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Digital labour: Workers, authors, citizens*

Jonathan Burston, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Alison Hearn

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 ‘interdisciplinary’, 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 whichever 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 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
exegeisis 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 ephemeralization 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-Witheford’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.

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Is it written in the stars? Global finance, precarious destinies

Brian Holmes

abstract

This paper explores an artwork - Black Shoals Stock Market Planetarium, by Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway - as a visual metaphor of the conditions of digital labour in the contemporary financial sphere. The experience of networked trading, the nature of the meta-commodity that is bought and sold, and the aesthetic of the ‘creative city’ that has grown up around the electronic exchanges are shown to cohere into the larger pattern of a predatory society, where ‘super-empowered individuals’ eat away the social framework that spawned their own increasingly precarious existence. Such is the destiny of the flexible personality. In conclusion, the paper inquires into the philosophical principles, scientific calculations and aesthetic figures that could chart another future.

Introduction

On AT&T Plaza in Chicago’s Millennium Park stands a giant stainless steel sculpture in the shape of an indented ellipsoid, 66 feet long, 33 feet high, weighing 110 tons and glistening in the sun like a drop of liquid mercury. Entitled Cloud Gate by the British artist Anish Kapoor and nicknamed ‘the Bean’ by locals, it cost 11.5 million dollars and immediately became what it was always intended to be, an urban attraction photographed by endless tourists, the world-renowned symbol of a creative city. Stand below the arching mass of the sculpture and gaze upwards at the omphalos or navel: your body multiplies into drunken curves, improbably fat and impossibly thin, like in a funhouse mirror. Look back at the sculpture from a few steps away: your diminutive image is crowned by a ring of skyscrapers, their outlines etched against a blue horizon.

Returning home from a recent trip to Detroit and a string of other half-devastated cities, I realized viscerally what I knew intellectually: that Chicago is the incomparable winner of the region, the Midwestern capital of the global economy. It’s the city that pioneered both commodity and financial futures, and after a recent round of mergers it is now home to the world’s largest futures and options network, the GLOBEX trading platform run by the Chicago Mercantile Exchange Group (the ‘Merc’). Elite knowledge workers are making tremendous amounts of money in this city. Yet our neighborhood just a few miles from the lakeshore is full of boarded-up houses and lives that have been foreclosed by the crisis. Twenty percent of the inhabitants have fallen beneath the poverty line and a quarter of the population has no health insurance. The municipal
housing projects have been destroyed for private development, and over thirty percent of the high school students will not graduate.\(^1\) On a sunny day you can see the bright blue sky through the rust-eaten girders of the elevated transport system.

This essay describes the workings – and indeed, the work force – of a variety of capitalism that has spread outwards from its Anglo-American core to reshape the entire planet. At the center of contemporary capitalism is a set of financial instruments called derivatives and a group of people called traders. The text draws links between their highly abstract formulas and the aesthetics of lived experience in the world’s major cities. It inquires into the emergence, over the past thirty or forty years, of a predatory culture built up around global finance, and into the precarious destinies that result from that culture. It begins not with the azurean blue, but with the curve of a dark horizon.

### Unstable constellations

Imagine the night sky as an overarching dome, filled with thousands of shimmering points of light. Like celestial messengers they glitter and gleam as they drift across the face of the heavens. Each of these bright stars represents the stock of a publicly traded corporation. The intensity of their luminous presence varies in real time according to the frequency of trading. If one star co-varies with others – that is, if a pattern emerges between the rates at which certain stocks are bought and sold – then the flickering points of light draw slowly together, forming unstable constellations.

The illuminated dome is an artwork by Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway, entitled Black Shoals Stock Market Planetarium (see figure 1). It refers both to the financial economy and to ancient astrological techniques for the calculation of human destinies. For its London installation it was connected to a Reuters news feed; in Copenhagen it was wired directly to the local exchange. At first glance it might resemble dozens of other stock-market visualizations, remarkable only for the astrological metaphor. But there is a further element to this piece, which transforms it into an existential allegory of contemporary social relations.

To create Black Shoals, the artists worked with artificial-life researcher Cefn Hoile, who developed computer algorithms for the generation of ‘creatures’ that would feed off nutrient energies released by the traded stocks. On the basis of the programmer’s genetic codes, populations of creatures are born, grow, reproduce and die, developing unique survival strategies that cannot be predicted in advance. Like traders, they form vast alliances or operate warily on their own, display tremendous mobility or remain fixed in one position, focus solely on particular stocks or cast their nets across the entire virtual universe. And like traders, they are affected both by the fluctuations of the market in general and by the strategies of their rivals. A photo documenting the work shows a dense cloud of tiny A-life agents. The caption reads: ‘These creatures would breed voraciously when they found food, causing huge swarms which would spread

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across the dome eating everything in their path and eventually dying out when nothing was left to eat.²

If this allegory of the trader’s condition can be termed ‘existential’ it is not because the creatures are alive in any natural sense, but instead because their artificial world is decisively shaped by a complex flow of data streams whose relations continually border on chaos. But does the allegory apply only to the denizens of the global exchanges? In his *General Theory*, Keynes famously used the image of ‘animal spirits’ to evoke the affective enthusiasms that motivate market behavior. Drawing on that image, the underground cultural critic Matteo Pasquinelli has compiled an entire bestiary of postmodern parasites whose life-support depends on the surplus values generated by electronic trading (Pasquinelli, 2008: ch. 1). He suggests that the form of our cities, the organization of our labour, the content of our entertainment and, I would add, the rules of our lawbooks and the teleological principles of our arts and sciences are all dependent on the greed, fear and irrational exuberance that drive the denizens of the electronic markets. They provide the common underpinning – both the affective and the monetary basis – for contemporary urban existence. Seen from this perspective, the ‘stars’ of global finance gleam with dangerous passions, and hyper-competition rules our creaturely destinies.

² This and the following quote can be found in the extensive documentation at [http://blackshoals.net]
As proven by the series of crises that have surged through the world economy over the last thirty years, nothing has more powerful effects at ground level than the shifting map of the financial stars above. The artists put it like this:

Because the stock market has the kind of cybernetic properties of biological systems and other complex phenomena (feedback loops etc.), it can be studied in the same way as biological systems. This tends to give rise to a sense that the market is somehow a ‘natural’ expression of some fundamental forces. One of the lessons we learned in our long journey to understand something about the operations of big finance is that the market is only a natural expression of the particular artificial world model that it embodies – in the same way that the artificial life creatures in Black Shoals Stock Market Planetarium are natural expressions of the computer program that they exist in.

*Black Shoals* is a great work because it asks two fundamental questions. First, what is the ‘artificial world model’ that contemporary civilization has come to embody, under the decisive influence of speculative finance? And second, will the ‘creatures’ of this particular world – not only the traders themselves, but all the cultures of global circulation that have sprung into existence over the last thirty years – now have to dramatically change survival strategies, or perhaps even die out and disappear in the wake of the current crisis?

**Mirror maze**

Writing in 1986, Susan Strange described the extreme volatility of the financial sphere as ‘casino capitalism’. While investment bankers made fortunes, risk and instability arose to dominate everyday experience: ‘The great difference’, Strange writes, ‘between an ordinary casino which you can go into or stay away from, and the global casino of high finance, is that in the latter we are all involuntarily engaged in the day’s play’ (Strange, 1997). By the mid-1980s, the continually rolling dice had disrupted the entire international system for the production and exchange of goods and services. The United States retained the central role in economic governance that it had won with WWII, but its hegemony was now founded on the management of chaos.3

The casino age began with the breakdown of the Bretton-Woods fixed exchange-rate scheme in the years 1971-73. The new regime of floating rates required the hedging of international payments by purchasing a whole range of foreign currencies, to offset potential devaluations in any of the monies actually being used. Already in 1971, Milton Friedman wrote a paper arguing for the necessity of trading currency futures, which soon replaced pork bellies as the mainstay of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.4 The appearance two years later of the first networked currency trading system, called the Reuters Monitor, marks the departure point for the ongoing proliferation of financial

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What became crucial in the trading pits was the relation of the speculating individual to the ciphers of opportunity flickering on the screen. As Urs Bruegger and Karin Knorr Cetina explain in an article on ‘The Global Lifeform of Financial Markets’: ‘The screen is not simply a “medium” for the transmission of messages and information. It is a building site on which a whole economic and epistemological world is erected. The world-character of this site also comes about through the performative possibilities of the dealing systems implemented on screen’ (2002: 395).

1973 also saw the publication of the Black-Scholes option-pricing formula. Exactly when the stability of the welfare state began to falter, two University of Chicago professors, Fischer Black and Myron Scholes, proposed its financial replacement – or its neoliberal derivation. Their aim was to find out how to accurately price a formerly obscure instrument known as a ‘European call option’. That’s a privately sold contract granting the right, but not the obligation, to buy shares of a stock for a guaranteed price at a future date. The difficulty was to know how much the guarantee should sell for. Their strategy was to assemble a fictional portfolio of stocks and options, and develop a technique of ‘dynamic hedging’ to continually buy and sell shares, balancing out the fluctuations in price among the separate elements of the portfolio in order to maintain an overall value. The price of the option would then be equal to the cost of continually hedging against possible changes in the value of the underlying stock; and the key predictive variable for estimating this cost would be the stock’s average volatility, or its standard deviation from its historical mean, which they calculated with a formula borrowed from the physics of Brownian motion. What they created was both a mathematical proof and a theoretically risk-free trading technique that used a carefully weighted constellation of values to distribute randomly occurring fluctuations back into the statistically regular equilibrium of the market as a whole. A third colleague, Robert Merton, added a piece of stochastic calculus called ‘Ito’s lemma’ – which actually came from Japanese rocket science – in order to allow for high-speed computer processing. Together they had invented the contemporary derivative.

The success of the formula touched off an explosion, or if you will, a supernova of derivatives trading. It has continued expanding up to the present, reaching a potential or ‘notional’ value of $683.7 trillion in mid-2008. To attain this impossible sum – roughly ten times global GDP – the option-pricing formula had to be rewritten for an enormous variety of contracts, including both specialized over-the-counter deals and standardized products whose costs and profits could be calculated instantaneously in the trading pits by means of networked computer devices. As Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee explain:

The model was extended to encompass increasingly abstract forms of risk that went beyond simple commodities options pricing into the much more sophisticated world of complex financial derivatives.... In ensuing years, mathematical statistics would work not so much in concert with

5 Cf. Walter Wriston (1992) The Twilight of Sovereignty: How the Information Revolution Is Transforming Our World. New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, p. 42: ‘Reuters and similar services provided by other companies have wrought a greater transformation in world financial markets in fifteen years than those markets had undergone in the previous centuries’.

6 [http://www.bis.org/publ/otc_hy0905.pdf]
As the key discovery behind derivatives, the Black-Scholes formula can be placed at the origins of the ‘artificial world model’ of finance capitalism. But it is also the source of a fundamental disconnect between the informational sky above our heads and the existential ground beneath our feet. On the one hand, the expertise of the ‘hardest’ natural science, physics, provides the bedrock of quantitative certainty that alone can quell the anxiety of government regulators and secure the confidence of investors. On the other, the ‘performatives’ of the dealing systems implemented on the screen are what actually generate the profits, pumping the animal energy of the trader’s passions into the financial stars above our heads and sparking the positive feedback loops of bubble economics.  

Never mind that the bedrock of certainty – the so-called ‘efficient market hypothesis’ – would later prove to be a chimerical fiction. For the cycle of profit-taking and reinvestment to continue recirculating indefinitely without any reference to material production – that is, for the sky above to take on a life of its own – just one further element was needed: systemic corruption that could subvert the checks and balances designed to prevent speculative bubbles. This corruption takes the form of what William K. Black calls ‘control fraud’, or the ability of corporate officers to suborn the regulatory instances, both internal and external, that are supposed to keep the system in balance. Corruption at the top can transform control functions – accounting firms, ratings agencies, even Greenspan’s Fed itself – into delusional devices for the maintenance of confidence, despite the obvious signs of market failure (Black, 2005). A type of derivative known as a credit-default swap (CDS) served as exactly this delusional device, providing mathematical guarantees for the inflation of the monumental real-estate bubble whose collapse precipitated the insolvency of the global financial sector at the same time as it revealed the impoverishment of the former American middle classes.

The word ‘speculation’ comes from the Latin verb specere, which means to look, in this case, to look into the future. But it is also related to speculum, or mirror. What the world model of financial capitalism does at ground level is to transform select living environments into grotesquely magnified reflections of the primary relation between the

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8 Justin Fox (2009) The Myth of the Rational Market: A History of Risk, Reward, and Delusion on Wall Street. New York: Harper Collins, p. 320: ‘The efficient market hypothesis, the capital asset pricing model, the Black-Scholes option pricing formula, and all the other major elements of modern rationalist finance arose toward the end of the long era of market stability characterized by tight government regulation and the long memories of those who had survived the Depression. These theories’ heavy reliance on calmly rational markets was to some extent an artifact of a regulated, relatively conservative financial era – and it paved the way for deregulation and wild exuberance’.
grasping trader and the profit-making opportunities flickering on the screen. The gentrification process that reached global scale in the mid-2000s has transformed entire cities into glittering mirrors of the narcissistic desire to gaze into an ever-more opulent future. Art, in the instrumentalized form of the ‘creative industries’, has been an important vector of this total makeover. Take one example of the results: the construction of flashy postmodern casinos in the impoverished core of Detroit, as a predatory regeneration strategy for a ruined city. No longer a production zone, the urban environment has become a stage for an infinite variety of speculative performances. Evoking the supposedly unlimited potential of human capital, these performances seek to justify future investment – in oneself, the land, a product, an algorithm, a business. Yet they take place under highly ambiguous circumstances, where the performer is often a ‘mark’, the target of someone else’s strategy.

The texts by the artists of Black Shoals Stock Market Planetarium suggest the existence of self-reinforcing ties, or positive feedback loops, between the A-life creatures and their objects of financial desire. But the programmer, Cefn Hoile, tends to portray his creations as victims of a financial universe beyond their ken: ‘The creatures’ relationship with their artificial world of stars is a mirror image of our relationship with the financial markets – they strive to survive, competing with each other in a world whose complexity they are too simple to fathom’. By accentuating the victim’s role, the allegory largely misses the predatory nature of creaturely existence. For not only do real-life traders prey on each other and on the assets or savings of smaller, more gullible investors, and not only do the banks and the great corporations prey upon each other and on consuming populations. In addition, the entire bestiary of financialized civilization gradually becomes imbued with the relations between hunter and hunted that the American sociologist, Thorstein Veblen, first described a century ago in his Theory of the Leisure Class. Today, the passion for the hunt has spread throughout the body politic. It lays the affective basis for what James K. Galbraith calls ‘the predator state’: a form of governance without any notion of solidarity, which encourages everyone to aspire to the condition of the hunter while at the same time delivering them over to the opposite fate of the prey (Galbraith, 2009). As Pasquinelli points out, representations of such base passions are rarely to be found in the idealizing images of contemporary art, which tend either to bow before the overarching logic of code or to exalt the febrile flights of desire. For an image of the predator society I am tempted to look back, not all the way to Veblen’s time, but to the ‘Magic Mirror Maze’ of Orson Welles’ film noir classic, The Lady from Shanghai, released in 1948 at the very outset of America’s rise to hegemony. The surreal closing scene of the movie offers a prescient glimpse of the distorted realities generated by the spectacular power-brokers of the neoliberal democracies.

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9 For an overview of the theories of speculative urbanism, see my article ‘Megagentrification: Limits of an Urban Paradigm’ [http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2008/12/06/megagentrification].

10 Cefn Hoile (undated) ‘Black Shoals: Evolving Organisms in a World of Financial Data’, available at the author’s website [http://cefn.com/cefn/?BlackShoalsPaper]. A similar image of popular powerlessness is offered by Rita Raley (2009) in her book Tactical Media. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 149: ‘While we may hold to the illusion of our agency in relation to the market, the illusion of our capacity to individually manage the market, we are always caught within a paradigm that is too complex and that in effect manages us’.
The hero of the film is the working-class Irishman Michael O’Hara, played by Welles himself. Following a chance encounter in New York, O’Hara is lured by his own greed and sexual desire into the intrigues of a rich American couple who sail him across the Panama Canal in a private yacht, embroiling him in a complex murder plot that finally leads to the mirror-maze of a San Francisco funhouse. Drugged and disoriented, he witnesses a wild shootout between the rich but impotent trial lawyer, Arthur Bannister, and his exotic wife Elsa, a high-class Caucasian prostitute born in China, played by Welles’ estranged wife Rita Hayworth. Faces and bodies multiply in a baroque confrontation of proliferating images, before the first shots ring out. As the mirrors shatter and the labyrinth of reflections falls away in broken shards, the husband and wife finally kill each other, fulfilling what the film portrays as their destiny. The Welles character escapes from the world of distorted spectacle into the open air, wondering how he will forget, how he will live on into the future.

Ask why

Today it is the mirror-maze of the speculative economy that lies in ruins, and the question is how to forget the impossible desires projected from the financial stars above, how to imagine other destinies. Yet what seems likely, if the current political passivity continues to reign, is that the multitudes of artificial life forms that flourished briefly in the glass-house environments of the financial capitals will now just fade away like the swarms of lesser creatures in *Black Shoals*, leaving the major predators with their weapons intact, still firing at each other. The danger is that the present crisis – with a magnitude comparable at least to that of the 1970s, if not the 1930s – will be resolved by those at the top of the social hierarchy, who are now attempting to reboot the speculative economy. In that case, the profound reshaping of social institutions required to end the crisis will be decided exclusively by them. If we want to make an egalitarian change in our world model, it’s urgent to understand what happens in the boom-bust cycles – before they are used against us once again.

‘Ask why’ was the slogan of the former energy-trading corporation Enron, whose opaque financial strategies, illegal business maneuvers and extensive support in Washington made it an exemplar of control fraud at the turn of the millennium. An advertisement aired just before bankruptcy in 2001 shows three businessmen with seeing-eye dogs and the heads of mice, wearing dark glasses and tapping the ground with white canes. The off-screen voice explains: ‘Enron Online... is creating an open, transparent marketplace that replaces the dark, blind system that existed’. Another ad promotes weather derivatives to protect against unforeseen climate events; the CEO who doesn’t buy them is shown as a sitting duck at a carnival sideshow, easily picked off by any kid with a BB gun (or more likely, a PC and a broadband connection).11 As for the slogan itself, it’s a classic symptom of the speculative economy: an injunction to know that reverses into its opposite. ‘Why ask?’ is the real message. At stake here is the function of the veil, which turns sophisticated knowledge, indeed visibility itself, into a weirdly transparent cloak of secrecy and denial. Visible blindness is the underlying formula of financial governance.

11 The ads are archived at www.rtmark.com/enron.
Perhaps the insight we’re missing is the answer to a simple question: What is a derivative? We know that it is a fungible contract, created by applying a mathematical formula to an underlying asset or commodity whose price is susceptible to fluctuation on volatile markets. By assembling constellations of values that statistically tend to fluctuate in opposite directions, derivatives were supposed to mitigate the risks of globalization with the highest degree of efficiency. The idea was that that all risks, including collective ones, should be made into salable products, formatted for the market by private actors in search of a profit. Yet although it is salable, the derivative cannot be understood as an ordinary commodity of the industrial era. Marx described the commodity as that product of human labour whose exchange value, seemingly animated with a life of its own, acts to render invisible the social relations that produced it. Derivatives, however, have nothing directly to do with production; instead they are conceived to manage the environmental risks that weigh on the future of speculative activity. In this sense they are *meta-commodities* that govern the unfolding of the contemporary economic model. Their fascinating appearance acts to conceal the private deliberations that effectively shape the environment in which any productive or consumptive activity can take place.12

The life form of the financial markets is now animated by these meta-commodities, which lend the new cityscapes their dazzling character. But what the pulsating lights of the central business districts hide is the privatization of the social state – indeed, the privatization of government. Gentrification is the fetishism of severed democratic relations. Meanwhile, as Lee and LiPuma point out, the proliferation of derivatives actually *increases* the risks that they are supposed to mitigate.13 Yet the breakdown, when it comes, can also have its payoffs. Consider the way that Enron’s manipulation of energy markets led first to rolling blackouts in California, then to the recall of the Democratic governor Gray Davis and the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has used the credit crisis as an historic chance to destroy public services.14 In the name of future prosperity for the middle-class citizens of California, the ‘Governator’ is terminating public funding for the socialized university system that allowed so many Californians to achieve middle-class status.15 What European activists call ‘precarity’ – that is, a condition of generalized uncertainty regarding education, employment, housing, health care, retirement and other life chances – now appears as a destiny, rising up against horizons blocked by the advancing threat of climate change. The supernova has finally imploded, leaving black holes in the future.

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13 ‘The very process that prices and commodifies also conceals its own social character, making more difficult the task of visualizing the systemic risk’. LiPuma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk*, op. cit., p. 55.

14 See the documentary on Enron by Alex Gibney, *The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), where the anatomy of control fraud is retracted from the sinews to the bone.

As the sociologist Daniel Bell wrote in 1973, ‘the “design” of a post-industrial society is a “game between persons” in which an “intellectual technology”, based on information, rises alongside of machine technology’ (Bell, 1999: 116). This is the formula of neoliberal finance. Can we finally ask why the citizens of the world’s democracies accept to play such strange games between persons, where they are alternately the hunter and the hunted? In the great hall of Chicago’s Merc or in the proliferating electronic spaces of the GLOBEX network, derivatives traders hold up a distorting but oddly faithful mirror to the wider worlds of so-called ‘digital labour’.

At the outset of this decade, in a text entitled ‘The Flexible Personality’, I identified a widespread desire among the new knowledge workers to mix their labour with their leisure in an enticing or even eroticized atmosphere of free play (Holmes, 2002). A hilarious image from the Yes Men, showing a corporate executive in a skintight ‘Management Leisure Suit’ with an electronically networked ‘Employee Visualization Appendage’ rising like a golden phallus from his hips, served to make the point. The kind of ‘play-labour’ celebrated by the pundits of Web 2.0 may have had transgressive connotations in the 1960s, but today it is only a grotesque parody of Huizinga’s *homo ludens*, and a woeful caricature of the sublimated sexuality that Marcuse envisioned in his revolutionary book, *Eros and Civilization*. What has disappeared from the networked cultures of casino capitalism is the willingness to engage in political conflict – even while the civilizational forces of Thanatos, or unbridled aggression, bear down on the biosphere. Now it is those aggressive drives that must be sublimated and channeled into a necessary struggle. Rather than draping aesthetic and epistemological veils over blatant expropriation, shouldn’t artists and knowledge workers seek political confrontations with those who set the rules of the game?

The struggles against privatization that began unfolding in September 2009 within the University of California system (and therefore at the heart of what autonomous Marxist theorists long ago identified as ‘cognitive capitalism’ (Corsani et al., 2001)16 have finally opened up a significant grassroots challenge to the logic of the predator state and the financial world model that it incarnates. The California outbreaks were preceded by major student movements in France, Italy and Croatia, and followed about a month later by parallel events in Austria – only the latest in a worldwide wave of cycle of protests refusing the instrumentalisation of higher education.17 These struggles are important, because the university has become the crucial laboratory of neoliberal management and financial engineering, in addition to its traditional role as R&D center for the industrial war machine.18 Only far-reaching changes in the ways that knowledge is elaborated and made productive can reorient our complex societies away from the suicidal pathway of

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17 See the map created by the Counter Cartography Collective in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, online at [http://tinyurl.com/university-struggles]

18 See Brian Holmes, ‘Disconnecting the Dots of the Research Triangle: Corporatization, Flexibilization and Militarization in the Creative Industries’, *Escape the Overcode*, op. cit.
climate chaos and generalized warfare, steering them instead toward a sustainable and survivable future.

Addressing himself to European artistic vanguards steeped in the heritage of Italian Autonomia, Pasquinelli calls for ‘the sabotage of creative value’ and ‘the explosion of the social relations enclosed in the modern commodity’. In the university, that would mean trashing the concept of individual market freedom and prying open the meta-relations of governance that are concealed in abstruse mathematical formulas. Such an explosion has become urgent. We need a different world model, which cannot be abstracted from price information analyzed by computers. But it will take more than critical insights to gain anything concrete. Beneath the curve of the night sky there awaits, not only occupations of public buildings and demonstrations on the streets, but also an existential struggle for the quality of our dreams. Critical intelligence and the radical imagination will have to merge with the animal spirits of political conflict, to chart new paths through the fateful spaces where symbolic constellations are etched on living skins.

references


19 Animal Spirits, op. cit., p. 49; also see my contribution to a debate with Pasquinelli on the My-ci mailing list on Dec. 18, 2008, at [http://idash.org/pipermail/my-ci/2008-December/000554.html]
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Life put to work: Towards a life theory of value*

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translated from the Italian by Emanuele Leonardi

abstract

Starting from the recognition that only a ‘labour theory of value’ is able to provide a measure of the value of the surplus, in this essay we’d like to pose the question of how the labour theory of value must dynamically adjust to the capitalist system and the succession of different modes of accumulation. Specifically, we focus on structural changes that have invested and partially modified the process of enhancing the transition from industrial-Fordist to ‘bio-capitalism’, at least in that area of the world where this transformation has established itself and is present. It is in this passage that the labour theory of value - intended primarily as a theory of value-time work - requires a redefinition that is able to grasp the qualitative changes that have overtaken and undermined the traditional theory of value labour. In particular, it will be considered a specific form of value creation: one linked to the concept of affective labour. Finally, in the last and final section, we discuss the hypothesis of the theory of life-value, nodding briefly to the related theoretical problems in view of a future research agenda.

‘What a long, strange trip it’s been’ 1

Introduction

It is with the establishment of the capitalist mode of production as predominant that the articulation of a theory of value that is able to explain the process of accumulation becomes inescapable. In fact, the emergence of capitalism entails the necessity to analyze the relationship between productive factors and final outputs in terms of value. As a consequence, temporality (in both its logical dimension – before and after – and its historical dimension – today and tomorrow) is entirely incorporated in the process of

* A preliminary draft of this paper has been presented at the International Conference Historical Materialism, London, November 2008 and at the Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens conference at the University of Western Ontario, London, Canada, October 2009. This paper is the result of a common discussion between the two authors; nevertheless, Part 2 has been written by Andrea Fumagalli; Parts 4 and 5, by Cristina Morini. The Introduction and Part 3 have been written jointly. The authors wish to thank Emanuele Leonardi for his careful and attentive translation.

accumulation and generation of value. Thus, capitalist surplus-value, which is to say the ability to produce accumulation, occurs in time, resulting from a non-linear dynamic movement, characterized by irreversibility (path-dependency), discontinuity and crisis.

Accumulation requires measuring value. This measure is necessary since it makes functionally possible the distribution of surplus generated by the development of productive factors. On this key point, the theoretical debate has been structured around a twofold identification of a theory of value based on labour, on the one hand, and a theory of value based on utility, on the other (Lunghini and Ranchetti, 1998).

As a point of departure, we assume that only a labour theory of value is able to perform the measuring-function of the value of surplus. Subsequently, we pose the question concerning how the labour theory of value should dynamically adapt to the evolution of capitalism and to the succession of its different phases of accumulation. More specifically, we will focus on the structural transformations that have heavily affected and partially modified the process of valorization during the shift from industrial-Fordist capitalism to biocapitalism (Part 2), at least in those areas of the world where this changes are tendentially established (Federici and Caffentzis, 2008).

Within the framework provided by this epochal shift, the labour theory of value – primarily understood as a theory of value-labour time – requires a redefinition that is potentially able to grasp the qualitative transformations whose historical appearance has put to question its traditional configuration (Part 3). As for this issue, in Part 4 we will consider a specific form of value-creation, linked to the concept of affective labour. Finally, in the last section, we will discuss the hypothesis of a theory of life-value and the related theoretical issues, paying particular attention to the elaboration of a research-agenda to come (Part 5).

Transformations of biocapitalism and effects on the labour theory of value

The advent of biocapitalism entails an adjustment of the process of valorization. From this perspective, the main points to emphasize are the following:

- The production of wealth and value is no longer based solely and exclusively on material production, but is increasingly based on immaterial elements, namely on intangible ‘raw materials’, which are difficult to measure and quantify since they directly result from the use of the relational, emotional and cognitive faculties of human beings.

2 With the term biocapitalism, we refer to a process of accumulation that not only is founded on the exploitation of knowledge but of the entirety of human faculties, from relational-linguistic to affective-sensorial. Biocapitalism points to a broader set of meanings than the ones entailed by the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism. Although we regard it as convincing in accounting for contemporary social and productive transformations, we also note that it runs the risk of being misunderstood as an approach whose only relevant object of study is the exclusive role played by knowledge. For further analysis, see Fumagalli (2007; 2010), Fumagalli and Vercellone (2007), Fumagalli and Lucarelli (2007; 2010), Vercellone (2003; 2006; 2007), Morini (2007; 2010).
• The production of wealth and value is no longer based on a uniform and standardized model of labour organization, regardless of the type of good produced. Rather, production is performed through different methods of organization, characterized by a network-structure whose implementation is due to the development of technologies for linguistic communication and transportation. As a consequence, the traditional, hierarchical and unilateral factory-form is replaced by still hierarchical structures that are displaced throughout the territory along subcontracting productive chains, marked by cooperation and/or hierarchy.

• The previous Fordist phase was characterized, at the productive level, by the following references: seriality, standardization, specialization of labour and tasks. At the level of exchange, it privileged mass-markets and orientation to the product. At the level of labour organization, it stressed the centrality of managerial command and an obsessive focus on the processes of execution (a reflection of the systemic denial of the workforce relationality). The current phase presents different peculiarities: life itself is put to work and the role of working relations is emphasized, directly incorporated within the productive activity. Thus, economic management assumes as its object living life rather than static life. In this context, the value of labour becomes increasingly vague, ever-changing, dependent on a variety of subjective evaluations.

• The new organizational culture of enterprises is centered around the concept of ‘human resources’. In fact, some new organizational models refer to the need to embody knowledge within enterprises. However, this knowledge is not explicit or objective, but rather relational: it encompasses the dynamic of a subjective knowledge that is ‘deeply rooted in action and in the engaging commitment to a specific context’. Cognitive labour organizations are interested not only in explicit knowledge, but also and more importantly in subjective (tacit) knowledge, everybody’s opinions (Nonaka, 1994), and everything that relates to ‘motivation’ (even drive-led motivation).

• In biocapitalism value lies, first and foremost, in the intellectual and relational resources of subjects, and in their ability to activate social links that can be translated into exchange value, governed by the grammar of money. Thus, what is exchanged in the labour market is no longer abstract labour (measurable in homogeneous working time), but rather subjectivity itself, in its experiential, relational, creative dimensions. To sum up, what is exchanged is the ‘potentiality’ of the subject. Whereas in the Fordist model it was easy to calculate the value of labour according to the average output and professional skills based on workers’ education and experience, in bio-capitalism the value of labour loses almost any concrete definitional criterion.

• Intellectual labour is more autonomous than material labour. However, this is not a natural, originary and immutable given. In the course of capitalist history, this higher autonomy finds possible explanations in the particular development of labour organization and production, especially in specific historical phases (intellectual labour directing and organizing material labour). Is this explanatory narrative still valid today? Nowadays, are not biocapitalist production and labour organization showing different features? What exactly does the distinction between intellectual and manual labour mean? In order to grasp their actual function, it is necessary to express both kinds of labour in a ‘determined historical form’ rather than by means of a general category. As
a consequence, the condition of a proper analysis of value is a critique of this intellectual-material separation that actually appears as scarcely representative of a social reality more and more concerned with the subsumption of every difference.

The complexity of the world is atomized and made functional to a productivity criterion.

- Another conceptual separation, fundamental in the Western tradition, is that of mind and body. Nonetheless, nowadays we witness a progressive melting down of dichotomies (which is not, per se, a negative trend) and, simultaneously, we note that existence has become entirely productive. Therefore the body (a controlled, monitored, artificially hygienist body) is explicitly incorporated into productive mechanisms. It follows the creation of new and unprecedented market niches: plastic surgery, fitness and body building, nutritionism, beauty industry. The ‘sexualization of bodies’, which is so evident today, appears as cold, putatively technical and neutral. Nevertheless, those bodies at work fully belong to the realm of the deactivation of affects and desires or, to better specify, to the channelling of both human drives toward the market. The hegemony of the productive function, actually lacking any reasonable legitimacy, continues to establish the rhythm of an undisputed productivity that extracts added value from everything, including the already mentioned knowledge, working experience and existential savoir-faire.

In the name of the market, contemporary capitalism tries to reconnect yet another historical separation, that of soul and body.

- Working performances change both quantitatively and qualitatively. As for the material conditions of labour (quantitative aspect), we witness an increase regarding working hours, an overlapping of labour tasks, the impossibility of distinguishing between working- and life-time and a deeper individualization of industrial relations. Moreover, working performances are more and more immaterial. Relational, communicative and cerebral activities become increasingly interrelated and central. Those activities require education, skills and attention. In this context, the separation of mind and body, typical of the Taylorist labour organization, tends to disappear in an inextricable mix of working routine and intense participation into the productive process. This subjection is no longer disciplinarily imposed by a direct chain of command. Rather, it is most often internalized and developed through form of subtle conditioning and social control. As a consequence, contractual individualism ends up representing the juridical and institutional framework within which the process of individual imitation-competition tends to become the guide-line of working behavior.

- The role of knowledge becomes crucial. In fact, the traditional creation of value by means of material production is supplemented by the creation of value by means of knowledge-production. In both cases, the ‘labour’ factor is decisive and its

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3 For example: production-reproduction; manual-intellectual labour; working time-life time; production-consumption. See Fumagalli, 2008.

4 We would like to note a fact too often overlooked. After a century-long decrease of working hours (during the industrial-Fordist paradigm), starting from the early 1980s this parameter begins to grow again. This recent increase in working hours is a structural element inherently linked to the shift to biocapitalism.
subordination to capital ratifies, through exploitation, the necessary condition in order for profit to realize itself.

• The ‘unpaid labour’ of women (Picchio, 1997; 2000), namely the work of reproduction and care, is configured as an interesting archetype of contemporary production. Once the analysis is focused on the dis-measure of labour within the current cycle of accumulation, then unpaid labour can properly show its (striking) exemplary characteristics. First, because we realize, when attempting to measure the value of social reproduction (domestic work, care, relational services), that this value is greater than the sum total of paid work. Secondly, and more importantly, because unpaid labour perfectly describes a process that represents the essence of working performances in their generality, since we define the current phase of capitalism as based on an anthropogenic model – production of men by means of men – (Marazzi, 2005), where life must work for production and production must work for life (Hardt and Negri, 2000). From this perspective, nowadays the value produced by labour structurally exceeds its monetary retribution. To put it differently, when the productive process incorporates knowledge and affects, desires and bodies, motivations and opinions, then it is clearly evident that what is actually sold is not entirely paid.

The main point we would like to emphasize is the following: the concept of biocapitalism refers to the production of wealth by means of knowledge and human experience, through the use of those activities, both intellectual and corporeal, that are implicit in existence itself. We might add that every process of production reflects not only material realities, but also social contexts. Thus, relations of production not only characterize different modes of production, but also societal forms. Gradually, the process of production turns into a process of production and reproduction of itself, which is the fundamental activity of a living organism. Although this basic idea is shared by all social forms of life, it becomes absolutely central in biocapitalism.

However, the process of knowledge accumulation is individual by definition. Even more radically, it is a defining element of a singular identity through language and memory (Locke, 2006). It is exactly because of its singular nature that contemporary biolabour is in constant need of relational activity, which in turn becomes an essential tool for transmitting and decoding cognitive activities and stratified knowledge in the individual. From this standpoint, cognitive capabilities and relational activities are inextricably linked to each other, and represent the basic elements of the general intellect, namely the widespread intellectuality glimpsed by Marx in the Grundrisse.

This general intellect is the new source of (surplus) value and, in order to fully actualize its productive potentiality, needs ‘space’, namely the possibility to develop a net of relations (Vercellone, 2006). Every singularity becomes a ‘knot’ in the network of collective intelligences, that organically connect economic and desiring flows. In other terms, if confined to the individual, knowledge is unable to grow productively. Surely, it might be functional to the generation of a personal process of valorization. Nonetheless, it cannot produce exchange value and, consequently, wealth accumulation (in its commodity form). Thus, biocapitalism is necessarily reticular (as opposed to linear) and hierarchies amongst different knots are intrinsically complex and related to elements of social control that pervade the space within which wealth is created and
accumulated. Indeed, it makes perfect sense from a biocapitalist perspective to be supremely interested in differences. Difference, even under the appearance of knowledge of indigenous or local systems, has become a highly valued commodity to be spent on the market. After all, globalization works precisely through the plural incorporation of alterity (Braidotti, 2008). As is clear, this topic would deserve further development. However, at least this key issue should be addressed: within biocapitalism, precisely because of its being reticular/non linear, a static idea of identity – perceived as permanent essence – is simply unthinkable. On the very contrary, identity ceases to be a stable datum to gradually become a process of identification that is incessantly constructed and restructured through different faces, roles and circumstances, both at the individual and the collective level. The identity of the multiple I – as we think of it – is configured as a field rather than as an essence. It is not a sort of metaphysical reality, but rather a dynamic system defined by potentialities and limits (which is to say, by relations) that can be theoretically recognized and practically transformed. To a certain extent, it is possible to argue that this eternally dynamic process guarantees the existence of a transformative force (whose peculiar production is surplus value) that we call general intellect and that develops different singularities.

It is important to stress that the shift from a production of money by means of commodity (M-C-M') to a production of money by means of the commodification of bios [M-C(bios)-M'] has modified the mode of production and the process of exploitation.

The new features of a productive activity that is tendentially immaterial, based on the exploitation of learning and networking economies, as well as the pivotal role of a precarious subalternity that prevents a new form of wage regulation, open up for biocapitalism the question of a proper modulation of the theory of value.

The first problem concerns how to measure the value of labour. In fact, it closely relates to the productivity of the general intellect and of relational activities (conceived as sources of the process of value creation in biocapitalism).

The second problem deals with the ‘source’ of the value of labour. It refers to working performances, on the one hand in the context of the dichotomy between the necessity of social and relational cooperation and its exploitation by means of learning and networking economies, and, on the other hand, the privatization of knowledge and the control of individual working performances (Hardt and Negri, 2000). As for labour organization, this contradiction assumes the form of a demand for social cooperation and, simultaneously, a hierarchical imposition organized around the individualization of bargaining and the income blackmail (whose condition of possibility is a widespread social insecurity). Therefore, cooperation and hierarchy are the cornerstone that regulate labour relations in the contradictory and unstable framework provided by biocapitalism. It is in this context that arises the question concerning the tendential melting down of the distinction between working- and life-time. Here, we are witnessing a process of assimilation between labour and life which generates a potential contradiction within the working subjectivity itself, creating idiosyncrasy and instability in the basic organization of individual lives. This contradiction recalls the dualism between man and machine, especially in a situation, such as the biocapitalist one, in
which the *mechanical* productive tool increasingly tends to be incorporated in the brain/body, namely a non-transferable element of individuals and immediately internal to labour-power itself. Moreover, the relationship between concrete labour (whose peculiar production is use value, potentially ‘creative’) and abstract labour (determined by capitalist conditions of production) generates at the same a potentiality for freedom and autonomy and a necessity of repression and brain lobotomization.5

Towards a life theory value: Knowledge, affect, image

Labour in biocapitalism has multiple features that open up new analytical scenarios. Those characteristics refer to: relational activities (*relational labour*); learning and knowledge-transmission activities (*linguistic and cognitive labour*); imaginary and sense-making activities (*symbolic labour*); corporeal and sensuous activities (*corporeal and sensorial labour*); affective and caring activities (*affective labour*). To sum up, labour in biocapitalism is the *ensemble* of the vital-cerebral-physical faculties of human beings. For simplicity’s sake, we define it as *biolabour*.

Regardless of its prevalent form, biolabour is characterized by the following features:

• The separation between *working-time and life-time* is overcome. When working performances imply vital faculties, then the definition of a temporal limit between working-time and life-time becomes impossible. Whereas it might fictitiously exist from a juridical standpoint, it is *de facto* ineffectual since there is no difference whatsoever between life and labour. Life appears to be totally subsumed under labour (here the role of new linguistic-communicative technologies is pivotal).

• The separation between *working-place and life-place* is overcome. In fact, multiple as it is, biolabour is *nomadic labour*. It requires a kind of mobility that produces *working non-places* rather than traditional forms of *domestication*. From this perspective, we do not argue for a coincidence of working-place and life-space, but rather for an expropriation of the working-place, with all the problematic consequences that derive from it in terms of labour identity.

• The separation between *production and reproduction* is overcome. This overcoming is the first effect of a putting to work of life itself. We conceive of life not only as life immediately subordinated to productive activities, but also as life directed towards its reflexive social reproduction. Nowadays, this process is exemplified by feminine caring labour. However, we might suggest that the tendential melting down of this distinction implies a partial overcoming of gender-based differences. In other words, we want to pose the problem of *difference tout-court*.  

5 The emergence of biocapitalism entails not only a metamorphosis of the relationship between concrete and abstract labour, but also a modification of the concept of productive labour (whose process of ‘abstraction’ produces surplus value). The limits of this essay do not allow us to deal with this issue. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the base of bioeconomic accumulation needs a constant expansion and ends up including the time of reproduction, education and consumption. See Fumagalli (2007); Amendola, Bazzicalupo, Chicchi, Tucci (2008). On the relationship between productive and unproductive labour in Marx, see Negri (2008).
• The separations among production, reproduction, circulation and consumption are overcome. The act of consuming is no longer reducible to the purchase of a material commodity or a service, as the economic science has traditionally taught us. In biocapitalism, the act of consuming is simultaneously participation of the public opinion, an act of communication, and self-marketing. Nowadays, consumption is participation of the public opinion because it is dominated by increasingly dynamic and specific conventions. As in financial market stakeholders behave according to a tacit convention that influences their actions through ad hoc linguistic-communicative practices, so in the context of monetary realization we witness the development of behavior- and consumption-oriented conventions (Fumagalli, 2007). From this perspective, the incentive to consumption is not based on the necessity to satisfy needs, but rather on the necessity to show a belonging to the common sense. That is precisely why consumption is also an act of communication, form of advertising, and process of branding (Arvidsson, 2006). Advertising, conceived of as the emblem of biocapitalist communication and monetary realization, does not refer to the purchase of external commodities, but rather induces individuals to valorize themselves. It is marketing of oneself, not of a given commodity. As a consequence, the non-separation between production and consumption becomes total. There is no longer separation between working and consuming acts. The Worker and the Consumers, once differentiated although embodied in the same person, are today melted in the vital acts of individuals. Once again, what appears to be an everyday act motivated by self-preservation (as the act of consuming) is valorized through the biocapitalist process of accumulation (Fumagalli, 2007).

A reflection about the modalities through which value is generated from biolabour must assume these differences. Subsequently, it is necessary to subdivide the analysis in three phases: value generated by the diffusion of knowledge, namely linguistic-cognitive labour (knowledge theory of value); value generated by affective and reproductive labour (affect theory of value); value generated by symbolic and imaginary labour, especially in the process of branding (image theory of value).

In the context of the present essay we exclusively focus on the question concerning affective value.

Towards an affect theory of value: Caring labour, emotional labour

In order to undertake an analysis of the role of affect as value-producer, we propose the concept of emotional labour. It has never been part of the official language of political economy, although it is known by women and sometimes used in scientific publications, especially in the Atlantic area. Within the category of emotional labour we find different working performances, mainly linked to services, education and assistance. More specifically, it encompasses the whole area of caring labour that, not by chance, is nowadays regarded as domestic production. It refers to a wide and significant sector which entails both the ‘management’ of familial activities and the practice of care, conceived of as the amount of affect utilized in the deployment of this
role (whose source is a natural predisposition of human beings towards surrounding persons).

In this context, the concept of feminization of labour\(^6\) can be further explored and enlarged, exactly by noting that affect has been inscribed in the dimension of waged exchange on the market. We believe that the public space as a whole is progressively feminizing itself, since it incorporates more and more visibly some of the most traditional and stereotypical elements of the feminine (maternity, care, seduction). These elements are transformed – through a forced, decontextualized and deformed interpretation – in central aspects of contemporary governance. To a certain extent, the concept of projective identification, introduced by Melanie Klein in 1946 to explain the relationship between the mother and the child\(^7\), seems to us particularly useful to understand the kind of relationship that is currently expected from the working subjects. The area of emotional, non-verbal communication becomes a part of the relation between capital and labour, within a dimension that not only maintains, but even deepens its hierarchy. Moreover, we witness an increase in the demand of caring or domestic labour. This expanding process is closely linked to the dynamic of feminization of labour, on the one hand, and to the progressive dissolution of the welfare state on the other. We define emotional labour as ‘labour involved in persons’ feelings, labour whose central element is the regulation of emotions’ (James, 1989: 15). Emotional labour becomes ‘social labour’ essentially through the result: emotions are transformed by/through the productive process. James refers to proper, true ‘emotional workers’ whose productive outcome is defined as ‘emotional product’ (James, 1989: 19). The object of caring labour is also the ‘valorization of the human person’, namely (at least partially) its ‘maintenance’ (Coordinamento donne Fp CGIL, 1999).

The notion of care-giver represents another possible definition for this kind of labour, which includes a series of activities, historically hidden in the interstices of family relationships, related to the world of affects and nowadays become economically interesting for biocapitalism.

However, following the analytical lines so far briefly discussed, we also note that teachers, advertisers, union executives, coaches, tabloid journalists, call-center workers and nurses might be defined as ‘producers of emotional labour’. Therefore, emotional labour refers to innumerable sectors, all those whose objective is not the production of material goods, but rather the production of wellbeing (in so doing, these sectors consume their proper finality).

Let us consider, for example, the relational ability of a call-center operator who is concretely evaluated as an infinitesimal fraction by the customer lifetime value (CLV) (Reichheld, 1996) of the person who contacted her looking for information. According

\(^6\) In recent years, this concept has been primarily proposed to underline a relevant quantitative increase with regard to the feminine presence on the job market. Moreover, it has been noted that the uninterested and precarious form with which women have been historically used to work is now a widespread model for men as well. See Morini (2007; 2010).

\(^7\) This relationship designates a process in which the role of the beneficiary (the one who receives the projections) is significantly important. See Klein (1946) and Grotstein (1981).
to managerial engineering, the CLV can be considered as the most important indicator and, as such, should occupy a fundamental position in a possible hierarchy of measure-criteria. Moreover, in monetary terms a costumer is valorized not only according to how much she purchases today, but also according to her purchasing potential in the course of time. The CLV is generally defined as ‘the total net revenue that a company can expect from a customer during a certain period of time’ (Rosset, 2003). For example, the call-center operator, connected through a phone to the costumer, attempts to establish a relationship of loyalty by means of a response that is as appropriate as possible. In doing so, she activates in her working performance not only what she learnt during her professional education, but also her relational intelligence – developed since her childhood – her innate relational attitudes, her faculty of language, her interests and social contacts. To this list we must add ‘physical’ components, such as a persuasive tone of the voice and a positive attitude during the phone call. This amount of ‘subjectivity’ and ‘affectivity’ is clearly present in the relation with the costumer, but is not represented in the operator’s wage.

This example gives us the possibility to outline the skills that are necessary to perform this kind of working activity. We report the most common (Goleman, 1998): acute and objective perception, awareness of the situation, sensitivity and intuitive knowledge. Other expressions, used in past years to describe caring labour, seem to be less objective, although suggestive and evocative. For example, Jessie Bernard referred to ‘warm heart’ as the most important quality in the services sector (1981). Instead, Luce Irigaray proposed the ‘fecundity of the caress’ (1985).

Moreover, the ability to ‘self-engage’ is often quoted as important. In fact, there are endless levels of empathy and infinite forms of application with regard to the necessities mobilized by contemporary labour. It must be noted the difference between the past – observation, perception and intuition were obviously relevant qualities, but the separation/distance (even physical) from the object of one’s labour remained implicitly unquestioned – and the present that, on the contrary, makes the participation to the productive process specifically performing. In particular, feelings, fantasies and imaginations are not removed or constrained, but rather solicited within the framework of affect-production. Even more radically, those are its grounding sites.

By means of formulations such as ‘emotional labour’ and ‘caring labour’, many scholars attempted to re-read the Marxian category of ‘reproductive labour’, underlining its transformation into labour of domestic production, through the fundamental passage of salarization. However, we must recall its salient feature, namely that the ancient contents of this labour constitute the value for the current configuration of capitalism (the affect of human resources). Every working performance is named according to its more significant, more effective and more difficult task. Nowadays the ability to understand and interpret others’ needs (relational skills, active listening skills, positive attitude to problem solving) has become an explicitly required feature of contemporary labour. Capitalism demands emotional labour – and evaluates its qualities –, showing an extraordinary pervasive capacity and a great plasticity in ceaselessly creating new territories to profitably colonize.
This process is closely connected to the globalization of the job market and to the feminization of immigration which functions through the incorporation of alterities, interacting with race, class and gender hierarchies. Thus, it is necessary a lexical/semantic update which is able to account for the fluid mutation of meaning due to social and productive transformations. Nowadays, as a matter of fact, poets, teachers or journalists are labelled as intellectuals, whereas nurses, cleaners and policewomen are tendentially collocated in the realm of manual labour. Nonetheless, exactly because of the fall of the dichotomous model, the categories at our disposal are too simple, inadequate to express the complexity of the contemporary class composition.

Caring emotional labour is also defined as relational labour. Thus, emotional language swarms over the productive field, even when unrecognized or removed. Particularly, caring labour, relying largely on emotional components (which are fundamental to meet expected results, the ‘goals’), cannot be restrained to the narrow and artificial borders of categories such as ‘manual’ or ‘intellectual’ labour. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly concrete labour. The historical separations between public and private, mind and body, hands and brain, culture and nature (as well as the polarization of positive and negative attributed to the spheres of production and reproduction – on which our symbolic order has been established) show all their limits and express today their paradoxes, their tensions and their contradictions.

In the first volume of Das Kapital, Marx writes

No matter how variously working tasks or productive activities can be considered useful, it is a physiological truth that they are functions of the human organism, and that all these functions, their content and their shape are essentially expenditures of brain, nerves, muscles, human organs (Marx, 1964: 68)

Those energies manifest themselves as immediate perception in every moment of life: they are constantly present. However, in performing a given task we ‘lend’ these perceptions, whose usage (‘objectification’) occurs during the working process. Caring and emotional labour satisfies all the conditions that define ‘usefulness’: its energy, its willful expenditure, its time, its goal. It is simultaneously useful labour (sometimes even a matter of life and death) and social labour, since it is necessary for others and valid in every society. Even more radically, to analyze caring and/or emotional labour also means, today more than ever, putting into question the ancient distinction between ‘labour’ and ‘non-labour’ (namely, the distinction between productive and unproductive labour), whose reflection is another dichotomy, the one between ‘paid life’ and ‘unpaid life’.

The border is arbitrary, ever-changing and subject to political decision. The specific productive cooperation to which labour-power participates is always wider and richer than the one mobilized by the mere working process. Labour-power valorizes capital solely because it never loses its characteristics of non-labour, which is to say its link with a productive cooperation richer than the one implied in a strict conception of the working process (Virno, 2001: 73)

Caring labour is above all, historically, a huge amount of unpaid (although indispensable) labour. It is based on an affective dimension (love relations) and on a
hierarchical aspect (sexual division of labour). Thus, it is the human sentimental element contained in reproductive labour that becomes essential in contemporary production (however, we do not forget power relations and cultural and traditional legacies). This element casts new light on the ‘border-less’ attitude of caring workers, for whom this dynamic is more explicit than for others. This tendency not to establish ‘limits’ is actually prototypical of contemporary production. The constant presence of auxiliary caring workers for elderly people, as well as the ‘asymmetry’ that marks the relationship between families and caregivers, makes the establishment of rigid demarcations with regard to the working performance a very difficult operation. Moreover, this process is reinforced by the nature of a task whose required contents are deeply cognitive, experiential and emotional. In fact, the ‘matter’ of labour is such that it is impossible to separate it from the subject that produces it. Life emerges in this context as the object of the productive process, due to the subjectification of production typical of biocapitalism. The highest point of contemporary capitalist profit is consequential to a proliferation of differences that are the base of the affective economy. At stake is ‘how to incorporate the maternal feminine in order to better metabolize its effects, since it has become a valuable commodity, to be spent on the market’ (Braidotti, 2008: 71).

Therefore, in the current context, it is necessary to conceptualize and define labour as production of affectivity. What do we mean when we refer to emotional labour and production of affects, or domestic production? Its focus on the productivity of the corporeal and the somatic is an extremely important element for the contemporary networks of bioeconomic production. However, it is equally necessary to avoid the risk of a too pure, abstract and quasi-idealized conceptual framework. Instead, we must insist on the concrete potential of exploitation involved in bioeconomic production.

From this standpoint, the expansion of the cooperative dimension incorporated in reproductive labour finds a significant confirmation. In fact, domestic labour has always produced sociability and use value, so much that it can be regarded as the fundamental driving force of productive labour. Perfectly conforming to a general and functional requirement which cannot be merely ‘mechanical’ and measured along the straight line ‘time-for-wage’, caring labour (emotional and affective: it deals with needs, attentions, social relations, bodily and spiritual wellbeing) represents in our opinion the best example of how life must work for production and production must work for life. The more the analysis digs in depth, the more we discover communicating assemblages of interactive and performing relations, integrated in a system which is entirely based on the living (obviously with different degrees of intensity).

Adrienne Rich has noted that these ‘scarcely paid’ jobs are in large majority performed by women involved in ‘sentimentalized roles, with the concrete presence of living individuals, children, sick, old’ (Rich in Lehorn and Parker, 1981).

**Brief Case Studies**

Although the definition of a proper conceptual framework is fundamental, it cannot substitute an empirical analysis of the validity of the affect theory of value. Our goal is
to advance a new hypothesis about the measurement of value with regard to affectivity. We make primary reference to the Italian situation.

The Italian National Health Care System is able to provide domiciliary assistance to 1% of elderly people, compared to 8% in France and in the United Kingdom. The absence of services concerning both old and new problematics of Italian households ends up being solved by feminine caring labour. As a consequence, women often cannot search for an employment on the external job market. Increasingly, the alternative to this ‘home-made welfare’ is represented by other ‘human resources’: immigrant caring assistants who are paid to perform these tasks, showing a form of privatization of assistance.

Recently updated data suggest that, in Italy, the total number of immigrant family assistants is between 1,000,000 and 1,600,000 (II Sole-24 Ore, 2007). A study conducted in 2005 at a European level – Gender Analyses and Long Term Care Assistance (GALCA) – attempted to estimate the value of welfare produced by caregivers (Fondazione Brodolini, 2004). In particular, the study was conducted with homogeneous criteria on locally representative samples of around 300 caregivers in Denmark (Roskilde), Ireland (Dublin) and Italy (Modena). This study allows us not only to delineate the socio-economic profile of caring labour and the socio-sanitary characteristics of the assisted, but also to quantify the single components of the caring service, such as the time of caring labour or the composition and duration of sanitary integrative services. The research is so detailed that it is possible to reconstruct the overall social cost of domiciliary assistance in the three situations and to compare it with the traditional alternative of hospitalization.

Calculations take into account different purchasing powers and degrees of disability of elderly people and include both the monetary costs (for families and the public service) and the value of unpaid caring time performed by family members (cost-opportunity). Many factors influence this calculation of cost-differentials, but two of them are particularly important: the combination of technology and domotics in Denmark and the employment of caregivers in Italy.

In Italy and in Denmark more than 90 percent of assisted elderly are assisted either at home or in especially equipped apartments, whereas in Ireland we note that more than 20 percent are assisted in ‘institutions’ - hospices or sanitary residences. However, in Ireland and Italy when assistance is domiciliary it is almost exclusively a (female)

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8 The range (1-1.6 million) is due to the irregular component (asylum seekers), particularly incisive in this form of employment, that makes these statistics quite aleatory. Between 2000 and 2003, ISTAT [Italian National Institute of Statistics] counted 400,000 caregivers. The study to which we refer added an estimated 250,000 and 900,000 irregular domestic workers to the 745,000 registered with INPS [National Institute of Social Services]. The sum total of these two components (regular and irregular workers) goes from the minimum of 1 million to a maximum of 1.6 million workers. Bocconi University instead estimated between 713,000 and 1,134,000 caregivers in Italy (CERGAS).

9 Wikipedia defines domotics (also called home automation) as ‘the automation of the home, housework or household activity’, in order to better life conditions, especially for elders and disabled people. It’s in this sense that the term is used in this article.
family member who takes care of elderly people, whereas in Denmark this is a task performed by the public service.

According to the results of this research, often (not always) taking care of the elderly at home is less expensive (for the collectivity) than hospitalization. In Italy, for example, the cost of hospitalization in a sanitary residence is more than 40 percent higher than the average social cost of domiciliary caregiving. Moreover, established as 100 the average cost per domiciliary assisted elderly in Italy, the cost in Denmark is 10 percent higher and 20 percent higher in Ireland.

The Italian variation on the familistic model, which is to say the ‘family-solution’ plus a caregiver, is the less expensive: €424 per week. Caregivers in Italy, according to this study, allow savings (in terms of social costs) for €100 per week/elderly if compared with Denmark and for almost €500 if compared with Ireland. This is due to their low wage. In fact, the study estimates the salary of a domiciliary caregiver at around €3.00 per hour and, for those who do not live with the assisted, €5.00 per hour. A domiciliary assistant employed by the public service costs around €19.80 per hour. Here is where the ‘shadow welfare of caregivers’ is precisely situated. Moreover, it should be added that whereas the elderly population of Modena – the sample city for the research – is quantitatively similar to the country’s average, its pro-capita income, feminine employment and public assistance are above the average. In Modena, about 27% of families which assist an elderly declared to turn to a paid external aid, more than 50% in a domiciliary situation (Bettio e Solinas, 2008).

In Italy, caregivers attenuate the conflict between labour and care. For example, in Modena, the appeal to extra-familial aid rises to 35 percent when the person in charge for caring is employed. This explains why the percentage of people forced to leave the job market or to reduce working hours is so low: 9 percent for men and 5 percent for women.

The ‘Italian model’ that emerges from this study symbolizes a mode of organization based on families rather than on social services, on domestic assistance rather than on hospitalization. The Italian model is less expensive and it is not yet collapsed because those €424 do not represent a necessary renunciation to waged-labour for the second generations and because the salary of caregivers (‘the second generations’ helpers’) is very low.

**Preliminary conclusions: A new research agenda**

As always, the capitalist process of valorization is still based on exploitation of labour. Nonetheless, currently we face a ‘labour’ which is no longer possible to singularly decline, which does not describe a homogeneous, univocal condition. Above all, it is a ‘labour’ which tends to be irreducible to a ‘material’ and quantitative measurement. This point does not deny the always material (and fatiguing) nature of labour. Rather, we argue that, in the last 30 years, what has been modified is the ‘form’ of production and of the commodity which generates the process of accumulation and valorization. In fact, the role of immaterial production is more central, as well as the quota of added
value that is dependent on supply, circulation and diffusion of immaterial commodities (by definition impossible to be numerically measured).

In the context of industrial-Fordist capitalism, the link between the physical performance of labour (which is an eminently corporeal activity) and the materiality of commodities was almost immediate. In general, workers’ bodies produced material commodities through the use of machinery. In contemporary capitalism, this link evaporates and often loses any importance. Increasingly, working performances are characterized by the pre-eminence of affective and cognitive elements. Not by chance, this process coincides with the growth of immaterial production. When labour is no longer primarily physical (muscular expenditure) but, rather, involves more mental faculties, then it tends to differentiate itself: it ‘subjectifies’ itself. In fact, subjectivity – namely individuals’ life – constitutes the potential and real base of the process of valorization. This is why we propose the term ‘biocapitalism’.

In the current heterodox debate, there are many adjectives that can be used beside the term ‘labour’: cognitive, affective or caring. Those words are still subject, even in the field of Marxist analyses, to some misunderstandings that reduce them to the traditional dichotomies between productive and unproductive labour or between manual and intellectual labour. Both the ongoing debate and its possible ambiguities are partially due to the necessity of investigating more precisely and rigorously the consequences of mutated working conditions on the labour theory of value. Although the latter remains an inescapable theoretical reference to measure the economic value of biocapitalism, it nonetheless must be newly analyzed in accordance to the structural and irreversible transformations due to the emergence of bioeconomical accumulation.

In industrial-Fordist capitalism, the unity of measurement of value was based on time. It was, so to speak, a temporal unity of measurement. More specifically, it was the temporal unit of a day, as proposed by Marx in *Das Kapital*, marked by a clear distinction between working-time and non-working-time. A second condition was the measurement of the value of the output – intended as the result of the working process combined with other productive factors. In this context, the value of production was necessarily measurable by means of prices and quantity.\(^\text{10}\) In fact, even by capitalists the determination of prices is regarded as an indicator of the dynamic relation between capital and labour. Quantities, on the other hand, are objectively measurable in numeric terms.

In biocapitalism, this schema collapses. As a consequence, we face two kinds of problems. The first concerns the difficulty (often impossibility) to determine a clear distinction between working-time and non-working-time. Moreover, immaterial production rejects a quantitative measure, which is to say that it is not immediately measurable in numeric terms. Notwithstanding various attempts to create new indirect

\(^{10}\) The question concerning the transformation of value into prices will not be discussed here in this essay.
unities of measurement,\textsuperscript{11} immaterial production is by definition a synonym of ‘dis-measure’. Consequently, the value of immaterial production is not determinable through objective units of measurement, even when conventional.

Faced with these problematics, the labour theory of value must be rethought and newly modulated. It can no longer be considered as the ‘objective’ measure of value. The temporal unit of measurement tends to become the life of human beings generally intended. Secondly, the value produced and then measured through prices is generated by social conflicts that, in turn, emerge from the behavior of working subjectivities involved in the process. With regard to this point, it is necessary to take into account that also the monetary unit of measure (through which prices are defined) lost its ‘objective’ reference. In fact, until 1971 the American dollar (to which all other currencies were fixedly related through the pegged rate) represented the objective ‘unit of measurement’ of money\textsuperscript{12}. The end of the system of fixed exchange rates inaugurates the era of money as ‘pure money-sign. Consequently, its value, as well as the value of immaterial production (impossible to quantify in numerical terms), is more and more dependent on subjective and conflicting dynamics involved in the continual redefinition of social and international hierarchies\textsuperscript{13}.

These unprecedented theoretical dimensions show the necessity of a new research agenda. At the moment, we advance the hypothesis that, in biocapitalism, the labour theory of value tends to transform into a life theory of value. We believe that the issue of affective labour (still in its embryonic form) is paradigmatic of this tendency. In fact, the concept of affective labour includes all those problematic elements that mark the crisis of the labour theory of value.

The example we discussed confirms that an effort that goes beyond working-time, physical expenditure and cognitive/affective abilities is impossible to measure. Otherwise put, our data demonstrate both ‘the wage as a miserable base for measurement’ and ‘the growth of command at the expense of exchange’ (Harney, 2009). The 3 euros earned by a caregiver immediately show a subtraction, an uncounted element. If compared to the previous wage-based relation, whose function was to clearly separate the interests of different parts (labour versus private life, with no full involvement of workers in their tasks), the current situation has radically changed. Nowadays, we witness the ‘total mobilization’ of labour, which is to say the putting to work of life itself, starting from the production of oneself. From this perspective, caring labour and the value generated by affectivity seem paradigmatic. The classical category of exploitation as extortion of surplus value is no longer applicable to a productive process that has made traditional units of measurement obsolete (Gorz, 2003). Self-exploitation, in this context, becomes a fundamental element of the process of

\textsuperscript{11} For example, in the sector of knowledge-production we witness the use of extravagant units of measurement such as ‘man-hours’, where the object of quantitative measurement is not the product but the person who produces it.

\textsuperscript{12} 1 ounce of gold = 35$. 

\textsuperscript{13} On financialization and its instability after the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, see Fumagalli and Mezzadra (2009).
valorization. It is directly proportional to the new centrality of subjectivity within the productive process.

Moreover, global diaspora has huge implications for a monetary economy whose integration is due to a thick network of transnational fluxes of capital and workforce. Such a system is profoundly marked by internal processes of migration that implies mobility, flexibility and precariousness of labour conditions.

Our case study allows us to believe that if measuring the value attached to emotional and caring labour is possible, then it can be configured just through negation: it is deduced from the welfare savings allowed by these forms of labour. Social equilibrium increasingly depends on working figures whose fundamental function (nothing less than the continuity of the species) is inscribed in a context of progressive social disengagement (the collapse of welfare territorial services). As a consequence, the characteristics of the Italian social-familial organism (South European family welfare) are exalted by biocapitalism through a process of total privatization of primary social needs. The sustainability of life is externalized to migrant workers and this process allows the State to save money. Moreover, it canalizes resources toward new job markets. To a certain extent, exactly as finance becomes a form of private social insurance, the labour of a caregiver (paid by families) seems to canalize income toward new markets and, in so doing, valorizes existence.

As a first step, knowing the cost of this expense (as well as its consequences in terms of consuming structures and of job markets both internal and external to enterprises) is necessary to analyze the social costs of the ongoing restructuring. This restructuring produces value for capital because it is extrapolated from a mechanism of collective insurance and because it is inscribed in a market-relation. However, the central and powerful issue we face at the end of our discussion is the always identical character of the use-value produced – be it wheat, a bolt, a painting, a book, a ‘fertile caress’. In fact, the notion of use-value (as the material side of commodities, common to all epochs) recalls an analysis which, in a primary instance, seems to transcend political economy. It is not a coincidence, in fact, that political economy did not take into account emotional labour until recently. This analysis involves political economy as soon as use-value is modified by modern relations of production and, in turn, modifies them through its incorporation. The commodification of use-value is due to these determined relations: they transform use-value into exchange-value. Evidently, the contradiction is the following: as modern techniques of cultivation, manuring and selection used by capital can change taste, natural properties and quality of wheat, so the seal of commodities on the intellect or the affect subsumed under capital can transform and even invert their material content and social meaning. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that, along with the product, living labour also exists and capital is forced to include it within the objective conditions of production. This is the processual contradiction of a relation of capital that precedes the result. Capital – subordinating to its self-valorization every labour – attempts (successfully) to annihilate the autonomy of living labour through its counterposition to capitalist objective conditions (conditions that are alienated as dead labour – machines). This process is immanent to the contemporary valorization of capital. Thus, the mobilization of empathy and affect, the production of information, the commodification of culture and bodies are nothing more
than the results of the deployment of the contradiction intrinsic to the totality of the contemporary, biocapitalist mode of production.

references


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The imprimatur of capital: Gilbert Simondon and the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism

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Abstract

The paper explores the relevance of Gilbert Simondon’s reflections on the notion of individuation for the development of the political and analytical hypothesis known as cognitive capitalism, recently proposed by economists such as Yann Moulier Boutang and Carlo Vercellone. The focus of their analysis is on the new exploitative dimensions of contemporary capitalism. Nowadays, exploitation is exercised on the process of individuation rather than on individuated entities. To theoretically grasp, and politically act upon, this unprecedented configuration, I argue that the Marxian notions of formal and real subsumption are still necessary but not longer sufficient. As a consequence, I will advance and discuss an original concept, that of impression, whose function is to supplement these Marxian notions in an attempt to understand the new modalities of contemporary exploitation. More specifically, the goal is to give a non-neutral account of what seems to be the categorical, albeit paradoxical, imperative of Post-Fordist capitalism: ‘be as different from the social norm as you wish, experience your autonomy in its fullness, as long as the outcome of your behaviour is translatable into the homogeneous grammar of the general equivalent – money’. To give empirical consistency to my analysis, I will attempt to apply the notion of impression to the post-welfare discourse of active social policies that aim to ‘empower’ the unemployed in and through the labour market.

Introduction

This paper explores the relevance of Gilbert Simondon’s philosophy of individuation (2005) for the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism as it has been proposed by authors such as Yann Moulier-Boutang (2007) and Carlo Vercellone (2006a; 2006b). More particularly, I will argue that the application of the Simondonian conceptual apparatus to the contemporary critique of political economy can shed new light on some specific processes of exploitation, processes that are defining features of the Post-Fordist phase of the capitalist mode of production. The current form of exploitation does not refer solely to individuated entities assembled within the category of waged labour. Without departing from that, it nonetheless expands its capture toward individuation itself, namely the process that leads to the creation of individual working figures. To theoretically grasp, and politically act upon, these new exploitative configurations the Marxian notions of formal and real subsumption are still necessary, but not longer

1 Although not discussed in the economy of the current work, another fundamental source on the notion of cognitive capitalism is Fumagalli, 2007.
sufficient. As a consequence, the core sections of this essay will advance and discuss an original concept, that of impression, whose function is to supplement these Marxian notions in an attempt to understand the unprecedented modalities of contemporary exploitation. More specifically, the goal is to give a non-neutral account of what seems to be the categorical, albeit paradoxical, imperative of Post-Fordist capitalism: ‘be as different from the social norm as you wish, experience your autonomy in its fullness, as long as the outcome of your behaviour is translatable into the homogeneous grammar of the general equivalent – money’.

The exposition will proceed as follows. First, I will briefly outline some of the key concepts of Simondon’s ontological propositions. Second, I will discuss some fundamental theses about the notion of cognitive capitalism. Third, I will introduce the concept of impression and discuss its main theoretical features. Fourth, I will attempt a brief empirical application of impression to the discourse of active social policies that aim to ‘empower’ the unemployed in and through the labour market. Finally, a provisional conclusion will expose possible lines of further research to enrich the general debate.

**Simondon**

The philosophical project developed by Gilbert Simondon over a period of twenty years is a highly complex and sophisticated one. Nonetheless, for the purposes of my argument it is sufficient to highlight two main theses through which a sharp line of demarcation has been drawn with regard to the Western metaphysical tradition. The first is the primacy of the process of individuation over individuated entities. From this perspective, Simondon’s polemical object has to be found in the various theoretical approaches that posit as prior a fixed principle that would be able to explain, produce and determine the course of subsequent processes of individuation. Constituted individualities are conceived of as given, immutable substances, so that the fundamental problem ends up being the recreation of the specific conditions that have made their existence possible. On the contrary, Simondon sees individuation as an operation, as a processual becoming by means of which structured individualities can emerge and relate to each other. At stake is the possibility to philosophically grasp the individual through individuation rather than individuation through the individual. As it is evident, the implications of this radical perspective are of primary importance:

The individual has to be understood as having a relative reality, occupying only a certain phase of being as a whole – a phase that therefore rests on a preceding pre-individual state, and that, even after individuation, does not exist in isolation since individuation does not exhaust in the singular act of its appearance all the potentials embedded in the pre-individual state. The process of individuation, moreover, does not bring to light just the individual, but also the individual-environment dyad. In this way the individual possesses only a relative existence in two senses: because it does not represent the totality of being, and because it is merely the result of a phase in

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2 Simondon’s thought has undergone a sort of renaissance in recent years. This new interest in his theoretical production has given rise to a rich international debate, whose significant expressions are the following: (in French) Stiegler, 2004; Combes, 1999; (in Italian) Ciccarelli, 2008; (in English) Toscano, 2006.
the development of being during which this latter existed neither in the form of an individual nor as a principle of individuation. (Simondon, 2005: 12; author translation)

The second, closely linked theoretical statement is the primacy of relation over its own terms. As we have seen, the process of individuation requires a field of singularities, conceived of as pure intensities, basic energetic unities; subsequently, these tensive potentials are transformed into relatively stable structures, which in turn bring to the foreground new differential environments. From this standpoint, the emerging system is nothing more than a precarious equilibrium between a pre-individual field of intensities and a trans-individual range of problems that have to be solved through contingent and unexpected structural operations. By referring to the pre-individual field as ‘metastable’, Simondon intends to advance the idea that, prior to individuality, being is affected by inconsistency, populated by divergent tensions, and pregnant with incompatible potentials. Relationality emerges in this phase of being and is consequently able to account for the onto-genesis of individuated entities. Simondon is strongly critical towards the conceptual dichotomies – matter and form especially – which have traditionally proposed to explain the original manifestation of individuals. Real relations, according to him, are those relations that co-emerge with their terms. They are operations that integrate irreducible differences, ‘not the simple relation between two terms that could be adequately known by means of concepts, inasmuch as they would have an effectively separate existence’ (Simondon, 2005: 19; author translation). As Alberto Toscano appropriately notes:

Rather than the substantial support of relations that would inhere within it, (preindividual) being is defined as affected by disparity, that is, by the tension between incompatible – as yet unrelated – dimensions or potentials in being. (Toscano, 2006: 139)

To conclude this section, I would like to underline that, although Simondon’s emphasis is clearly on the operative and processual realities rather than on the static and individuated entities, the relationship between these two categories might be defined as a-symmetrical complementarity, since each of them represents the condition of possibility for the understanding of the other. And it is from this specific difference, of degree rather than of kind, that I will attempt to map out some internal resonances between the philosophy of individuation and the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism. Moreover, this complex/paradoxical complementarity between opposite terms will open up the theoretical terrain upon which the notion of impression, conceived of as a tool to produce a cartography of contemporary exploitation, grounds its logical justification and political effectiveness.

**Cognitive capitalism**

The hypothesis of cognitive capitalism is complex and multilayered, and can consequently be approached from a variety of perspectives. However, for the purposes of the present work I will limit the discussion to a general premise and then move directly to the Marxian notion of subsumption, which is the one I would like to problematise. First of all, while referring to a paradigmatic analysis of the current phase the authors I mentioned earlier are not simply posing the problem of a description of the contemporary functioning of the multiple circuits of accumulation and/or valorisation.
Economic sociology has already accomplished this task. Rather, we are dealing with the necessity to provide a partial, class-based understanding of Post-Fordist conditions, an understanding whose goal is from the very beginning its employment in the social struggle to overcome such conditions. As it has always been in the workerist methodological tradition, it is the point of view of the working class that has to be assumed.

Consequently, it is from an analysis of labour modifications that the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism is allowed to perceive the current phase as a new great transformation, a third capitalist era whose difference from the previous two is precisely defined by a shift in the actual way through which capital subsumes living labour under itself. On the basis of this elaboration, Vercellone proposes a periodisation of the history of capitalism marked by the presence of three main stages.

The first is mercantilist capitalism, in which formal subsumption prevails. In this context capital faces an already formed productive network and limits itself to assume it as its own base. In this way the privileged locus of production has to be individuated in the workshop, concomitant with the hegemony of workers’ handicraft. The determined class-figure of this first moment is the professional worker.

The second stage is industrial capitalism, whose apex is represented by the Fordist model. This latter is informed by the logic of real subsumption, which implies that capital produces on its own the means of production and the pivotal locus of production itself is the large-scale factory. This peculiar mass-production of standardised goods implies a polarization of workers’ knowledge and skills that in turn involves a strict division between directly productive tasks and planning skills. Here the prevalent class-figure is the mass worker.

The third stage begins with the crisis of the Fordist model and is represented by the emergence of cognitive capitalism, defined by a specific exploitative relation with knowledge, by the diffusion of mass education and, last but not least, by the violent inclusion in the circuits of valorisation of worker’s subjectivity, conceived of in terms of means of production (Vercellone, 2006a).

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4 It may be useful to report a passage from the classical locus of this methodological formulation, namely Mario Tronti’s Operai e capitale: ‘We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, to change perspective and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, the capitalist development is subordinate to workers’ struggles, comes after them and on them it has to build the political mechanism of its own production’ (Tronti 2006: 39).

5 With the concept of subsumption, Marx qualifies the forms of subordination of labour to capital and, as it is clear, there is a strict link between subsumption and exploitation.

6 ‘The general features of the formal subsumption remain, viz. the direct subordination of the labour process to capital, irrespective of the state of its technological development. But on this foundation there now arises a technologically and otherwise specific mode of production – capitalist production – which transforms the nature of the labour process and its actual conditions. Only when that happens do we witness the real subsumption of labour under capital’ (Marx, 1979: 1034-1035).
Now, at this point one might legitimately ask: which kind of subsumption is proper to cognitive capitalism? Vercellone’s answer is the following:

[…] the subsumption of labour under capital, from the point of view of the labour process, returns to be essentially formal. This means that the cooperation of labour no longer needs to be ruled by capital, and this reaffirmation of the autonomy of living knowledge could lead to a resurgence of tensions regarding self-determination in the organisation of labour and the social ends of production. (Vercellone, 2005: 10)

According to Vercellone, the new phase does not require a different conceptual apparatus to be grasped in its singularity; no qualitative shift seems to be involved. Rather, it is a matter of investigating a new articulation between formal and real subsumption, an articulation in which the former returns to dominance. In fact, since capital progressively loses its ability to direct/organize social cooperation, exploitation is deployed through a twofold strategy: extension of actual working hours (new centrality of absolute surplus labour) and hyper-productivity of finance (whose nourishment is the autonomy of the general intellect). As a necessary consequence, financial rent – conceived of in terms of Post-Fordist means of exploitation – has to be understood as purely parasitical.

A different perspective is proposed by Moulier-Boutang (2007), who intends to show the unique features of contemporary accumulation by means of a new theory of exploitation, which is in turn based on the pivotal notion of second level exploitation. To introduce this concept, the author provides a preliminary distinction within the notion of living labour: at a basic level, labour would be defined by a physical, material energy expenditure (labour-power), while at a superior level we find memory and cognitive functions (invention-power). At this point, Moulier-Boutang advances the thesis that cognitive capitalism is more concerned with the violent appropriation of affects, subjectivities, knowledge and mental or spiritual capacities, which we find at the superior level of living labour (hence second level exploitation). Conversely, both mercantilist and industrial capitalism were concerned, albeit in different ways, with the transformations of material energy into physical goods. As Moulier-Boutang explains:

The specificity of cognitive capitalism is that it receives its legitimacy from the very nature of its accumulation. And what is the quality of this accumulation referred to? It is referred to the fact that it is essentially grounded on second level exploitation. In as much as the profitability of capital invested in productive activities almost exclusively arises from an exploitation of second degree (which means that exploitation of first degree can be reduced to its simplest expression), we are witnessing the full deployment of cognitive capitalism. Even before being a stabilised regime, a mode of accumulation, capitalism is the tendency to transform the mode of exploitation. (Moulier-Boutang, 2007: 148)

The concept of impression

Now, although this analysis might appear overly simplistic and excessively schematic, and although the distinction between labour-power and invention-power may recall a kind of body-mind dualism to which a shrewd post-Cartesian epistemology has addressed convincing critiques, nonetheless we find it very important since it underlines
the necessity to think the new forms of exploitation outside (albeit in no way against) the Marxian notions of formal and real subsumption. In a fundamental passage, Moulier-Boutang explains that, in order to exploit the general intellect under cognitive capitalism, it is necessary ‘to avoid a perfect objectification (reification or alienation) of the invention-power in the labour process or in the product’ (Moulier Boutang, 2007: 147-148; emphasis added). If we substitute the expression ‘perfect objectification’ with ‘transformation in individuated entities emptied of their potentials’, it becomes possible to see how Simondon’s thought can help us in a proper conceptualisation of the forms of exploitation specific to cognitive capitalism.

At this point, I can advance two hypotheses and an inference: 1) Both formal and real subsumption essentially cope with relatively homogeneous individuated entities (in the first case capital finds them as already formed, while in the second it establishes a disciplinary process which starts from a well defined point – the individual worker formally free to sell her labour-power – and ends in another well defined point – the forced inclusion of the proletarian in the scarcely differentiated category of waged-worker); 2) Capital, in its cognitive phase, must grant to social cooperation, or subtly impose to productive citizens, a certain degree of self-government in order to subsequently, ex post, capture the value they produce. Here, self-government means the possibility for them to enter in a non-disciplinary – yet not uncontrolled – process of individuation; 3) If these two hypotheses are plausible, then it becomes possible to argue for a new conceptual apparatus potentially capable of providing a mediation between a determined mode of exploitation of individuated entities (formal and real subsumption), and a just as determined mode of exploitation of processes of individuation.

This is the reason why I propose to supplement (not to substitute) the notion of subsumption with the concept of impression, whose function is to define at a theoretical level the specific characteristics of the exploitation of individuation. The reason why the term impression is chosen is twofold: on the one hand, it recalls the Latin locution nihil obstat quominus imprimatur, generally abbreviated in the term imprimatur. This expression was used by the ecclesiastical authority to approve the printing of books and refers to a form of control that (rhetorically) does not impose a pre-given outcome.

7 For a truly remarkable analysis along the same argumentative line, see Chicchi, 2005.
8 It may be useful to note that I do not want to argue for a perfect transition from Fordist and Pre-Fordist forms of exploitation to Post-Fordist ones. On the very contrary, these exploitative practices tend to supplement each other presenting themselves in complex configurations dependent on the singularity of each given context. However, this should not prevent us from investigating the specific form of exploitation in cognitive capitalism, which is becoming more and more diffused especially in the metropolitan areas of the planet.
9 A further specification seems necessary at this point. When we refer to ‘scarce differentiation’ we are not suggesting that professional and mass workers are comparable to mere automatons and that their working activity should be interpreted as mere repetition of mindless gestures. In contrast, what we want to highlight is the transformation of the role of autonomous creativity in the process of capitalist value-production: from fatal threat to be fought through discipline (mercantilist and industrial capitalism) to necessary resource to be simultaneously incited and controlled (cognitive capitalism).
10 Texts to which the imprimatur was rejected were immediately included in the list of prohibited books (Index Librorum Prohibitorum), formally abolished by Pope Paul VI in 1966.
but rather establishes an initial (and firmly indisputable) condition of acceptability. On the other hand, it suggests a photographic metaphor; in fact, it recalls the constitutive indeterminacy of the impression of a photographic plate before subsequent treatments bring it to full development. Moreover, it discloses the virtual (but nevertheless real!) edges of an image without filling them with actual content. To put it otherwise, it refers to a dynamic regime of superimpositions in which at the beginning, ex ante, the establishment of a limit or threshold takes place. This limit then influences the process of subjective becoming without positing a necessary outcome to it. However, impression is not configured as the purely formal act which consists in drawing an immaterial border; on the contrary, it presents itself as a direct tool for governing life, as a biopolitical dispositif aimed at selecting subjective trajectories ‘potentially’ functional to capitalist valorisation. I say ‘potentially’ because, although the negative injunction occurs ex ante, its economic validation, its inclusion in the circuits of accumulation cannot but manifests itself ex post, at the end of the process, when the unpredictable but not unlimited outcome actually appears. In other words, although impressed, a process of individuation always remains partially indeterminate (since, by definition, it proceeds through the activation of unactualised potentials, whose transparent measurement, or complete management, is simply impossible). This means that capitalism is forced to keep open this indeterminable processuality, whose mode of development necessarily implies the production of antagonisms.

At this point, however, another consideration seems unavoidable: just beside the negative injunction (impression as the establishment of a limiting threshold), we always find a correlative positive injunction which incites/imposes the subject to conform as much as possible to the imperative of enjoyment by means of differentiation (impression as the act of governing the social body through the production of market-led forms of freedom).

Here the double injunction of the capitalist categorical imperative we sketched above acquires its proper sense. In fact, the twofold prescription ‘(1) be as different from the social norm as you wish, experience your autonomy in its fullness, (2) as long as the outcome of your behaviour is translatable into the homogeneous grammar of the general equivalent – money’ finally rests on the paradox of a coercive freedom, of a refined governmental dispositif which controls while inciting to subjective autonomy.

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11 It is important to stress that I refer to a temporal terminology from an abstractly logical (as opposed to linearly chronological) perspective.

12 According to Michel Foucault, freedom is a necessary condition for capitalism (and biopolitics) to function. In Birth of Biopolitics, he recognises the incapability to properly manage the process of freedom-production as one of the main causes of the crisis of liberalism (a political rationality that ‘consumes freedom’). From this crisis emerges neoliberalism as a specific governmental practice whose relationship to freedom-production is ‘refined’ through a radical anti-naturalism. Nonetheless, production of freedom is more a contested battlefield than a flat surface upon which power can be boundlessly exercised. As Foucault brilliantly explains: ‘Finally, and above all, there are processes of clogging such that the mechanisms for producing freedom, precisely those that are called upon to manufacture this freedom, actually produce destructive effects which prevail over the very freedom they are supposed to produce. This is, if you like, the ambiguity of all devices which could be called “liberogenic”, that is to say, devices intended to produce freedom which potentially risk producing
It is this inherent paradox, from whence the productive and interventionist side of capitalist command issues, which seems to me lacking in the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism as proposed by Vercellone (and, to a certain extent, also by Moulier Boutang). While focusing exclusively on the economic validation ex post, they seem to delineate a mystical profile of social cooperation, an image of the multitude as good in itself, as intrinsically innocent. For these reasons we agree with the critique recently formulated by Alberto Toscano, according to whom:

The question is in what sense we are justified in speaking simply of ‘capture’: are we not dealing with the incitement by capitalism of a simulacrum of self-valorisation, an ideology of cooperation which would mistake a global constraint for a subjective initiative? Is cooperation really outside, or even relatively autonomous from, the self-valorisation of capital? (Toscano, 2007: 80)

Since social (even autonomous) cooperation does not emerge in a vacuum, ex nihilo, the problem posed by Toscano has to be taken seriously. To envisage an answer to his last question, however, it is necessary at the very least to introduce some illustration of how impression might work in a concrete analytical context.

**Impression applied: Exploitation in active social policies**

As an empirical example, I propose to analyse the debate about active social policies (basically concerned with the reform of welfare state) that has arisen in recent years in the field of economic sociology (Geldof, 1998; Larsen and Van Berkel, 2009). Welfare is here conceived of as the institutional apex of the Fordist phase, a relatively stable balance of force relations marked by a ‘tacit agreement’ between labour and capital (increased wages for increases in productivity and social rest). From this perspective, welfare directly refers to the issue of exploitation – to put it crudely, the working class forced through struggle a different distribution of surplus value – and seems consequently to be a suitable terrain to advance a preliminary evaluation of the heuristic and political potential of the concept of impression.

To simplify a little, active social policies aim at re-including in the labour market subjects that are, for various reasons, unable to successfully cope with it as it is usually configured and, consequently, represent a burden on the social security budget. In general, it might be said that the discourse of activation assumes as its polemical object the so-called welfare dependency, which is to say a putative tendency on the part of recipients (usually poor and/or unemployed) to live off their allowance. This polemical object, however, presents from the very beginning of the debate (mid-1980s) an interesting ambiguity: it can be addressed starting from both a disciplinary and an emancipative premise. In fact, some authors (Murray, 1984) see activation as an opportunity to enforce a disciplinary reform and to bring an end to the supposed situation where social benefits constitute a hammock rather than a safety net, whereas others (Katz, 1990) focus on the obligation for the state not to limit its action in providing benefits as financial compensation for social exclusion, but rather to actively create material/symbolic conditions for individuals’ ‘free’ empowerment. This duality

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is perfectly reflected in the twofold rhetoric of the activation discourse: on the one hand, there is a clear emphasis on workfare, namely the imposition of compulsory labour or service on people who receive financial aid through welfare as a necessary condition of their assistance (mandatory participation in designated activities). On the other hand, what is stressed is the role of employability (and its lifelong updating), which is to say the ever-changing set of skills, competencies and factors of adaptability that are supposed to support individuals’ empowerment in and through the labour market.

Although always somehow co-present, these two sides of the activation discursive regime (disciplinary workfare versus empowering employability) have very different historical roots; whereas the former has tended to be a crude electoral argument for certain neoliberal right-wing formations, the latter has been progressively inscribed into the official language of the large majority of Western democratic institutions. This is hardly surprising from the standpoint of the present reflection. In fact, while the disciplinary solution would not require a conceptual innovation to be grasped in its essence, a form of exploitation based around an incitement to empowering creativity poses new, urgent problems to be faced by means of new theoretical tools. An anomalous social situation is in place: elements such as affectivity, learning attitudes and sensitivity, that in principle have nothing to do with work performances and have in the past been banned from them, enter now imperiously into the vortex of the process of valorisation. This is clearly illustrated, for example, in the 56 Employability Skills 2000+ gathered by the Conference Board of Canada in 2000. Among them we find suggestions such as ‘access, analyse and apply knowledge and explain or clarify ideal skills from various disciplines (e.g., the arts, languages, science, technology, mathematics, social sciences, and the humanities)’; ‘recognise the human, interpersonal, technical, scientific and mathematical dimensions of a problem’; ‘be innovative and resourceful: identify and suggest alternative ways to achieve goals and get the job done’; ‘be willing to continuously learn and grow’ (Conference Board of Canada, 2000). To repeat: personal talents, interests and abilities, once rigidly separated from working requirements, are today an important segment of the process of value production. As a consequence, one of the main tasks of social policies is to channel this chaotic and elusive raw material of value toward its institutional refinery: the labour market.

From this unprecedented configuration arises a fundamental question: how do we address, from the perspective of the activation discourse, the paradox of an exploitative procedure that extracts surplus-value by calling for the free/innovative development of its own ‘victims’? The main issue here concerns the articulation of the concept of

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13 For example, employability is one of the four ‘pillars’, along with entrepreneurship, adaptability and equal opportunities, of the European Employment Strategy sponsored by the EU.

14 In fact, it would be sufficient to argue for a partial return to formal subsumption: forced increase of absolute surplus-labour as a result of the extortion of a quota of the indirect wage represented by welfare. To be sure, this process is taking place. Nonetheless, in my opinion, it does not exhaust the profound complexity of the issue at stake.

15 The Conference Board of Canada is an influential not-for-profit organization dedicated to researching and analysing economic trends, as well as organizational performance and public policy issues. Self-declared ‘objective and non-partisan’, the Conference Board of Canada claims not to lobby for special interests.
freedom. Through impression, whose functional aim is to bond ontological individuation and contemporary exploitation, it is possible to argue that activation policies can work—as they actually do, at least to a certain extent—only in so far as the creativity and innovation they enact are declined along a prescriptive idea of freedom which is not pure, abstractly disembodied, but rather concretely specific: it is freedom to subjectively compete in entrepreneurial forms.16 Active social policies presuppose impressed subjects, competitive individuals that are always-already potential entrepreneurs. In other terms, this kind of governmental regulation requires a politico-economical setting such that capital and labour do not confront themselves on different (but mutually implicated) levels of the productive process. Capital and labour do not face each other from a structural asymmetry that nonetheless preserves their identities as incommensurable. Rather, labour appears to be progressively absorbed into capital: potentially (and rhetorically) every individual is a self-entrepreneur and must economically compete to reach its realisation (as profit).17 This is why the target of activation policies does not confront the labour market from a merely external position, as was the case, to a significant extent, for welfare recipients. In fact, for this kind of social program to work, co-operative subjectivities must already be impressed by capital, which is to say that they entertain a relation of proximity with the meta-rules of the market before they actually get lost in the maze of actually existing job markets. To put it differently, contemporary social subjectivity is from the very beginning embedded in a market-led grammar whose syntax is represented by the enterprise, whose morphology is configured as competition and whose phonetics is incarnated into money.

The fundamental point I would like to stress is that the notion of impression does not intend to shift the analytical focus from the problem of exploitation’s violence to that of exploitation’s seduction, or simulacrum of self-realization. Rather, it aims at reconfiguring the violent substance of contemporary exploitative practices within the framework of its seductive form (which is obviously not the only one, but nevertheless increasingly central). In other words, the hypothesis of impression would like to set in motion a critical rethinking about the status of the relationship between social cooperation (and its possible—not to be taken for granted—autonomy) and capitalist command (and its necessary coercion). The pivotal question here is the following: how to descriptively discern and prescriptively act upon the points of friction that are operating within the conflictual and dynamic relationship that exists between incitement

16 Christian Marazzi has brilliantly linked this new dimension of the notion of freedom to the neoliberal transformation of the homo oeconomicus: ‘Homo oeconomicus is no longer a subject of exchange, as in classical economics, but rather a subject whose definition is provided by abstract labour, a subject contained in exchanged commodities (among which is labour power), a subject of production. The homo oeconomicus is the self-entrepreneur, the cornerstone of neoliberal ideology as well as the emerging figure of Post-Fordist transformations [...] It is a subject to be considered as an enterprise and, as such, it must manage its life as a business plan, which is to say according to criteria such as savings, investment, innovation, speculation, etc.’ (Marazzi, 2008: 136). See also Chicchi, 2008.

17 From a sociological perspective, Vando Borghi and Federico Chicchi refer to this process as the tendential shift from a Fordist-Taylorist objectification of labour (marked by standardized gestures, rhythms, tasks) to a Post-Fordist objectification of workers (characterized by self-management as incitement to subjective differentiation). See Borghi and Chicchi, 2007.
The concept of impression does not yet answer this question, but allows it to be posited in such a way that analytical extremes like the naive innocence of social cooperation and the impenetrable pervasiveness of capital’s rule are avoided from the very beginning. Even more importantly, through the concept of impression it is finally possible to address the issue of new political (namely non-neutral) criteria by means of which to criticise (and propose alternatives to) both private and public policies that concretely organise the exploitative practices everyone of us face on a regular basis.

Provisional conclusion

At this point, I would like to advance a brief specification in order to prevent possible misunderstandings. These critical remarks are not intended to reinstate the disempowering and ultimately self-consolatory paranoia of the ‘omnipresence of the monster’: capital remains a historically determined social relation, absolutely not eternal and, what is more important, pervaded with antagonisms which constantly put into question its reproduction. Simply, I would like to avoid the opposite extreme, namely to see the monster – yes – but to believe at the same time that it is already dead. In particular, the concept of impression, which emerges at the intersection between the Simondonian ontology of individuation and the paradigm of cognitive capitalism, might be able to further problematise two of the most discussed issues in the context of so-called post-workerism. The first refers to the ontological opposition between biopolitics, conceived of as the level at which the potentiality of social cooperation is autonomously and fully actualized, and biopower, seen as the vampire-like apparatus through which capital ensures a purely dominant form of extortion (Hardt and Negri, 2000; 2004; 2009). I contend that this model is too schematic (even Manichean) and does not grasp in depth the complex and often contradictory phenomenology of contemporary exploitation. Through impression, which involves a strong emphasis on the constitutive ambivalence of the current phase of capitalist development, this rigidly dichotomous distinction might be rethought in more empowering political terms and more effective explanatory formulations.

The second issue concerns the thesis according to which profit is increasingly becoming a form of rent (Vercellone, 2006b). From this perspective, the new centrality of rent would prove the exclusively parasitical nature of cognitive capitalism and finance would be configured as a totally non-productive governance of externalities. Again, impression might function as a practical/theoretical tool to further investigate the active role of finance in subjectively shaping social actors and objectively establishing neoliberal environments. In fact, financialization has to be understood as the specific form of capital accumulation attuned to the new processes of value production (Marazzi, 2010), namely a governmental dispositif which is able to ‘configure discursive regimes that, by affirming themselves as indisputable truths, influence

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18 This is how I would rephrase Toscano’s last question as quoted in the preceding section.

19 Let us note, in passing, that the becoming-rent of profit does not necessarily imply (neither logically nor politically) the becoming-entirely parasitical of financial capital. It might very well simply suggest a different configuration of contemporary circuits of accumulation, valorisation and exploitation.
people’s conducts through a modulation/amplification of their trust and expectations’ (Luce, 2010: 63).

To better delineate this key issue, let us briefly consider the recent crisis of global capitalism (Bazzicalupo and Tucci, 2010; Mezzadra and Fumagalli, 2010; Orsi, 2010). Many interpretations focus on the distinction between financial and real economy and, consequently, point their analytical gaze toward processes of over-production and/or under-consumption. Other, more original readings see the massive indebtedness of the working class (especially in the US) as a sign of an antagonistic assault on the domain of credit whose goal is the re-appropriation of money to pay for social reproduction. This argumentative line recognises the systematic attack performed by neoliberalism to workers’ conditions and can thus convincingly explain how they have been completely subsumed under finance and then turned into compulsive debtors. As the Midnight Notes Collective aptly put it:

> Workers demanded access to the requirements for reproduction through the credit system. Capital’s “sharing” with workers of accumulated value through making credit available comes at a price: the workers’ desires for access to the means of reproduction (home, auto, appliances, etc.) are aligned with capitalists’ desires for accumulation. (Midnight Notes Collective, 2009: 7)

As we see, this analysis addresses the very core of the issues. In order for workers to powerfully access the golden realm of consumption (which is to say, to fully experience their autonomy), their subjectivity must already be inscribed in the structure of capital’s desire (which is to say, it must be translatable into the homogeneous grammar of money). Thus, the concept of impression provides a suitable terrain not only to theoretically grasp this complex and paradoxical dynamic (which is at the origin of the current crisis), but also to undertake a reflection about how to politically force and possibly ensnare capital’s valorising junctions and articulations. Whereas it is impossible to predict what the outcome of this process of practice/knowledge production will look like, it is fairly easy to recognise its profound urgency.

To conclude, let me re-state my main point: the subject of social cooperation does not appear by spontaneous genesis and is not a natural given. On the contrary, for its antagonistic emergence to occur a collective act of organisational creation is required. This is why the crucial question of the project of a different institutional setting cannot be avoided. At stake is nothing less than the necessity of a new grand narrative based on a cautious, but nonetheless ambitious, prefiguration of a desirable world to come.

**references**


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20 This is just another way to say that the problem of *capitalist co-optation* is pivotal and must be further analysed. To put it succinctly: how is it possible that a workers’ offensive move proves successful in the very moment in which it is absorbed into capital’s wish-for-profit? As it is evident, simple answers are of no use. I hope impression will provide a valuable theoretical device to politically solve this nefarious riddle.

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User-generated content, free labour and the cultural industries

David Hesmondhalgh

abstract

A dominant theme of recent critical analysis of digital media, user-generated content and cultural industries is that they involve unpaid work (‘free labour’) on the part of participants. This theme has been developed alongside other critical studies of labour in the cultural and IT industries, which focuses more on professional and semi-professional work. Critiques of free labour have provided some stimulating and necessary interventions against complacent celebrations of cultural-industry work, and of the relations between production and consumption in the digital era, but some significant conceptual issues concerning capitalism, exploitation, power and freedom remain underexplored. In addition, these critiques potentially serve (unintentionally) to marginalise the political importance of the conditions of professional cultural labour. After locating the critiques of free labour in the context of autonomist Marxian thought, the article a) argues that the frequent pairing of the term ‘free labour’ with the concept of exploitation is unconvincing and rather incoherent, at least as so far developed by the most-cited analysts; b) explores what political demands might and might not coherently be derived from critical accounts of free labour (and argues that the internship system is by far the most significant example of free labour in the contemporary cultural industries; c) assesses a previous critical attempt to address questions of unpaid labour, involving the concept of the ‘audience commodity’, and judges that it takes a much more pessimistic view of populations than that of free labour, but shares a lack of engagement with lived experience and political pragmatics; d) argues for the continuing political importance of the conditions of professional cultural production, against the implicit marginalisation of that importance in some versions of the free labour debates, and summarises conclusions from some recent research on the subject.

Critiques of creative labour in the digital era

Cultural industries and cultural production have been the subjects of thousands of studies. But until recently, only a very small proportion of these studies focused on the creative labour that is fundamental to this realm of production. The forgetting or devaluation of work in analyses of cultural industries has taken a number of different forms. One, apparent in some arts and humanities studies, is a focus on individual producers rather than on the complex division of labour, which, as the sociology of culture has shown (in valuable accounts such as Becker, 1982; Wolff, 1993), is the basis of most cultural production. Another is an emphasis within certain schools or traditions, notably some types of cultural and media studies, on consumption, at the expense of production.
More recently, though, the devaluation of work in communication and cultural research has taken a new shape. Digitalisation has led to a proliferation of new forms of amateur and semi-professional production; blogs, Wikipedia, citizen journalism and various forms of interactive games were the most cited examples during the 2000s. Many commentators have heralded this supposed explosion of non-professional cultural production as evidence of a new era of cultural production, and as a democratisation. Axel Bruns (2008: 13-14), for example, claims that production and consumption are old-fashioned ‘industrial age’ concepts, and that in the internet age, where access to the means of producing and distributing information is ‘widely available’, consumers can become cultural producers and distributors, bypassing ‘traditional’ organisations via peer-to-peer and ‘many to many’ (rather than ‘one to many’) communication systems, leading to a new form or model known as ‘produsage’, a mixture of production and use.¹

Phenomena such as Wikipedia and open source software are, without doubt, fascinating examples of cultural activity that attempt to base themselves on the pleasures and rewards of co-operation rather than competition. It is certainly the case that the cultural industries in the digital era, like many other kinds of firm, increasingly seek to draw upon the participation of their users and consumers.² But too many of these discussions of transformations associated with new digital media rely on caricatured portrayals of supposedly bypassed eras. The ‘industrial age’ for example involved much more complex relations between production and consumption than is implied by Bruns’s account. What’s more, many of these discussions are discomfortingly reliant on business and journalistic commentary regarding the impact of digital technologies on economies and societies in the twenty first century. The list of neologisms and buzz phrases goes on and on: ‘the new economy’, ‘the digital economy’, ‘wikinomics’, ‘crowdsourcing’, ‘collective intelligence’, ‘the long tail’, ‘the wisdom of crowds’, ‘smart mobs’, etc. If I read one more time about how Time magazine nominated ‘you’ as person of the year in 2006, and how this marked the beginning of a new era of user-generated, content, I think I’ll post a video on YouTube. It will be of me holding my head in my hands and screaming. Clichés and received thinking seem to dominate this area of debate.

Such accounts of transformation have not been without their critics. A dominant theme of recent critical analysis of digital media is that they involve unpaid work on the part of participants. In a seminal essay, Tiziana Terranova wrote about the phenomenon of

¹ A similar but older phrase, ‘prosumer’, coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980, involved the claim that production and consumption had been separated in the era of mass production, and that increasingly, in order for firms to achieve customisation, a post-Fordist economy would require the increasing integration of consumers into the process of production. Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) argue that Web 2.0 facilitates a much more intensified version of ‘prosumption’, one which generally empowers consumers and which is characterised by the end of scarcity and an economy of abundance. The millions of workers who are currently losing their jobs in the wake of recession might question what is meant here by ‘abundance’.

² Of course some firms and industries have opted for prohibition of certain kinds of participation, rather than engagement, notably the early efforts of the music industries to address digitalisation (see Hesmondhalgh, 2009). Some have tried a mixture of the two strategies – see Green and Jenkins (2009).
'free labour’, which she described as ‘an important, yet unacknowledged, source of value in advanced capitalist societies’ (Terranova, 2004: 73). Free labour was, wrote Terranova ‘simultaneously voluntarily given and unwanted, enjoyed and exploited’ and on the internet included ‘building web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists and building virtual spaces’ (2004: 74). Others have applied similar perspectives to other forms such as television and games. Mark Andrejevic, reacting against celebratory accounts of ‘active audiences’ in media studies, has written powerfully about ‘the ways in which creative activity and exploitation coexist and interpenetrate one another within the context of the emerging online economy’ (2008: 25). In earlier work, Andrejevic had discussed how ‘reality TV anticipates the exploitation of…the work of being watched, a form of production wherein consumers are invited to sell access to their personal lives in a way not dissimilar to that in which they sell their labor power’ (Andrejevic, 2004). Andrejevic (2008) went on to explore how online viewer activity serves television producers in two ways, by providing feedback, which saves the producers from having to undertake expensive market research, and by, in effect, publicising television programmes, which saves marketing costs. Andrejevic critiques the equation of participation and activity with real democratisation and shared control, and claims that regimes of surveillance and imperatives of profit-making hugely compromise the pleasures and progressive elements of online participation. In the world of games, Greig De Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford (2005) have explained how, from the 1990s onwards, ‘authoring tools’ have been increasingly packaged with computer games, helping to foster a vibrant participatory culture of game ‘modding’, or modification. They argue that the work of such modders is a kind of free labour, a ‘space-defying’ process of exploitation of ‘collective intelligence’, which also serves as a kind of informal training for the future game development workforce.

A further way in which analysts have pointed to the contribution of free labour to the cultural industries is the way in which the latter draw on pools of talent outside their boundaries, and employ professionals to manage crossings of those boundaries, and to negotiate the creativity-commerce dialectics that are at the heart of modern cultural production. All this is familiar from political economy and sociological analysis of cultural industries analysis (see for example Miège, 1989) but recent critics have linked this to the free-labour debates by emphasising the way that creative professionals draw on the unpaid ‘mass intellectuality’ (see below) of alternative and underground scenes. One writer (Arvidsson, 2008), in an effort to counter the celebratory discourses associated with modern creative industries policy, even uses the rather dubious phrase ‘creative proletariat’ to refer to the underground cultural producers that some creative professionals draw upon as part of their work. Elsewhere, Arvidsson (2005) has extended discussion of free labour into debates about consumption, claiming that brand management exploits the ‘immaterial labour’ of consumers by drawing on resources of ideas and styles generated in contemporary urban environments. Clearly, this is a more

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3 Terranova’s essay was originally published in 2000, but was reprinted in only a slightly revised form as part of Terranova’s book Network Cultures in 2004.
critical account of ‘user-generated content’ than is to be found in academic management studies and journalistic hype.4

But the critique of free labour is not the only way in which critical analysis has sought to pay attention to creative labour in recent years. Alongside these developments, there have also been discussions of professional and semi-professional workers in the cultural industries and in related industries such as web design. Various recent critical accounts have suggested that professional workers in the (digitalising) cultural industries and in related industries are involved in forms of labour that are characterised by high degrees of autonomy, creativity and ‘play’, but also by overwork, casualisation and precariousness. Andrew Ross (2003: 9) observed how, in the eyes of a new generation of business analysts in the 1980s, Silicon Valley ‘appeared to promote a humane workplace not as a grudging concession to demoralized employees but as a valued asset to production’. ‘New economy’ firms, he argued, aimed to provide work cultures that ‘embraced openness, cooperation and self-management’ (ibid). Ross showed that such features were in fact closely linked to long working hours and a serious blurring of the line between work and leisure. Whilst the dot.com working environments of the 1990s offered ‘oodles of autonomy along with warm collegiality’ they also enlisted ‘employees’ free-est thoughts and impulses in the service of salaried time’ (Ross, 2003: 17, 19). This process of involvement has been described as ‘self-exploitation’. Similarly, also writing about new media work, Andreas Wittel (2001) saw there a paradigmatic case of an emergent form of community that he calls ‘network sociality’, one which appears to be individualistic and instrumental, involving an assimilation of work and play. Ros Gill (2002), in a study of European freelance new media workers, found evidence that features of the work that seemed superficially attractive, such as its informality and high levels of autonomy, were in fact particularly problematic for women because of the lack of clear criteria for evaluating work and especially because of the difficulties such informality caused when seeking new contracts.

Such insights, often developed in relation to the IT sector, have been increasingly applied to the cultural and creative industries. Gillian Ursell’s (2000) early contribution noted ‘an intensification of the self-commodification processes by which each individual seeks to improve his/her chances of attracting gainful employment’ (Ursell, 2000: 807) and analysed how television workers had, in the era of casualisation and increasing freelance work, come to take on the work of organizing their own labour markets. This element of ‘apparent voluntarism’ needed to be acknowledged, Ursell claimed, and she turned to Foucauldian theory not to dispense with labour process theory concerns but ‘to approach them more substantively’ (Ursell, 2000: 809). In particular, she drew on Nikolas Rose’s (1999: 145) idea that, in advanced liberalism, freedom is redefined as ‘a capacity for self-realisation which can be obtained only through individual activity’. Discussing how notions of creativity, talent and work are being redefined in those burgeoning micro-businesses of the cultural sector associated with young people, including fashion and design, but also entertainment industries such

4 Facebook has recently come to be seen as the archetype of a business that relies on the activity of its users as the basis of profit, and it has become increasingly common to hear remarks made on this among critical scholars. For a thoughtful analysis of Facebook in relation to debates about free labour, see Cohen (2008).
as clubbing, recording and magazine journalism, Angela McRobbie (2002a: 523) echoed Ursell in pointing to the ‘utopian thread’ involved in the ‘attempt to make-over the world of work into something closer to a life of enthusiasm and enjoyment’, and in focusing on how this leads to a situation where, when things go wrong, young people entering these creative worlds of work can feel they only have themselves to blame. In this respect, McRobbie usefully broadened the study of creative work to include a wider set of conditions and experiences, including the way in which aspirations to and expectations of autonomy could lead to disappointment, disillusion and ‘self-blaming’. She also pointed to the gendered aspects of these conditions, with women now expected to find full-time work, uninterrupted by family commitments, satisfying and enriching (McRobbie, 2002a: 521). The context for McRobbie’s critique (see also McRobbie, 2002b) was the then UK Labour government’s creative industries policy, and their general valorisation of labour, where ‘work comes to mean much more than just earning a living; it incorporates and takes over everyday life’ (McRobbie, 2002b: 99). McRobbie was usefully questioning the ‘ideal of self-expressive work’ (2002a: 101) and its place in Labour’s advocacy of ‘a new youth-driven meritocracy’, involving a labour of love and self-exploitation. Later writers have built on these contributions (a helpful and important synthesis is provided by Banks, 2007). In the article discussed above, De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford (2005) showed how the creativity and playfulness highly valued by the games workers that they interviewed served to offset extremely long and demanding working hours. In a series of articles and chapters Matt Stahl has brought legal, political and cultural theory together to suggest that the incorporation of subjectivity into capitalism acts as a kind of pacifying device in the era of neo-liberalism and that popular music’s democratic promise that ‘you can do this too’ is a particularly salient way in which ‘liberal society’ promises an end to alienation and appropriation by promising independence and autonomy (Stahl, 2006: 23).

Some of the key concepts raised in these recent debates about paid employment in the IT and cultural industries (such as self-exploitation and the hidden costs of autonomy) are germane to discussions of free labour in the digitalising cultural industries. Yet the free labour debates have paid only rather passing attention to questions concerning employment, occupations and careers in these industries, other than to make passing reference to moments of resistance to oppressive working conditions.

I return to questions concerning quality of working life in the cultural industries towards the end of this article. I argue there that these questions are important political ones, even if celebrants and critics of digitalisation see professional cultural work as in decline. But first I want to address a number of issues regarding the concept of free labour itself. The perspectives outlined above have provided some stimulating and necessary interventions against complacent celebrations of cultural-industry work, and of the relations between production and consumption in the digital era. Understandably, though, given their innovative character, and the fact that they have been responding to relatively new social and cultural transformations that are difficult to comprehend as they unfold, some important conceptual issues remain underexplored. For example: are we really meant to see people who sit at their computers modifying code or typing out responses to TV shows as ‘exploited’ in the same way as those who endure appalling conditions and pay in Indonesian sweatshops? Clearly not – and this raises the question of how to integrate such analysis into more satisfactory understandings of capitalism,
exploitation, power and freedom. To what kinds of political demands might objections to free labour give rise? I address these issues below, but first, the political origins of the debates about free labour need to be clarified.

**Free labour and autonomist Marxism**

Much of the research and commentary indicated above draws on a set of theories and concepts that will be familiar to regular readers of this journal. Autonomist concepts of immaterial labour, affective labour and ‘precarity’ have been of increasing interest to critical commentators on contemporary work, including labour in the cultural and creative industries. The concept of immaterial labour has its origins in a series of papers in the journal Futur Antérieur by Michael Hardt, Maurizio Lazzarato, Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno in the early 1990s. The concept was there defined as ‘the labour that produces the information and cultural content of the commodity’ (Lazzarato, 1996: 133). It was to come under serious attack from other autonomist Marxists (notably Caffentzis, 1998) for its excessive optimism, lack of attention to gender, and failure to recognise the continuing significance of highly material forms of exploitation and oppression. Consequently, by the time of their widely-read book Empire, Hardt and Negri (2000: 290) had developed a more expansive definition: ‘labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication’. This now incorporated ‘affective labour’, involving human contact and interaction, and including the kind of heavily gendered caring and health work to which the critiques of Caffentzis and others had drawn attention. In autonomist discussions of both immaterial and affective labour, there was a focus on labour and the production of culture, knowledge and communication – and a reaching for a critical conception of the place of such labour in modern societies.

Hardt and Negri begin from a discussion of how the introduction of the computer has radically transformed work. Even where direct contact with computers is not involved, they say, the manipulation of symbols and information ‘along the model of computer operation’ (2000: 291) is extremely widespread. Workers used to act like machines, now they increasingly think like computers. They modify their operations through use, and this continual interactivity characterises a wide range of contemporary production. The computer and communication revolution of production has supposedly transformed labouring practices in such a way that they all tend toward the model of information and communication technologies, and this means a homogenisation of labouring processes. In this respect, Hardt and Negri are pessimistic about the ‘informationalization’ of the economy. But they are much more optimistic about ‘affective labour’, which, they claim, produces social networks and communities: and, for Hardt and Negri, cooperation is immanent to such labouring activity. This networked cooperative aspect of affective labour is then transferred by Hardt and Negri to other more computer-

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5 Ros Gill and Andy C. Pratt (2008) provide a survey of relevant writing in their introduction to a special section of the journal Theory, Culture and Society on ‘Precarity and Cultural Work’. That special section contains an article by myself and Sarah Baker where a version of some of the material in this paragraph originally appeared, along with a critique of Hardt and Negri (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008).
driven and ‘symbolic-analytical’ forms of immaterial labour, as if nurses and computer programmers were doing the same kind of work. A further leap is to see all such workers as therefore equally imbued with the same capacity to struggle against capital. Because wealth creation takes place through such co-operative interactivity, Hardt and Negri believe, ‘immaterial labor thus seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism’ (2000: 294).

In her highly influential piece on free labour, Terranova (2004) borrows this optimistic emphasis on the collective nature of knowledge labour and on the continuing, indeed thriving, existence of a ‘general intellect’ constituted through the continuing vitality of human labour and subjectivity. Capital constantly struggles to valorize (make profit out of) this intractable terrain (2004: 88). The internet itself can be seen as a sign of that vitality. ‘Free labour’, then, has something of a double meaning. It refers to unpaid work, but, in line with Terranova’s explicitly autonomist sympathies, it also refers to the way in which labour cannot be fully controlled, because of capital’s continuing and problematic reliance on it. Terranova is scathing about the ‘popular, left-wing wisdom about the incorporation of authentic cultural moments’ (2004: 79). Rather than incorporation, for Terranova phenomena such as open-source software represent ‘the overreliance of the digital economy’ (2004: 93) on free labour.

Is free digital creative labour really exploitation?

I now want to consider some of the issues raised by Terranova’s characterisation of free labour as ‘[s]imultaneously voluntarily given and unwanted, enjoyed and exploited’ (2004: 74), in particular how we might understand relations between exploitation and satisfaction, alienation and freedom, in the present digital context.

The question of exploitation has been raised by Arvidsson (2005) in his piece on free labour in relation to brands, discussed earlier. Brands are ‘valorized’, writes Arvidsson, through their ability to extract a premium price and through the way that higher brand values generate higher share prices. All this depends on brand awareness, associations and loyalties, all of which in turn depend on the attention of consumers. Surplus value – the Marxian term for the ability to generate greater amounts of money from capital investment – is based, in Arvidsson’s gloss, on ‘the ethical surplus, or the surplus community that consumers produce’ (2005: 250) and upon which businesses then draw. This is not just a matter of the time spent on such activities, Arvidsson claims.

Brand management is also a matter of managing the quality of the common [sic] produced through communicative interaction. The qualitative dimension of exploitation thus consists in making the productive sociality of consumers evolve on the premises of brands; to make it unfold through branded consumer goods in such ways that makes it produce measurable (and hence valuable) forms of attention. (2005: 251)

But it is not clear that this really corresponds to exploitation in any meaningful analytical sense of the term. Rather, the problem, as Arvidsson expresses it, seems to be here one of controlling or reshaping the ways in which people communicate, pushing them in the direction of brands. That is indeed a problem, as a number of critics have pointed out, notably Naomi Klein (2002). But this is not the same thing as exploitation.
It is important that such a loaded word is used with at least a certain amount of precision. Exploitation can be used as a useful term to express our repulsion when someone makes use of someone else for their own purposes, but when used in research we presumably intend it in a more precise analytical sense. And analytical use of the concept of exploitation has been overwhelmingly Marxian: it is about the historical relationship between classes, again in the Marxian sense. Erik Olin Wright (1997) has argued that exploitation in its Marxian sense is based on three principles. First, exploitation occurs when the material welfare of one class is causally dependent upon the material deprivation of another. The capitalist class in modern societies could not exist without the deprivations of the working classes. Second, that causal dependence depends in turn on the exclusion of workers from key productive resources, especially property. Third, the mechanism through which both these features (causal dependence and exclusion) operate is appropriation of the labour of the exploited. The first two alone would just represent oppression; for exploitation (in the Marxian sense) to take place, the third condition must be present. Equally, appropriation is not the same thing as exploitation; the first two features, causal dependence and exclusion, must also be present as well as appropriation.

As well as being a historical concept, exploitation is also an explanatory one. It was intended to explain how capitalism was able to generate such massive surplus values and at the same time such immiseration. This explanation, it should be noted, rests on a complex conception of compulsion. All human life involves being compelled to do things. Implicitly, therefore, the explanatory power of the concept of exploitation rests on an ethical distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of compulsion. As Alex Callinicos puts it:

What is distinctive about Marx’s account of capitalist exploitation is that the appearance of free exchange between worker and employer is nullified by the unequal distribution of the productive forces: as a result, workers are compelled to sell their labour-power to the capitalists on terms that lead to their exploitation. This is a violation of their liberty, even if they are not directly coerced into performing surplus-labour for the capitalist, but rather do so as a result of what Marx called “the silent compulsion of economic relations”. Thus exploitation is directly unjust, independently of any injustice in the initial distribution of productive assets, because workers are illegitimately compelled to work for the capitalist. (Callinicos 2000: 68)

So exploitation in its Marxian sense, Wright and Callinicos help to make clear, is a historical, explanatory and ethical concept that revolves around certain (disputed) notions of class, labour and compulsion. This means that when the term is applied to specific empirical examples, some kind of link needs to be made to these necessary abstractions if it is to have analytical purchase. This does not mean that every single invocation of the concept of exploitation by any writer should involve such theorisation. The problem here though is that, as the quotations in the introduction to the concept of free labour in the first section of this article illustrate, the term ‘exploitation’ has been widely but uncertainly used in these debates.

In a recent piece on YouTube, Andrejevic (2009) has returned to the issues of free labour discussed in the earlier pieces quoted above and has offered a more developed consideration of the concept of exploitation. Drawing on the autonomists, Andrejevic sees the term ‘free labour’ as meaning unpaid work, but also freely given work, ‘endowed with a sense of autonomy’ (2009: 416). He interprets this as suggesting a
logic whereby the production of community and sociality is ‘both autonomous of capital and captured by it’. For Andrejevic, this question of capture signals the crucial importance of exploitation. Turning to the work of Adam Arvidsson, Andrejevic wonders (as I have, above) whether the capture or appropriation of free, affective and immaterial labour, as outlined by Arvidsson, can really be described as exploitation in any convincing analytical sense. Andrejevic rightly points out that, for Marxian analysis, the generation and appropriation of surplus value depends on a kind of force:

> the forcible separation of the worker from the means of production is conserved in workers’ forced choice to relinquish control over their labor power. But the potential located in affective or immaterial labor by Arvidsson, Hardt and others lies in the very fact that it is freely or autonomously given. It is by definition not forced. Nor is it clear that this labor is appropriated under the threat of force, which renders the claim of exploitation in need of further explanation. (2010: 418)

Because of this, Andrejevic seeks an alternative understanding of exploitation in relation to digital labour. To do so, he emphasises how the concept is bound up with the related concept of the alienation of workers from the products of their labour. Web 2.0 style technologies, says Andrejevic, gain their popularity by offering users an escape from alienation (there are potential links here with Stahl’s work, discussed above) by offering ‘modicum of control over the product of their creative activity in return for the work they do in building up online community and sociality upon privately controlled network infrastructures’ (2009: 419) and allowing themselves to be monitored. For Andrejevic, there is an important distinction to be made between ‘user-created content’ and ‘user-generated data’ (2009: 418). It is the latter not the former that is extracted under conditions of private ownership and that is turned into a commodity. All this suggests to Andrejevic a generalisation of the forms of subjection traditionally associated with women. Time spent building social relations in affective labour is both autonomous and subject to exploitation, he writes; so is the kind of immaterial labour involved in social networking sites such as YouTube.

Rather than exploitation, however, Andrejevic’s analysis seems actually to be dependent on questions of freedom and ideology. In his various contributions (such as Andrejevic, 2004: 201), he shows how prevailing ideas about digital interactivity do not so much conceal more general relations of exploitation but rather point to their inevitability, celebrating the savviness of audiences, but offering no means by which this savviness can be converted to forms of action which might meaningfully reduce inequality. This seems to me to be insightful. But his conception of exploitation is rather less successful. Andrejevic here tries to rescue the concept of exploitation in relation to ‘free’ digital labour by linking it to force indirectly, via the concept of alienation. The oppressive system of alienation creates such misery that it compels people to seek out ways of re-exerting their control in ways which then become open to appropriation of surplus value by capitalists. This is a thoughtful and stimulating idea, but the mechanisms of this indirect force – for example the variable ways in which people respond to alienation by seeking out cultural production – are not really spelt out. What’s more, this conceptualisation risks reducing the drive to communicate and to produce culture and knowledge to a reaction to alienation. And there is evidence that capitalism might have moved in the direction of attempting to reduce alienation in the interests of accumulation (see Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).
The concept of ‘free labour’ is linked to some interesting ideas about power and control in cultural production in the digital era. But the frequent pairing of the term with the concept of exploitation is unconvincing and rather incoherent, at least as so far developed by the most-cited analysts. I hope this does not come across as pedantry. I point all this out in a comradely attempt to encourage greater precision in critical thought. In the same spirit, I now turn to questions concerning what political demands might flow from critiques of free labour.

Is unpaid labour always a problem?

Even if they might want to retreat from the view that free labour involves exploitation in any meaningful Marxian sense, leftists might still want to hold on to the idea that it is wrong in some way. In its broadest sense, labour is simply exertion of the body or mind, and it is usually used to describe activities that have some sort of compulsion attached to them. Obviously we cannot define labour in terms of whether it is paid or unpaid, or whether an employment relation is involved, because it is clear that a great deal of the labour that goes into sustaining and enhancing life in modern societies is unpaid. But under what conditions might we object to such unpaid labour, and on what grounds?

Domestic labour, often performed primarily by women, is the most discussed version of such unpaid labour (and those who write about affective labour from an autonomist perspective sometimes have a tendency to sound as though this insight was an invention of the autonomist Marxists, sideling the many contributions that come from other perspectives – see Himmelweit, 1991 for one summary). But the fact that these debates concerned a form of unpaid labour should not make us think that the fact that labour was unpaid was always the principal point under debate. The important point that feminists were making, in drawing attention to the economic and social contribution of unpaid domestic and childrearing labour, concerned the many injustices associated with the gendered division of labour, including the expectation that one particular group of people (women) were, more than any other group, and by virtue only of their biological and cultural differences from men, expected to perform such onerous duties without financial recompense. Closely connected to this was a set of disadvantages in paid labour markets, including exclusion from certain high-prestige sectors. The ethical problems here were ones of inequality and injustice, and the political ones concerned, for example, whether a demand for wages would really serve to address these problems or whether the deeper question was the institutional separation of (for example) childrearing from paid work. Even if we agree with the wages for housework movement, this does not mean that we can or should apply similar demands to other forms of unpaid labour. Clearly, life will always involve a huge amount of labour, often unpleasant, some of it answering more urgent needs than others, and in some cases we might find it acceptable, or a matter of lesser priority, that certain forms of work are unpaid and others paid. Until the work/leisure distinction and the social division of labour are abolished altogether (the extremely distant utopian aspiration embodied in Marx’s famous hunter/fisher/critic passage in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts) we cannot expect to be paid for all the many different tasks that we might have to perform in order to reproduce and maintain life. Even if we achieve more just social relations, future societies will continue to be based on a
complex division of labour, and it seems highly likely that some spheres will come within the realms of paid labour and some outside it.

The important question here though is whether socialist-feminists (in the broadest sense of that term, to include anyone who thinks that economic and gender relations are currently unjust and unequal, and need urgently to be made more just and more equal) might object to unpaid work in the cultural industries on anything like the same grounds as the objection to unpaid household labour – i.e. that it contributes significantly to broader patterns of inequality and injustice. If that can be shown, then there might be a strategic case for demanding payment, to redistribute income, and/or in order to highlight the ethical problems concerned. To consider that question, though, we need to be clear about which forms of unpaid labour are being discussed. There has been a tendency to bandy about the phrase ‘free labour’ as if it describes one huge, interconnected aspect of inequality and injustice. Instead, unpaid work may not be a problem in itself, and may in fact be an inevitability, even in a better future society. The fact that work is being performed for free in itself is not a sufficient objection.

In the history of cultural production, only a very few people within any society have taken on the role of cultural producers in return for financial reward. A major development was the patronage relationships of feudalism and early capitalism, which gave way to payment by royalties and wages with the development of cultural capitalism and the copyright system. Most cultural production in history has been unpaid, and that continues to be the case today. Consider the millions of people across the world, especially young people, who will, on the day you are reading this, be practising musical instruments, or, to use an example from an industry that I would call a leisure industry rather than a cultural industry, imagine how many young people are practising football or basketball. Now it could be argued that all this represents labour (defined here as the expenditure of effort, under some kind of compulsion; it will usually seem preferable to undertake some other more restful activity) which is vital to the realisation of surplus value in the music industry or the football industry. For this work helps to create a reservoir of workers, from whom these industries can draw. Regular practice by future musicians and sportspeople ensures that there are greater levels of talent available for businesses to employ. The football example is perhaps even more germane, because while a great deal of music teaching is done on a professional basis, most football coaching is done by amateurs, who give of their time in reward for a range of pleasures and rewards including winning competitions, inculcating the joys of team-based physical activity, and being able to shout very loudly at young people. But even if this is true, what political demands might ensue from this? Wages for music practice? Wages for sports coaches? Of course some on the left believe in the importance of making ‘maximum’ political demands as a way of furthering emancipation, but there also needs to be some sense of prioritisation, and at

6 The fact that most humans engage in some kind of cultural production on a more or less daily basis, and have throughout most of history, and certainly have during the modern capitalist period, exposes the more naïve versions of claims that digital technologies have created a new era where formerly passive consumers have become producers (or ‘produsers’). Production and consumption have always been dialectically intertwined – and also need to be considered as separate moments in an interlinked process. But that is not my main concern here.
least some kind of pragmatic reading of what might be possible. An undifferentiated critique of free labour can generate demands that fail these basic tests.

Now the advocates of a critical (autonomist) position towards free labour may validly respond that free labour only becomes an issue in spheres of activity where there has been extensive commodification, and that the vast social reach of certain digital technologies makes it important to highlight the labour that they depend upon. The development of the internet might be an example of this, or more specific sites such as YouTube. Even here, however, there are problems that we might want to consider, and which do not seem to have been raised in the debates about free labour. Terranova’s seminal account usefully pointed to the huge amount of unpaid work necessary to create the internet. But it may be said in response that those who undertook such unpaid digital labour might have gained a set of rewards from such work, such as the satisfaction of contributing to a project which they believed would enhance communication between people and ultimately the common good; or in the form of finding solutions to problems and gaining new skills which they could apply later in other contexts. In some cases, it might be possible to think of their work as involving the building of skills which lead to higher wages being paid in the longer term – a kind of deferred wage. Without denying for a moment the fundamental importance of a living wage, it seems dangerous to think of wages as the only meaningful form of reward, and it would surely be wrong to imply that any work done on the basis of social contribution or deferred reward represents the activities of people duped by capitalism. Actually, it seems to me that this would run the danger of internalising capitalism’s own emphasis on commodification. We have to hold on to the value of work done for its own sake, or as ‘gift’ labour (see Hyde, 1983), and complaints about free labour – unless the normative basis for the complaints are spelt out very carefully – risk undermining that value.7 It may be that open source software is linked to corporate forms of capitalism, as Terranova (2004) and others have pointed out. But the idea of carrying out software development for free may in many cases lead to the development of products, which are not quite so much under the control of major corporations as others. At the very least, complaints about free labour need to be linked to discussion of which kinds of free labour merit payment and which do not. We might for example want to argue that the expertise that goes into Wikipedia might be subsidised by governments and corporations out of general taxation given that it provides a huge social resource, often drawn upon by businesses and governmental institutions; until recently, this was the justification for funding Higher Education out of taxation in Western Europe, though this idea has been eroded in the era of neoliberalism. On the other hand, the complaint I referred to earlier, that contacting friends and uploading photographs on to Facebook represents some kind of exploited labour is, to my mind, more along the lines of arguing that we should demand that all amateur football coaches be paid for their donation of free time: not impossible to argue for, but hardly a priority – and accompanied by the danger that it may commodify forms of activity that we would ultimately prefer to leave outside the market. The dangers of

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7 Terranova’s great article muddies the waters by linking such free labour to the ‘self-exploitation’ of professionals who work long hours. These are two very different issues. Terranova explicitly sets herself against one version of the view that ‘gift’ forms of labour might be valued (that of Richard Barbrook, 1998) but it may be that there are other better versions of that argument, and ones more consistent with her underlying critique of capitalist social relations.
commodification might be better countered by arguing against developments, which seek to exert ownership by sites of content generated by users. It could be that it is in the realms of intellectual property that a more convincing critique of contemporary capitalism might be mounted, rather than unpaid labour.

A striking case of unjust, unpaid labour in the media industries is the internship system. It is increasingly difficult to enter the media and media-related industries in advanced industrial countries without having performed, at some point, a significant period of unpaid work. The fact that young people are willing to do this is a product of the desirability of creative labour, and the over-supply of workers. The extraction of billions of hours of unpaid labour by media companies can be seen as a kind of rent (in the technical economic sense). This is offset by the considerable time needed to train and mentor a constant influx of young, inexperienced workers, but this does not come close to matching the financial advantages gained by media companies. The use of such young people performing unpaid labour also depresses wages for workers in the cultural industries. Furthermore, it has a serious impact on which kinds of people are likely to be able to gain entry to the media industries. Young people from wealthy families are much more likely to be able to afford sustained periods without pay. Increasingly, internships are provided as part of media education degrees. Of course many young people want to carry out such internships. But they benefit companies at the expense of time that young people might be spending exploring ideas and broadening their intellectual horizons – benefits that it might be difficult for them to understand, compared with the potential excitement of working in a media company, but which in my view must be seen as likely to provide benefits for societies. Defenders of labour might, then, argue for such internships to be made illegal, or for them to be licensed: media companies might have to pay a fee into a common fund which is then distributed to young people as payment, or is simply redistributed through taxation, earmarked for education.

**Free labour and the audience commodity debate**

Discussions of labour in the cultural industries have visited the terrain of unpaid labour before, in a debate on ‘the audience commodity’ that received significant attention in the early years of the political economy of communication, and which has been revived in recent years. I want to revisit this territory briefly here, in order to show the dangers of an approach to questions of labour that is insufficiently informed by ethical thinking and by attention to the specifics of particular forms of work and leisure experience – dangers that may afflict the attempt to build a critical perspective on creative labour based on the free labour concept.

Dallas Smythe, followed by other writers (such as Jhally and Livant, 1986), argued that, in paying for the advertising which sustains a great deal of modern cultural production, advertisers were buying ‘the services of audiences with predictable specifications who will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times to particular means of communication…. As collectivities these audiences are commodities’ (Smythe, 1977: 5). Goran Bolin (2010), drawing on Meehan (2000), has helpfully clarified some of the
confusions surrounding this debate. Rather than seeing audiences as working for media industries, Bolin suggests, it is more fruitful to see statistical representations of audiences as raw material that is shaped into a commodity by market research agencies and departments and sold as a commodity: ‘It is not the viewers who work, but the rather the statisticians’ (Bolin, 2010: 357). But I think there is an even greater problem with the view that would see individual audience members as undertaking unpaid work when they watch television programmes. In Smythe’s formulation, the objection to this rests on the idea that ‘all non-sleeping time under capitalism is work time’ (1977: 6). The time that workers spend off the job, says Smythe, involves ‘coping while constantly on the verge of being overwhelmed’ by the pressures created by their immersion in consumer desires created by monopoly capitalism (1977: 14). Now I would not deny that the freedoms of ‘free time’ are constrained by social forces in problematic ways (see Hesmondhalgh, 2008 for my take on these questions with regard to music consumption). But Smythe’s account is crude, reductionist and functionalist, totally underestimating contradiction and struggle in capitalism. The underlying but underdeveloped normative position is that all the time we spend under capitalism contributes to a vast negative machine called capitalism; nothing escapes this system. No work or leisure seems, by this account, to be any more meaningful than any other. It is unclear whether Smythe is demanding payment for the unpaid labour of audiences; and in fact it is unclear to me why he does not include payment for sleep in his demands, given that this too seems to involve the reproduction of labour power.

Smythe’s contribution, favourably cited by some contributors to recent debates (e.g. Andrejevic, 2004: 97, 114), shows the danger of a Marxian analysis that has totally lost its connection to pragmatic political struggle. The recent and often autonomist-inspired interest in free labour cannot be accused of the defeatism underlying Smythe’s almost Orwellian picture of workers giving their free labour to the reproduction of television. As we have seen, though, the danger is that they go rather too much in the opposite direction, seeing unpaid labour as a sign of an immanent revolutionary potential among workers. What may connect them is a lack of a coherent and pragmatic analysis of political struggle, and of lived experience.

**Quality of working life in the cultural industries**

In this final section, I turn to the point raised earlier concerning the effects of free labour on the conditions of professional and semi-professional workers. Terranova inherits the autonomist Marxist tendency to separate out questions of labour from employment: ‘Labour is not equivalent to waged labour’ (2004: 88), she points out. The internet itself is mainly created by unpaid labourers rather than by employees – just as the vital work of human reproduction and sustenance is mainly conducted by unpaid women. Terranova believes that this insight points to the limitations of a mode of

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8 See also Maxwell (1991).

9 It would be an empirical mistake, Bolin argues, to see these statistics as representative of reality. They are notoriously slippery and inaccurate. He believes that Smythe, Jhally and Livant, and Andrejevic (who follows this line of thinking in his 2004 book) all make this mistake.
thinking that sees the ‘unemployed’ as lazy and in need of compelling into paid work. But what this means for analysis of the conditions of actual paid workers is not clear.

So in this final section, I want to address the question of how we might best consider work in the cultural industries, in terms of its quality. Doing so allows us to take seriously the lives of workers, in a way that the focus on ‘prosumers’, ‘produsers’ and even free labour sometimes might discourage. My view is that, while recognising the genuinely stimulating and important interventions made by some of the critics discussed above, we need to connect the analysis of cultural and creative labour much more explicitly to the sociology of work in general, and to a richer and diverse body of social theory than has been used in that critical work.

In the book that Sarah Baker and I have recently published on work in the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010) we argue that an important issue for those concerned with labour in the present conjuncture is to think about good and bad work, and what differentiates jobs, occupations and careers from each other in terms of their quality. To pursue this issue, we asked the following question: what kinds of experiences do jobs and occupations in the cultural industries offer their workers? We draw on sociology of work and political theory in an attempt to conceptualise more fully what might constitute good and bad jobs, occupations and careers.

It was clear from our research that many cultural-industry jobs and occupations are riddled with problems and inequities. Many are offered on a short-term basis, making it difficult to plan ahead with any certainty, and constraining workers’ abilities to make their work the basis of meaningful self-realisation. Although many people respect art, learning and knowledge, some see them as mere ornamentation, and creative labour as a kind of social luxury. This limits the degree to which workers in these industries can feel sure of social respect and recognition. Autonomy is always limited, but many creative workers have little control over the products they are involved in, especially in terms of how they are distributed, marketed and publicised. The ‘autonomy’ involved in freelance work can provide freedom to combine work with childcare and family life, but it can also involve isolation and a lack of solidarity with other creative workers. The returns for creative work are highly uneven, and many struggle even to get a foothold in the cultural industries. By contrast, a successful few enjoy considerable benefits in terms of financial reward and recognition, in ways that distort the minor differences in talent that might lead some to succeed more than others. Many workers tolerate poor pay, long hours and difficult conditions in order merely to gain jobs with very poor levels of security and protection. In other words, to achieve the possibility of self-realisation through creative work seems to require what some recent critics, as I pointed out earlier, have called self-exploitation. In the light of these dynamics, many workers leave the cultural industries at a relatively early age, burnt out by the need to keep up to date with changing ideas of what is fashionable, relevant and innovative, a process that requires not only hard work at work, but also a blurring of work and leisure. Many cultural industries now seem to their workers to be more competitive than ever, and staying ahead requires long hours and an intense relationship to the work. Autonomy is a desirable feature of creative work, but it comes hand in glove with self-reliance and an uncertainty about career paths. All in all, there are good reasons, it seems, to think of
creative work as, to quote the title of a track by British rap musician Mike Skinner, who performs under the name The Streets, ‘the hardest way to make an easy living’.

These negative factors have led many critical commentators to interpret positive aspects of creative work in the cultural industries as, ultimately, control mechanisms that serve to discipline or seduce workers into putting a great deal of themselves into what they do, and tolerating precariousness and insecurity. Such critical accounts have been an important counter to the complacent portrayal of creative work in creative industries policy. Yet in the form that they have often been presented, such criticisms may leave something of a normative vacuum. For to treat these positive components of creative work as mere sugar coatings for the bitter pill of precariousness is surely too dismissive of the genuinely positive experiences that some creative workers have in their jobs and careers. It’s worth recalling that jobs, occupations and careers in the cultural industries rarely involve gruelling physical demands or tasks that endanger the person undertaking them. They hardly ever involve work of a kind that many others will find disgusting or disdaining (such as a toilet attendant, or nurse who has to care for incontinent patients). In fact, cultural-industry jobs are often thought of as desirable and intriguing, even glamorous. They involve expressive and communicative forms of endeavour, which are highly valued by many people in modern societies. Although this of course depends very much on industry and genre, in principle at least this suggests that they are capable of providing a basis for respect and recognition from others, which in turn can help nourish the worker’s sense of self-esteem, and over time, contribute to projects of self-realisation. Cultural-industry organisations also tend to be structured in such a way that some workers are able to gain high levels of autonomy, in two different senses: workplace autonomy and creative autonomy deriving from ambivalent Enlightenment and romantic conceptions of the value of art and culture. This means that they have the possibility of shaping outcomes, and producing good work in the sense of work that contributes to the common good. There are also significant spaces where excellence is valued and encouraged. We shouldn’t forget then that as well as the negative dynamics I’ve already outlined, the cultural industries provide significant opportunities for good work.

We need to hold on to the ambivalence of work in the cultural industries, and to recognise that firms and other institutions differ in terms of what kinds of conditions and experiences they make available for their workers, including how much they respect autonomy and workers’ needs to make good products (arguments made by Keat, 2000 and Breen, 2007). This suggests that there is a highly significant issue for those concerned with equality and social justice in relation to work in the cultural industries, which some recent critical accounts – including those concerned with free labour – may have served to marginalise. This concerns how positive and emancipatory aspects of labour – including creative labour in the cultural industries – might be made more prevalent, and how negative aspects of work might be contained, controlled or even eliminated. Underlying this question is a deeper one: which political projects may best enhance human well-being and social justice with regard to work? These fundamental issues haven’t yet been analysed sufficiently in the burgeoning literature on creative work.
references


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On the new dignity of labour

Barry King

Abstract

In the first half of this paper I situate the contemporary discourse of ‘creative’ labour, of which digital labour is regarded as the epitomising symbol, within the historical discourse on the dignity of labour. One of the conditions of possibility of this discourse is to be located in the prevailing conception of social class. Although class position cannot be defined exclusively by occupation, under conditions of precarity or ‘liquid modernity’, occupation has increasingly assumed the role of a key determinant of social and economic and inequality. In the second half of the paper, I provide a brief overview of the history of work as a dignified and dignifying activity. This historical contextualisation is followed by the argument that judgments about the skill status of a particular occupation are at base judgments about the moral qualities of different categories of workers and ultimately the individuals placed in such categories. I identify three figurations of work in the Western economies – the ergometric, fractal and modular – and locate digital labour within this moral cascade of job types. The article concludes with suggestions about the utopian and dystopian resonances of digital labour in relation to the concept of collective labour and the neo-liberal ideology of self-appreciating labour.

Introduction

Contemporary commentary on class as a determining factor in social and political life are grappling with an enigma. As economic and social inequality reaches stratospheric levels globally, class seems less relevant as a way of understanding identity and social relationships (Domhoff, 2008; Evans and Evans, 1995; Hout et al., 1993; Scott, 2002). The appearance of a disconnect between class structure and class-consciousness is, of course, a perennial problem in Western Marxism (Anderson, 1975). Hence the existence of a vast literature that attempts to explain the relative absence of a revolutionary working class movement especially in advanced capitalist economies of Western Europe and the USA. Such an absence has persisted, through boom times and slump, despite the presence of a distinctive set of working class institutions, such as trades’ unions, co-operative organizations and working class communities assembled around primary industries such as mining, steel production, and automobile production. The decline of the latter through de-industrialisation and off-shoring is clearly a present factor, but even when such industries were at their height, the forces of solidarity turned inward rather than outward. The economic realities that determined class existence, for the most part, conspicuously failed to eventuate in a full-blown class-conscious solidarity, seemingly content to meander along the by-ways of class awareness, a self-contained existence within but not against capitalism (Hobsbawn, 1984: 14-32). Nor
can it be denied that one of the historical legacies of the 1980’s is a retreat from class by Marxism itself, with other forms of inequality, and other political entities such as the ‘people’ being pushed forward as providing a more appropriate agency of change (Wood, 1986). In the technical literature of social theory and sociology, such trends have been matched by a more rigorous formulation of concepts like exploitation and the relationship between status inequality, occupation and class capitalism (Wright, 1996).

It is not my intention to pronounce on these complex issues here. Rather I will note that contemporary accounts of class refer to it as less of a political process than a matter of culture. An increasing number of intervening variables have been uncovered by empirical research: the weakening of the division between mental and manual labour within organisational culture, the unequal effects of occupational closure, inequalities in the social, economic and cultural assets of different families, the impact of consumerism, and the role of taste in classification struggles over the definition of personal worth and respectability (Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992; Grusky and Weedon, 2005; Savage et al., 2005; Skeggs, 2005). Once again, the arbitration of these various claims is a matter for specialists. What is evident is that unlike the claims of post-class or post-politics theorists, sociological class analysis is also in the same gradient of descendent from the traditional identification of class with a national structure of wealth and income towards the micro-frameworks of inequality. Such fine-tuning of facets of inequality is to be welcomed. But there is a danger that in the refinement of measures, the contribution of class to such processes gets pluralised out of existence. So it has been suggested that the microstructures of association, the circle of friends, the local network or the kin group are the drivers of inequality. Sequestered from the impress of collective life, such groups generate their own hierarchies and discriminatory boundaries in order to maintain their position and cohesion in relation to outsiders. In this manner, ever more finely and locally grained forms of discrimination emerge from the locality and are a result, not of economic factors or collectively based world-views, but of the principle of hierarchy as an anthropological constant (Bottero, 2004; Devine, 1998). What is entertained here, even unintentionally, is a variety of the ‘death of class’ thesis with the structural aspects of class undergoing morselization and confinement, in a Foucauldian sense, to the realm of immediate or individual experience. For what I shall dub class morselization theorists, class inequality remains a fact but it has ‘lost’ its traditional mediations possibly under the influence of neoliberalism (Compton, 1996; Webb, 2004).

Although it is not made explicit, class morselization theories bear a family resemblance to a structuration model (Giddens, 1973). In this model, the causal intensity of other forms of (ascribed) inequality – gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality – varies in relation to the class position of the individuals and groups who are the bearers/inheritors of the markers of difference. Thus, for example, the historically generated stereotypes attached to being black or female (or both together) will have a greater or lesser impact depending on the socio-economic (class) position of the individuals concerned. Socio-economic class is therefore a necessary but not sufficient condition (or as Giddens describes it, a mediate rather than proximate cause) for social inequality. Individuals as the differentially positioned inheritors of historically specific identities are located in particular contexts of interaction – markets, hierarchies, and networks – that facilitate or inhibit the development of individual opportunities to
affirm or overturn their original identity endowments. How this process works creates a form of life, which, if limited by class, filters the process of class structuration through the social and cultural texture of lived experience. How class impacts a particular individual, or for that matter a group of individuals, depends accordingly on the ongoing alignment of an individual’s life course to the social texture he or she inherited from the past and encounters in the present (Eder, 1993).

Having identified the configuration of current debates over the nature and geometry of class, I now want to focus on my main theme: how the development of ‘digital’ capitalism is reconfiguring class relationships at the point of production. A conventional answer is that digital capitalism is transforming the occupational structure. But the transformation of occupations is proceeding at a slower pace than that predicted by end-of-work theorists such as Jeremy Rifkin (Rifkin, 1995). Prior to the banking crisis at least, long term employment was not declining in Europe and the USA, though it is being redistributed across the occupational order so that the conditions of employment such as wages, hours of work, job security and benefits are worsening (Auer and Cazes, 2000; Doogan, 2005; Kalleberg, 2008; Nolan and Slater, 2010). The probable reason for the widespread belief in a ‘workless’ society is that restructuring is hitting categories of jobs that have historically been protected from shifts in technology and the labour market. In the USA, for example, since the 1990s, employment has been growing at the top and the bottom of the occupational scale with a squeeze on growth in middle-range occupations (Autor, Levy and Murnane, 2003).

But below the macro-level of analysis, the perception of the value of labour is shifting, with growing prominence accorded to the creative capacities of digital labour. From a structural perspective, even with the transformative powers of digital technology, we are not moving into a post-capitalist age. The fundamental property relationships that underpin the class structure remain intact and have sharply intensified (May, 2006). Acknowledging that an objective shift is not occurring does not mean that the perception of a shift is not doing an important ideological service. Digital labour is a new chapter in the moral history of the concept of work that links technological advances to the concept of work as expressive play. The close linkage of the development of digital technologies with the realm of entertainment and play is obviously an important ingredient in this evocation – not withstanding the tendency for digital play to be commodified, as with the phenomenon of ‘gold farmers’ who develop the capacities of avatars for sale (Yee, 2006; Dibbell, 2007). But rather than address the question of play, my emphasis is on digital labour as an image of work that reframes mundane labour as a positive or ‘cool’ experience. At the level of representation, then, the question of the transformation of work is inescapably a question about the value ascribed to different kinds of occupations, to work and, in the final analysis, to workers.

**Class as closure**

A recent theme in the study of stratification points to ‘access to occupation’ as the key point of articulation of class inequality. To some extent this emphasis continues an old tradition of equating class with occupation, but it goes further, postulating that contemporary class societies are marked by a process of individualization in which
social reference units, such as the family or the community, no longer offer effective support to the individual in framing his or her life course. The process of locating the self in a narrative becomes dependent on the market as a site of consumption and, prior to that, the earnings and benefits provided by an individual’s engagement with the labour market (Beck, 2004: 127-138). An important mediator of class formation, then, is the occupational structure and an individual’s place in it, such a place determining income and the social worth of the individual. One approach to the occupations is to see them, much like medieval guilds, as instruments for social closure, a conception that ultimately departs from a class analysis (Grusky and Weedon, 2001).

A better approach is to treat occupations as the point of access through which individuals are placed, empowered or disempowered, in respect to the existing scheme of social and cultural inequalities (Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992). In this approach, class formation is determined by the interaction between a vanishing mediator – the representational servant of social change between capitalist and post-capitalist productive relationships – accomplishing the magical supersession of class. Through the concept of dignity, ideas about the intrinsic worth of the individual have been decoupled from the structural realities of class. This is not to assert that calls for dignity are mere apologetics for capitalism, as the movement for decent labour indicates (Sen, 2000). But my focus is on the regressive rather than progressive features of dignity, not the least because digital labour is rosily represented as the most dignified labour. Digital labour, in my view, involves the parcelling out of moral worth to different kinds of labour. In this way, class determination becomes a discursive method for fixing the moral worth of different ‘kinds’ of persons (Sayer, 2005). But class determination is not the only fixing process; consumption as an apparent realm of self-expression, if not redemption, is just as consequential if not more so (Campbell, 1989; Doherty, 2009).

On dignity

In the kingdom of ends everything has either value or dignity. Whatever has a value can be replaced by something else, which is equivalent; whatever, on the other hand, is above all value, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity… Whatever has reference to the general inclinations and wants of mankind has a market value; whatever, without presupposing a want, corresponds to a certain taste, that is to a satisfaction in the mere purposeless play of our faculties, has a fancy value; but that which constitutes the condition under which alone anything can be an end in itself, this has not merely a relative worth, i.e., value, but an intrinsic worth, that is, dignity. (Kant, 1785)

Writing at a time and in a country where pre-capitalist forms were still prevalent, Kant presents dignity as a moral absolute defined against the exchange relationships typical of a newly burgeoning capitalism. The forms of relative value – relative as a means to a particular end, such as the selling of labour power and ‘the exercise of wit and imagination’ – are cast as compromises to human dignity, which resides in the realm of ends in themselves.¹ Defining dignity as inalienable offers a moral buttress against

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¹ Fancy value as an intermediate state between the realm of ends and the realm of means strikes an odd note today given the pervasive development of commercialised entertainments – though it has a certain critical traction as a shadowy emblem of use value.
capitalist relations of production. Kant’s statement can be seen as a resume of current thinking about the relationship between work and dignity under capitalism. However, there are some serious limitations to it.

Taking Kant literally means that dignity becomes a luxury afforded only to those who are not obliged to take their skills to the market. Moreover, Kant connects dignity to mental rather than physical or manual labour. The latter, echoing an age-long tradition of viewing work as Adam’s curse, is defined as undignified. Adam Smith, Kant’s near contemporary, in his discussion of productive and unproductive labour, is more forthright in addressing capitalism as a context:

The labour of some of the most respectable orders in the society is, like that of menial servants, unproductive of any value… The sovereign, for example, with all the officers both of justice and war who serve under him… are unproductive labourers… Their service, how honourable, how useful, or how necessary soever, produces nothing for which an equal quantity of service can afterwards be procured. (Smith, 1776: 265)

In the class of unproductive labour are found: ‘some both of the gravest and most important, and some of the most frivolous professions: churchmen, lawyers, physicians, men of letters of all kinds: players, buffoons, opera singers, opera dancers, etc.’ (Smith, 1776: loc cit).

In distinguishing between productive labour that creates surplus value for the capitalist and unproductive labour paid for out of revenue, Smith recognizes a fundamental opposition posed by capitalist productive relationships between economic and moral worth. As the terms he deploys – ‘however honourable’, ‘gravest’, ‘most important’, ‘useful’, ‘necessary’, ‘frivolous’ – suggest, unproductive labour from a financial point of view can nonetheless evoke other conceptions of value. Kant’s absolute denial of dignity to paid work is in Smith’s argument replaced by a calculus of utility – productive for capital, socially productive, productive to the worker and so on. But for all its failure to engage capitalism as a reality, defining dignity as Kant does, as an end in itself, provides a benchmark against which to interrogate how human worth sustains itself when faced with the systematic compromises resulting from the sale of labour power as a commodity.

The insistence on work as an end in itself is echoed in a tradition that views work as a species-defining activity (Sayers, 2005). Marx, drawing on Hegel, analyses the diverse ways in which the social relations of capitalist production developed, and then thwarted, the potential of work to lead to the full development of the individual; such potential rests, in turn, on the development of the direct producers’ collective self-organisation through the phases of socialism and then communism (Sayer, 2005). In England in the 1840-50s, William Morris, drawing on the more radical aspects of Ruskin’s arguments about art as the epitome of work as self-realisation, made the strongest popular case against the hedonistic equation of work with pain, distinguishing between useful toil and drudgery (Dart, 1999). A ‘producerist’ tradition of the Gospel of Work saw manual labour as the source of wealth. Independent or self-employed artisans were seen as possessing a moral and religious superiority over the idle rich and the managerial servants of capitalism. No less a figure than Abraham Lincoln, in his annual message to Congress in 1861, defined capital as nothing more than the fruits of labour. For those
workers newly entering capitalist relations of production, dignity depended on controlling the labour process and the empowerment provided by labour unions or other forms of craft association.

Mercantilism, classical liberalism and neo-liberalism codified work as a curse, a ‘disutility’ to be endured in order to survive, and as a patriotic duty. Adam Smith emphasized the soul-numbing impact of the division of labour and saw work as fundamentally ‘toil and trouble’ (Spencer, 2010: 42). Bentham, who saw hedonism as the primary motive for human behaviour, sharpened this emphasis; work was only useful because it provided the means to enjoy the pursuits of leisure (Spencer, 2010; White, 1979).

The development of Scientific Management and, subsequently ‘high waged’ Fordist practices, sought to place the labour process under the direct control of capitalism (Gutman, 1977; Montgomery, 1989). As these practices, valorised by the Gospel of Wealth, became hegemonic, the values of the Gospel of Work became a counterpoint to the daily struggles for dignity in the workplace (Durrenberger and Doukas, 2008). The discursive struggle for hegemony between these two doctrines is ongoing and eternally recurrent within capitalist social relations of production. As a recent ethnographic study of work observes:

> Life demands dignity and meaningful work is essential for dignity. Dignity is the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others working with dignity requires purposive, considered and creative efforts on part of workers as they confront workplaces that deny dignity and infringe on well being. (Hodson, 2001: 3)

Practically, workplace dignity rests on a dynamic supportive relationship between the individual worker and collective organisations; the latter includes political associations advancing democratic demands, and labour organisations that seek to secure conditions of employment and a living wage. Dignity also inheres as a pervasive informal force within the workplace through:

> [C]ountless small acts of resistance against abuse and a strong drive to take pride in one’s daily work …Much of the daily battle for dignity at work is waged by individual workers and small groups of workers against managers and supervisors and also against other employees and groups of employees… these struggles highly symbolic in nature, with gossip and character assassination playing central roles. (Hodson, op.cit. 264-265)

**The new kinds of work: Digital labour**

A feature of the historical framing of work has been its equation with manual labour, which could be seen as either as a barrier to, or a means towards the realisation of dignity (Kelly, 2000). Manual labour has been the historically accepted badge of the proletariat, primarily carried out by males. By contrast, middle-class identity has been associated with mental labour and levels of education, culture and taste that spared their possessor from onerous work. Once again, the capacity for mental labour power, even within the middle class, is imagined as primarily a male characteristic.
What is notable about the depiction of work from the onset of the current century is that the benchmark of intrinsically good work has become knowledge-intensive mental labour – particularly when information technologies are involved, in other words, digital labour. Manual workers are less likely to value work for its intrinsic qualities compared to non-manual workers. This difference might be a realistic appraisal of the quality of work encountered by manual workers. If a tight focus is maintained on those who are employed – as opposed to self-employed craft workers or in a different value set, proprietors – then good work, work that affords dignity, is a perquisite of white-collar employment (Svallfors, 2006).

A general endorsement of this equation of good work with mental labour can be found in contemporary cultural representations of work, specifically in the popularity of television forensic melodramas. Network series such as CSI, and its clones, Bones, House and in Britain, Waking The Dead, and Silent Witness celebrate work as a team engagement in a knowledge-intensive process, driven by specific projects or cases. Emotional labour is an important element in the plot, but always as a barrier to be surmounted in the pursuit of an intellectually satisfying and legally sound solution. Police procedural dramas that once, in movies such as Someone to Watch Over Me, the Dirty Harry series or television shows such Hill Street Blues, explored the conflicts and contradictions between legality, morality, class resentment and working class authoritarianism have been sidelined (Aronowitz, 1992). Today’s dramas prioritise reflection and deliberation over decisiveness and action. They feature sleek, well-educated professionals as protagonists who confront the world of crime and criminals, to say nothing of the general public with the cognitive authority of science.

Another feature of the foregrounding of objectivity within current popular representations of work is the trans-valuation of gender stereotypes. Here is a working world populated with emotive males and coolly rational females, dedicated puzzle-solvers applying the impeccable authority of forensic science and causing unrealistic expectations of the standards of proof (Cavender and Deutsch, 2007) Even in shows such as The Sopranos or Mad Men, traditional stereotypes, seemingly deployed for historical and social plausibility, become ironic devices revealing ‘atypical’ resources of intelligence and cunning or unexpected weaknesses. Similar switches are apparent with racial stereotypes, of which The Wire is an outstanding example. Compared to the solidity of the world of Archie Bunker, today’s popular sitcoms such as Malcolm in the Middle, My Name is Earl and Everybody Hates Chris depict working class life as a constant but inept struggle to replace boring and insecure work with the excitements of consumerism or petty crime. Such déclassé scenarios, hovering on the edge of poverty and social disintegration, evoke the world of knowledge intensive work as a better and more dignified prospect. Here the lessons of good motivation and high performance, take their place alongside those contemporary hymns to the performance principle:

2 Though as Hodson notes from his survey craft workers are generally better organised to defend job quality in the work place, professional workers tend accede to management’s demands for increasing work intensity in exchange for job security.

3 For a survey of the history of media depiction of the American working class depiction see Bustch (1995) and Kendall (2005).
reality television shows and talent contests, where contestants struggle to manifest the small differences of talent and commitment that can translate into winning (Kjus, 2009).

A thorough mapping of the contemporary media representations of class is too complex a task to shoulder here. But I want to note that even popular culture representations are celebrating the creativity of labour. This celebration also finds a forthright expression amongst management gurus, the foremost of these being Richard Florida. In his hands, creative labour has become the foundation of a new class order: ‘Essentially my theory says that regional economic growth is driven by the location choices of creative people – the holders of creative capital – who prefer places that are diverse, tolerant and open to new ideas’ (Florida, 2002: 223).

Urban cosmopolitans are the key to economic success. They are the historic agency that presents Capital with its determinant negation because creativity is a property that workers own, that cannot be taken from them. Even without collective organisation, workers in the knowledge economy are collectively – and, it is implied, individually – indispensable (Florida, 2002: 37). If Florida celebrates the power of labour, he has little to say about the power of Capital; downsizing, outsourcing, CEO remuneration, leveraged buy-outs, and the like are treated as facts of nature to which workers must respond creatively.

The crux of Florida’s appeal rests on a democratic acknowledgement that specialised workers have knowledge vital to wealth creation. Accordingly, management faces the problem of retaining a resource that is within, but not of, the company (Luque, 2001). Such specialist workers are able to negotiate service contracts that provide for a more autonomous relationship to the work place, higher salary, fringe benefits and a commitment to a relatively extended term of employment. But they must be distinguished from more numerous routine employees whose conditions are regulated by a labour contract, which treats them as units of labour power to be paced and closely supervised, and offers few or no benefits, nor a commitment to continuous employment. The general climate of re-commodification, where fewer of life’s necessities are protected from the action of the market, affects all employees, but workers on labour contracts especially (Breen, 1997).

What Florida is articulating is a new hegemonic conception of labour power. This imagery is both celebratory – labour is inherently creative – and divisive, because ‘creatives’ are seeking, in the pursuit of excellence and a unique vision, the right to be unequal. The claims of new class structure in which access or knowledge rather than property are the levers of power are certainly exaggerated. On the one hand, cross-national data on employment patterns indicate that long-term job tenure and stability are the norm, even for routine blue- and white-collar work. Labour markets far from becoming unstructured or fluid, remain segmented between a relatively stable core and a much less stable periphery, which functions like a revolving door in and out of the labour market. What is particularly salient is that for young workers, the transition from the hyper-flexible periphery to the core of at least semi-permanent jobs is becoming more difficult to achieve and, if occurring, is a more protracted process (Rosas and Rossignotti, 2005).
If the ‘end of work’ thesis is exaggerated, neo-liberal cuts, de-industrialisation, the decline of organised labour unions and the ongoing fiscal crisis mean that all ranks of workers face increasing uncertainty and here, media reporting of job losses, particularly amongst previously viewed as secure white collar workers, have fuelled anxieties (Fevre, 2007).

The general perception of job insecurity is impacting the workplace with employees reporting lower levels of job satisfaction and commitment to organisational objectives, and a heightened preparedness to seek alternative employment – the psychological correlate of churn (Sora, Caballer and Peiro, 2010). In these circumstances, it is not surprising that knowledge-intensive jobs come to epitomise ‘good work’. Such jobs are better paid and more likely to be located in the core, where employment is stable and work is flexible compared to the multitudinous periphery, where workers are flexible and employment precarious. Jobs in the media, the performing arts and fashion, because they are project-based, have the prestige of creativity and innovation and a glamorous proximity to cultural entrepreneurs and above-line creative workers. Influential texts have popularised have equated intrinsically satisfying work and the performing arts, and celebrity culture has popularised the notion that success can be attained through nifty self-fashioning (Pine and Gilmour, 1999). This equation of ‘good work’ with psychological and physical compliance signals the management of personality as an exchange value, an alienable façade distinguished from the hidden and more capacious uses of the self.

However, the conjuration of cultural work as intrinsically creative underplays the fact that significant elements of such work involve bodily labour in the production of ‘immaterial’ services – as the paradigm occupations of modelling and performing clearly demonstrate. Obviously enough, food industry and retail workers do routine unskilled and semi-skilled manual work, and for every shoe designer, there is a platoon of factory operatives churning out down-market copies and sales assistants selling them. So, too, jobs that are primarily focused on serving the needs of clients are less expressive than emotionally prescriptive, requiring daily emotional labour: ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ (Hochschild, 1983: 7). But arguably the most significant misrepresentation driving ‘creative labour’ is the idea of ‘inherent’ talent, which tends to obscure the fact that such labour is highly dependent on the possession of appropriate technology at the best level of development and the capital to exploit it (Bilton, 2007: 72-74). Digital labour is the apogee of such a dependency.

**The very modern good work imaginary**

Following earlier work, I name these jobs, in a descending order of expressive latitude, modular, fractal and ergometric jobs (King, 2007). These kinds of jobs cut across the distinction between service and labour contracts because their expectations can be applied to all employees, full time, part-time and subcontracted:

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4 Though the actual decline of manual labour in Western economies is less precipitous than imagined, much manual labour has of course migrated to the developing countries.
(a) Modular jobs – employees selected on the basis of specific skill sets – writer, illustrator, designer, producer, director, animator, etc. – and psychological profile. Given that there is likely to be an excess of candidates with an appropriate skill set, personality factors are paramount. In order to gain and stay in employment, workers are required to supplement their focused expertise with ‘deep’ acting skills, self-managing their emotions to fit in with a work process marked by deadlines and time sensitive projects.Balancing deadlines and long-term relationship work, these workers also engage (in and out of work) in compulsory networking. The dramaturgical metaphor fits this environment because, like actors, workers assume characters that are distinct from their veridical selves, which may be a source of discrepant information about their commitment. This kind of job is modular because there is an element of autonomy in the styling of the work, the phasing and pacing of delivery and self-presentation, with resources of irony, reflexivity and humour deployed as tension management. Although the public may be the final recipient of the service provided, the proximate clients are other professionals within and outside the organization (Rose, 1989).

Even if attention is narrowed to encompass only skill-intensive positions, it is doubtful that these permit, because of their intrinsic properties, the unlicensed exercise of creativity. Such a capacity remains the prerogative of ownership. The much-touted notion of the project team engaged in producing cultural commodities is much more problematic than it appears. Teamwork in corporate settings can be coercive and controlling, demanding of high levels of psychological and physical conformity. What begins as an ideal (let’s be creative!) rapidly mutates into a performance principle – show creativity or else! (Barker, 1993; McCann, et.al. 2008). Nor is it clear that notions of human resource management (HRM), with their litany of job enrichment and high performance work systems (HPWS), is deliverable within a system of capitalist corporate governance (Thompson, 2005; Christopherson, 2008).

Modular jobs are presented as the handmaidens of creative freedom, equated with information work per se, despite the fact that the expansion in knowledge work is concentrated in routine service work where jobs are fractal rather than modular (Fleming et al., 2004; Royle, 2010; Thompson et al., 2001). But even if this equation were taken at face value, modular workers are increasingly exposed to corporate or market failures and expected to accept the entrepreneurial risks once assumed by the corporation. In addition, such workers are required to work long hours, donating free labour and lower wages in order to establish a track record. What autonomy they achieve is often at the cost of self-exploitation and of being flexible to the point of dispensability. Despite these immediate experiences they are likely to entertain an uncritical belief in media representations of the ‘cool’ jobs they occupy, perhaps because other jobs are no better and perhaps worse (Neff et al., 2005; Ross, 2008; Terranova, 2000). Modular jobs are relationship jobs in which solicitation of collaboration, brainstorming, aesthetic appreciation and design intelligence are prioritised. The management of such jobs is a balancing act between release and control of the ‘creative’ impulse (Bilton, 2007).

(b) Fractal jobs – labour contract jobs in which skill levels are low and personality requirements are de-individualised and focussed on conformity. In line with geometric terminology, fractality is a condition of self-similarity in which sub-units are identical
and exact miniatures of a totality or rather, since we are dealing with people, are expected to be. Individual employees are functionally organised by management to be interchangeable. The fractal jobholder is required to project a rigidly scripted personality: a standard uniform, a prescribed demeanour, and a specific interactive script for dealing with customers (Ritzer, 1996). This mode of regulation is emotional labour, involving surface conformity or ‘shallow’ acting (Hochschild, 1983).

The fractal job has as its axial principle the standardisation of a service or a service relationship. Such jobs, identified as McJobs, are widely perceived as being low skill, low pay jobs with few career prospects.

(c) A third kind of job is the ergometric job, very much the offspring of the subsumption of work to capitalist direction. Not lauded as creative, this kind of job covers wage-labour contract jobs, which are low-skilled and where a rising level of output is key priority. In such jobs the personality of the worker is irrelevant or rather, bears a positive or negative zero sum relationship to output. The requirement that such jobs ‘bypass’ personality is signalled by terms such as hands, muscle and so on. Once, the notion of dignified labour rested on the simple fact of doing a day’s work and earning wages. As Henry Ford put it: ‘For the day’s work is a great thing- a very great thing! It is the very foundation of the world; it is the basis of our self respect’ (quoted in Thomas, 1999: 166). The ergometric job is externally paced or extrinsically motivated, either by machines, by piece rates or by time study, and is associated with close supervision. Ergometric labour may be entangled with intangible commodity production such as consumer electronics, CDs and DVDs, fashion wear, shoes, etc. – but essentially, the work process entails the manipulation of matter. In the lexicon of ‘creativity’, ergometric work is bad work.

While these descriptions might seem simply to be fancy names for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled work, this would miss the fact that skill is an aspect of all work. The central question is whether this is recognised or disregarded in the social relations of the workplace. In other words, these are ideal types, rather than empirical descriptions, that describe the moral worth or dignity of the worker rather than the content of the job. As one study observed: ‘We found that knowledge workers were distributed across all occupational groups. This finding provided support for those who have argued that the growth in knowledge work cannot be measured by occupational changes’ (Benson and Brown, 2007).

The superior conditions of the modular job mark the superior worker, despite the fact that empirically a fractally regulated employee may exercise a margin of creativity and a modularly regulated employee, dull conformity. Moreover, moral evaluation is nested within the work order of ‘cool’ jobs. In the case of fashion for example, good work, or high-end autonomous work is the province of fashion models and editors. Below this elite core is a periphery of catalogue editors and ‘part models’ (car models and ‘part’ models valued for their hands, hair, thighs, etc.) and, further removed from these, are the humble fashion production workers (Neff et al., 2005). In these circumstances the collective labour process is itself divided between jobs that have a high individual and

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5 For middle-class fears and a front line account of life in the menagerie of work see Erhenreich (1990; 2002; 2006).
named content and jobs that are blank and anonymous, much like the distinction between credited and uncredited roles in acting.  

In sum, the distinction between service and labour contracts a moral calculus that ennobles some activities and not others. Such a calculus drives people, particularly young people, to yearn for ‘glamorous’ jobs (Hearn, 2006). Contemporary management theory, with its intensive weighing of employee motivation, exercises a parallel moral fascination (Fleming and Sewell, 2002; Scott, 1998).

From another aspect, these kinds of jobs are collective imaginative riffs on the categories of real and formal subsumption. In general terms, subsumption varies according to the extent that the capitalist owns the means of production and controls the work that is done. With modular and fractal jobs, capitalist possession of the means of production is the norm, but the actual work process remains within the worker’s discretion – a condition of formal subsumption. MacJobs (now iMacjobs) have the fullest potential for autonomy or distance from direct control of the labour process by management because they require scarce skill sets; in McJobs the work process is prescribed in detail by management, leaving workers to supply a personal coloration to a standardized script of service. Such jobs are a mix of real and formal subsumption. In ergometric jobs, the organisation of the work process is under the direct control of the capitalist – a condition of real subsumption (Marx, 1976: 1019-1028; Ouggaard, 2008).

But as already pointed out, beyond the social relations of production aspects of these kinds of jobs sit as scheme of valuation and worth. Modular, fractal and ergometric jobs are not seen as equally valuable in terms of the capacity to give meaning and direction to the individual. The cascade of descending value from the modular, fractal and ergometric job derives from the interface between the liberal and neo-liberal governance of the subject. Ergometric and fractal subjects are historic survivals from the era of liberal capitalism, still relevant today for the realities of menial work in the service sector and manual labour. The liberal model of the subject is the possessive individual whose spiritual and intellectual needs are set aside in the sale of labour power. Under the logic of the cash nexus, the social and cultural needs of the worker are deemed a private matter to be resolved in the realm of consumption. The modular subject, by contrast, rests on the category of the neo-liberal subject, of the self-appreciative individual in which more is sought and expected from work than its economic reward. The self-appreciative individual seeks to improve his or herself as human capital and expects self-esteem and self-development – in short, dignity – to an important part of the rewards of work (Feher, 2009). Ideally, high wages and high ‘spiritual’ value are positively correlated but they need not be. Indeed the norms of self-appreciation rationalise a reduction of the rewards of employment – including low pay or the donation of free labour, the foregoing of benefits such as health insurance, holiday pay and job security. In this sense, the norms of self-appreciation constitute a ____________

6 Virno (2001) writes about immaterial labour as virtuosity: as an exercise of powers within a network of processes that produce a suite of products and services. But he is much more cautious in distinguishing between conscripted and unscripted (or open forms) of virtuosity. In the former case, what Virno calls virtuosity moves closer to what is otherwise termed task-directed performance.
pragmatic compromise of the Kantian ethics of purposelessness that sees pay as an irrelevance compared to the right to live a valuable life.

The appreciative subject – he or she who accepts the development and maintenance of their human capital and social capital as a personal, work related responsibility- is the poster boy and girl of the ‘information’ economy in general and of modular work in particular. Appreciative subjects are not uninterested in economic reward, no wage earner can be, but they are prepared to weigh cash against the psychic opportunities for self-development. This may explain the attraction of cool jobs in which the prestige of association clearly outweigh immediate gains and the long-term uncertainties of success. In this sense, all the world of cool jobs approximates to a performer taking jobs to build up a profile and network (Blair, 2001). The discourse of creativity surrounding digital labour is an important means for insinuating the ideology of self-appreciating labour to work per se. In this manner, the norms of self-appreciation, especially as promulgated by the media, become the ever-receding horizon and yearned-for utopian prospect for those whose social destiny is confined to the realm of ergometric and, especially, fractal forms of service work.

**Digital value**

The contemporary mapping of good work is a kind of ongoing soap opera of personality, which accounts for the pervasiveness of the theatrical metaphor. There are ‘star’ jobs that permit a maximum latitude for self-expression and ‘walk-on’ jobs that require the exact same actions with every ‘take’ and the suppression of individuality; jobs flush with personality and those emptied of it.

Beyond these local yet direct coercions of mental and physical labour power, in a globally networked division of labour, distributed work processes suck human mental and physical resources into an undifferentiated pool of energy for abstract co-operation under conditions of economic and moral inequality.

My primary claim has been that the representation of good to creative labour accomplishes the disappearance of class by a rendering occupational change as a kind of moral uplift for certain kinds of work – content rich and digitally driven. Digital labour is a key ‘brand’ in this process; the ultimate moral dignifier articulates a judgement on the worth of the person of the worker (Sayer, 2005). There is nothing new in this tendentious celebration of conformity, save its new digital clothes.

Digital labour finds its metaphoric personification in modular work, ordering in a cascade the moral value assigned to fractal and ergometric work forms. At the same time there is seemingly something quite progressive – it might be called post-capitalist – in the digital reanimation of the Kantian notion of dignity as an end in itself. In closing, let me note two aspects of what might be called errors of personification.

It will be recalled that under capitalist social relations of production, productive labour is labour that produces surplus value (Marx, 1976: 1038-1041). Management’s celebration of the ‘creativity’ of digital labour is marked by the equation of ‘creativity’ with profitability (Schlesinger, 2007; Peck, 2005). Such a self-interested evocation
draws on an ostensibly transcendent (and hegemonic) celebration of labour power. In this sense, the attractiveness of Richard Florida’s fantasy of a creative class draws on popular sentiments that go back to notions of a labour aristocracy and the Gospel of Work. But, there is deeper resonance that pushes beyond the confines of capitalist accumulation. It will be recalled that Marx defined good work as work that was not alienated by capitalist social relations of production, within which the worker under went a tripartite process of estrangement – from the ‘fruits’ (commodities) of the expenditure of labour power, from cooperative relationships with other workers, and from nature as it was transformed by the worker’s activities, including the worker’s own nature as a process of self-development and transformation. The result of these estrangements was the loss of connection to the ontological vocation of being human, of creating and developing the species-being (Marx, 1992: 266-270). Digital technologies, if released from the confines of private property in the means of production, have the potential to establish a collective dominion over organic and inorganic nature (Dyer-Witheford, 2006).

But such capacities are currently imagined only within the needs and dispositions that serve capitalism. Species-being is rendered as an accomplishment found only at the top of the ensemble of the work order. The stars of the modular realm, as capitalists or aspiring capitalists, confirm that powers of the collective can richly endow the life of the individual qua individual. In capital fetishism, the capitalist, as the personification of capital, appears as the source, the veritable demiurge that creates value. For the rest, there remains the mute appreciation of the creativity of labour as the enclosure of genius.

The second aspect of personification rests on another sleight of hand. Within a social formation in which occupational access is restricted and tenure precarious, there is a tendency to fetishize the powers of the collective. A fetishism of the collective is entirely understandable given the vast store of resources and stored knowledge – itself the product of the exercise of collective labour in the past. Being orphaned from that heritage confers a sedulous and slowly dawning sense of disinheritance on those excluded from it. In this connection one might consider the fate of the 99ers, unemployed workers who have used up the allotted 99 weeks of benefits in the US to get a sense of this alienation from the collective (Harris, 2010).

Perhaps here is the imaginary engine of geek culture, the deep longing to participate in media popular culture, to be somebody in the light of what has been and is being made and remade.

There is a fetishism of the collective, or the general intellect (the moment of the multitude) that operates as the complement to the capital fetish typical of the era of industrial capitalism. This fetishism is that mode of appearance of value in which the technology of production – including machines and systems of organising people – assumes the role of a demiurge (Vann, 2004). This new mode of personification cannot inhere as an abstraction within capitalist property relationships and must be given a human face or more exactly, a façade. The point of mediation, exemplification and

7 It is in this sense that Virno defines Post-Fordism as the Communism of Capital (2001: 110).
embodiment is now the work team that (under the entrepreneur’s inspirational leadership, of course) becomes a corporate individual – following the precedent established in US law that a corporation is a person. Here can be found a clue to the origins of the prestigious cult of busyness in both work and leisure – everyone wants to be ‘part of the action’ (Gershuny, 2005). In this process, the historically constructed Promethean power of ‘species-being’ is parcelled out and captured out in a premium rent or ‘human capital’ for unique individuals. This incarnation requires its cast of players, its ‘stars’, its leading and supporting players and its fractal walk-ons, all of whom draw on the prestige of living life as an art form. In this manner a new status order of busyness, within both work and leisure, both substantive and perfunctory, colonises the terrain of creativity. But we need to remind ourselves, as actor network theory has told us, that what is obfuscated in these celebrations is the digital labourer dependence on a system of material support and intellectual property relationships without which his or her ‘creativity’ cannot be recognised much less exercised (Herrero, 2010). Digital labour may be at its most creative when obscuring the social relationships of capitalism, this side of the end of work as we know it.

references


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The digital touch: Craft-work as immaterial labour and ontological accumulation

Jack Bratich

While much of autonomist theory privileges the most developed sector of capitalism (the digital online media and communication industries), this paper asks us to turn our attention to a revived ‘pre-capitalist’ form of cultural production. This article analyzes the recent resurgence of DIY craft culture around the following themes: 1) immaterial and affective labour; 2) gender and the home; 3) time and capitalism’s historicity. It challenges the periodisation of immateriality by highlighting the informational and communicative practices embedded in craft culture. In so doing, we can rethink the temporality of capitalism by teasing out a labour thread that passes through capitalism without being reduced to its purview. The gendered dimension of digital labour displays affective and immaterial qualities that have persisted resiliently before, during, and, in time, after capitalism. Craft as power (the capacity to act) is an ontological accumulation of species-being that pushes us to rethink the ‘organizing’ of subjects. Craft, tied to what Nick Dyer-Witheford calls species-being resurgent, provides a key example of the ontological development of subjective powers, ones that become ever more resonant in the crisis and ruins of capitalism.

Introduction

What is a paper on the resurgence of handicrafts doing in a special journal issue on digital labour? How could this most manual, pre-industrial form of labours be elucidated within a theoretical framework (autonomist Marxism) that begins with the pervasiveness of immaterial labour? What does the pre-capitalist practice of craft-work have to do with late capitalism, even post-capitalism?

We can begin to answer these questions by playing with a few linguistic tricks. Digital, as we know, refers not only to the informational, virtual realm of ones and zeros but also to the fingers – those physical manual extensions that apprehend the world. As Heidegger reminds us, many of our metaphors for understanding (grasping, comprehending) depend on a hand with its digits (Derrida, 1987: 172-3). A treatment of media technologies as ‘extensions’ belong among them; where the digits end, the digits begin, from counting on fingers to abstract computation. In turn, our names for the digital realm carry crafty connotations: the Web, the Net, the network, the node (derived from knot). Cyberculture titles like Tim Berners-Lee’s Weaving the Web and tactical media theorist Geert Lovink’s Dark Fiber make these links explicit. Interestingly, even the concept of trickery has a craft origin. Trick’s roots are in the
Latin *tricæ*, meaning ‘trifles, nonsense, a tangle of difficulties’, out of which the French language gets tricoter, to knot (Online Etymology Dictionary). Out of this artifice (once defined as skill or cunning via craft-making, now associated with deceit and trickery), this trifling intrigue (etymologically linked to both trickery and entanglement), we might shed some light on contemporary issues surrounding digital labour. Here, I explore the virtuality of digital craft-work, in Pierre Levy’s sense of cracking open an initial actuality to reveal a ‘knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity’ (1998: 24). In the intricate history of digital craft, especially its new mutation into online digital spheres, we can see virtuals unfolding.

This article examines craft-work around the following themes: 1) immaterial and affective labour; 2) gender and the home; 3) time and capitalism’s historicity. Doing so complicates the immaterial labour thesis of autonomism in the following ways: it challenges the apparent newness of the digital and of immateriality by highlighting the informational and communicative practices embedded in traditional craft culture. In this way, we can rethink the temporality of capitalism, namely, by teasing out a labour thread that passes through capitalism without being reduced to its purview. This history of technics and craft-work also foregrounds the gendered dimension of digital labour. Taken together, these lines of questioning unsettle the autonomist political investment in the hegemonic sector of class formation. I will argue that we need to look at the digital labour whose affective and immaterial qualities have persisted resiliently before, during, and, in time, after capitalism. Craft-work can be tied to what Nick Dyer-Witheford (2004) calls species-being resurgent and provides a key example of the ontological development of subjective powers – powers that become ever more resonant in the crisis and ruins of capitalism.

### The popularity of craft culture

Elsewhere Heidi Brush and I (2006) have analyzed the increasing popularity of what we call fabriculture and craft-work. We refer to a range of ‘domestic arts’: knitting, crocheting, scrapbooking, quilting, embroidery, sewing, doll-making. This popularity inhabits the spheres of marketplace commodification (e.g. Martha Stewart, the DIY cable channel), peer-to-peer exchanges (Etsy, knitty, Craftster), documentaries (Woman’s Work), and anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian craftivist projects (Cast Off, Craftivism, Anarchist Knitting Circle, MicroRevolt, Anarchist Knitting Mob, Revolutionary Knitting Circle). This revival can be found in a variety of online and offline spaces, from blogs to back rooms of independent shops, from street protests to virtual knitting circles. A phenomenon this popular cannot, we argue, be reduced to any one of these realms; its virtuals clearly need to be teased out.¹

The relationship between handicrafts and cybertechnology has been discussed in numerous texts by cyberfeminists and others. As Reece Steinberg’s Craft/Technology website (2004) points out, technology and craft are deeply intertwined. In addition to the linguistic entwinements mentioned above, historical connections abound. The first

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1 For excellent overviews of the activist, feminist dimensions of this resurgence, see Minahan and Cox, 2007; Pentney, 2008; and Robertson, 2007.
attempt to automate processes was based on the Jacquard Loom, as Sadie Plant (1997) reminds us. Plant even suggests that the binary code 1/0 that underpins computer programming was derived from knit/purl. She also points out a networking component to weaving:

Weaving was already multimedia: singing, chanting, telling stories, dancing and playing games as they work, spinsters, weavers and needleworkers were literally networkers as well...: the textures of a woven cloth functioned as the means of communication and information storage long before anything was written down. (Plant: 4)

Kirsty Robertson (2006) argues that information technology is less about hardware than software and that code-based programming is akin to knitting.

Mainstream cultural outlets make sense of the resurgence of crafting through these connections. Time reviewed the fabricultural site Craftster and called it ‘open-source crafting...’ (Craftster, 2006). Some key individuals involved in fabriculture have a foot in both worlds. Leah Kramer, founder of Craftster, is a computer programmer, while Jenna Adorno (a writer on knitty.com) works in the software industry. Not surprisingly, these crafters generally maintain an online presence for their handicrafts. Another technical example is knitPro, a web application that translates digital images into knit, crochet, needlepoint and cross-stitch patterns.

Undoubtedly, the resurgence of fabriculture has occurred alongside of digital, virtual culture but has it done so as complement, opposition, or antagonist? Perhaps, fabriculture is all three at different moments, as it has been throughout its entangled history. This enmeshing sets the stage for the next, which involves material/immaterial dimensions.

**Craft as immaterial labour**

The notion of immaterial labour is a controversial one. Rather than entering into an academic assessment of its analytical and descriptive value, I instead want to experiment on its virtuals by expanding the concept to include atypical practices. Rather than limit immaterial labour to newer occupations comprised of digital information services (computer workers, advertisers, symbolic analysts), it is useful to understand the immaterial as a dimension of many forms of labour. Let us take Maurizio Lazzarato’s (1995) descriptions as our guide.

First, immaterial labour refers to the activity ‘that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’ (Lazzarato, 1995: 133). For Lazzarato, this involves both increases in computer activity (informational), and the creation of tastes, opinions, and concepts (cultural). Nevertheless, if we take his thesis seriously as a description of dimensions of labour as such, rather than as a particular concrete manifestation (a

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2 For an excellent discussion, critique, and response to the concept, see the special issue of *ephemera* (Dowling, Nunes, and Trott, 2007).
‘stage’ of capitalism), we can apply it to the most material of labors and products. What might comprise the informational and cultural content of handicraft?3

To be sure, crafters often embedded meanings into their final products. Quilting, especially, is renowned for its implementation of codes and signs. Hidden maps and ciphers were employed to convey escape routes in the Underground Railroad, for example. Una Kimokeo-Goes (2007) examines Hawaiian appropriations and subversions of missionary-delivered quilting practices, focusing on how this crafting preserved identity and passed values across generations. The textual in the textile also can be found in family crests, Native American quilt-narratives, espionage messages, and encrypted love notes. Sometimes, as in the technique of ikat, a series of dyes in the weft and woof are used such that pictures might appear afterwards. Rather than an intended meaning, ikat is a ritual that allows the fabric itself to speak. But immaterial practices do not only take the form of images. The Navajo spirit path involves weaving an incongruent line into the fabric, one that goes to the edge of the rug. This intentional irregularity opens the object to its exterior, allowing the weaver to escape becoming trapped in the object and to continue weaving. It has even been said that the original Harris Tweed was a fisherman’s protective fabric; wives would sing safeguarding songs into the weave as they made it.

A slew of museum exhibitions and art projects have revived the element of immaterial meaning within the material, with titles like Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting and Gestures of Resistance. One exhibition, Crying the Blues, used quilting to convey seniors’ ‘stories, ideas, and concerns’ (including health care, education for their grandchildren, wage cuts and job loss) (Clover, 2005: 635). More than a series of representations, this material imaginary was then re-circulated as a pedagogical tool. The final ‘product’, therefore, embodied, both, a set of symbols and a set of connective material practices that formed a provisional community. Indeed, craft-work has historically been performed as a gift-giving practice and as a form of care for others (kin, children, spouses, friends). The material object is produced out of, and for, community relationships. In this way craft-work is saturated with use-values.

Beyond the meanings directly integrated into the material design and the immaterial affective purposes of the objects, we also need to take into account the communicative actions infusing the production process itself. Adam Arvidsson (2005), drawing from Paolo Virno, notes that,

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3 There are some obvious departures here from Lazzarato’s restrictive use. The use value of the commodity does not reside in its informational/cultural content, though this semiotic quality is indispensable at times to the uses (as in secret codes) and more importantly to the process (the persistence of occulted knowledges through marginalized spaces and practices). While the value of the product, unlike Lazzarato’s version, might get used up in consumption, the fact that much of the historical process of crafting was outside of the commodity marketplace makes this characteristic less important. More important is Lazzarato’s remark that subjectivities are transformed via immaterial labour. Immaterial labour produces a social relation: ‘labour produces not only commodities, but first and foremost it produces the capital relation’. In the case of craft-work we might alter this to say it produces a ‘non- or post-capital relation’ (Lazzarato, 1995: 137).
Immaterial labour works with language in the wide sense of the term. It utilizes a common ability to interact and socialize, and a common symbolic framework, a set of shared knowledges and competences, to produce a social relation. (Virno, 2004, in Arvidsson, 2005: 241)

This social context of production, according to Lazzarato, results in an ‘enlargement of productive cooperation that even includes the production and reproduction of communication and hence of its most important contents: subjectivity’ (1995: 140).

Thinking of craft-work as immaterial labour would mean taking seriously what Tiziana Terranova sees as forms of labour not usually associated with value: chatting, life-stories, amateur production and other ‘informational materialism’ (2004). We could consider this ‘peer to peer textiling’. The knitting circle or sewing circle is a key example here. Often considered women-only spaces where the production of physical objects and communication takes place, these temporary autonomous zones provide a different kind of subject-formation. These spaces function to allow women to swap skillful knowledge (techné), as well as stories, experiences, songs, and other life-strategies. The sewing circle, comprised of communication and information-transmission, can be seen as a historically persistent affinity circle; it is not only a coping mechanism, but a temporary resting point for future actions. Faith Wilding and Critical Art Ensemble put it succinctly: ‘The organizing cell for the first phase of feminism was the sewing circle, the quilting group, or the ladies’ charity organization’ (2006).

Craftivists develop values and practices like mentorship, community-building, connection with other DIY projects, and gender empowerment. The Revolutionary Knitting Circle, for instance, promotes discussion, skill-sharing, and relationships among people with different backgrounds. The S/he Collective works toward building a community that promotes women’s art and social change. The current resurgence of crafting has strong links to the anarchist milieu, especially as a politicized practice of resourcefulness, local knowledge, and nonhierarchical organizational forms. In sum, the manual production of a material object involves organizational forms infused with immateriality, from specialized technical knowledge about the work itself to the wisdom and emotional support of life advice.

The virtual knitting circle and the social home

The knitting circle meshes well with the World Wide Web. When these circles initially went online, the community-producing communicative aspect came along with them (Bratich and Brush, 2006). Virtual crafting continues to exchange advice, skills, jokes, and products in addition to being a commodity market. This communal quality is found in everything from the online blogs to public demonstrations, from small Stitch ‘n’ Bitch sessions in social centers to working academic groups at conferences like ‘Digital poetics and politics’ (Buiani, 2005). The most individualistic, personal craft narratives

4 The social networking of digital online media thus has a predecessor in the tactile media of craftwork. The familiar claim about the radical potential of the digital web – interconnection, collaboration, producing and reproducing relationships – has a long history in other kinds of networking.
very quickly become stories about connecting to communities and traditions (see Lydon’s The Knitting Sutra [1997] for an excellent example). These on and off-line gatherings do not just bring people and ideas together to make and sell a product, they work to connect members’ skills, competences and creativity, in other words, their labour.

The online component is just one version of the recent publicness of fabriculture. The popularization of what Jean Railla (2004) calls ‘the new domesticity’ is a moment where the domestic becomes public (e.g. it appears in popular culture, it’s often done in public sites, it circulates via the social web). Here we can introduce a term, following the autonomist analysis of the different figures of 20th century labour: the social home. By this term I mean two things: 1) the domestic sphere’s practices physically coming out into public view, and 2) the recognition that the home was always a site of convergence between social relationships and cultural economies.

The social home acknowledges the oppressive conditions for women in domesticated situations, like gender domination and the exploitative reproduction of labour. Spaces of enclosure and marginalization now spread throughout the socius. At the same time, it is important to note along with Glenna Matthews (1989) and others, that the home is not simply a space of capture but a site of subject-production irreducible to mechanical reproduction. The home is composed of affective spaces, involving not only emotional or sentimental qualities but also the power to act. These spaces can work to increase subjective capacities via interaction. These counter hierarchical circles and circuits across and between women have been examined most famously and controversially by Caroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975) and more recently by Franklin et al (2005). Craft-work, as part of this social home, now brings with it all the histories of affinity circles and powers activated and suppressed within the domestic sphere.

These affinity circles traditionally existed in the margins (sometimes literally as corners and backrooms of homes). It is no wonder that these tightly knit groups were ridiculed as gossip circles and otherwise semiotically denigrated (Stoller, 2003). Seen as idle time and unproductive activity from the perspective of capital and masculinized value, these forms of craft-work didn’t get integrated into profit-making systems but were marginalized as, at best, use-value objects or cost-cutting measures. But, it is precisely in this diminution of productive experience as ‘only’ affective – read as trivial and trifling – that new figures and possibilities arise.

I want to argue that what is most important about craft-work is the fact that it is produced through affective labour (a component of immaterial labour, according to Hardt and Negri (2000: 293)). Affective labour includes care-giving work, unwaged women’s work (especially household labour) and media entertainment (Dalla Costa and James, 1972; Del Re, 1996; Federici, 2004). Labour finds its value in affect, defined primarily as the power to act (Negri, 1999; Hardt, 1999; Lazzarato, 1995). Rather than think of capital as the maker of value through the extraction of maximum labour power from others, Antonio Negri (1999) argues for a value analysis from below, or the base

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5 This follows from the autonomist notion of the ‘social factory’, in which the procedures and mechanisms of factory discipline begin to permeate everyday life.
of life. Affect refers to processes like 1) small scale circulation (gifting gestures); 2) cooperation as a kind of surplus; and 3) ‘historical and moral values’ (1999: 80). For Michael Hardt (1999), affective labour ‘is itself and directly the constitution of communities and collective subjectivities’ (1999: 89).

Craft-work as affective production allows us to think about value differently. Untied from capitalist valorization, craft-work produces communities and subjectivity laterally and contains an autonomous circuit of meaning and relationships. We have noted above how community and affinities are produced through craft circles in both their historical and contemporary virtual forms. The fact that products often circulate within a gift economy (in and out of capitalism) resonates with this affective quality of small-scale circulation. The recent revival of this gift economy via handicraft encodes a desire for the pre-capitalist form of production, for the ‘personal touch’. Pre-capitalist associations are, of course, a way of marketing commodities with global/local authenticity (Gajjala, 2006), but they also raise the issue of what, exactly, is being revived in this moment. In order to do this, we need to address temporality directly.

Temporality 1: Revivals and pre-capitalism

Capitalism emerged via the transmutation of craft. Textiles were one of the first major industries. Craft-work moved from guild to factory, from artisan work to industrial labour, from use-value to exchange-value. However, the ‘handicraft’ product wasn’t the only thing to get systematized, and eventually automated, with the loom. The craft circles, creating community through production and distribution of the object (within the family, as gift, as public sign), were also captured by capital. This labour transformation was, obviously, thoroughly gendered. Mechanization disaggregated the cottage industry of weaving; it intensified the forms of production, and installed male spinners as textile machine operators (even while their wives and children often toiled for these piecemeal labourers). The gender struggles in craft-work, however, existed in antiquity, and the preconditions of capitalist gender hierarchies can be found in the professional guilds, even those who afforded more room for women’s agency (Federici, 2004; Bratich and Brush, 2006).

The resurgence of craft-work and fabriculture is a revival of this initial mutation. In a telling parallel, fabriculture’s recent popularity arose alongside the exposure and scrutiny of global sweatshop practices in the 1990s. Craft culture is even regarded as a direct response to this pervasive and oppressive form of craft-work (MicroRevolt, 2006; Campbell, 2005). The emphasis on slow production as opposed to rapid output, on personal expression against repetitive and specialized tasks, and on the gift exchange versus mass production, all comprise this parallel craft. And this is not new. As Glenna Matthews notes, ‘from time to time there has been an outcropping of this kind of rebellion against everything being machine made’ (Sabella, 2006).6

6 Interestingly enough, industrial looms were primary targets for Luddite sabotage. Informational forms of sabotage like viruses also find their way into fabriculture (Buiani, 2005).
Revivals are a mixed bag. One angle sees this resurgence as merely an ideological nostalgia for an idealized past. Another sees it as a way of creating value-added authenticity for commodities in an increasingly ethereal marketplace. But what if we were to think of a revival not as a return to the past, but as an affirmation and reversion within a fabric that was never lost? In other words, crafting never died: it simply spun out into multiple spaces via diverse forms.

The recent resurgence invokes the long history of craft-work. But it is not simply a return to the folk. There is a difference between noting a long-standing tradition, and relegating it to ‘the past’ (as pre-modern, as a previous stage in development, as pre-capitalist). What would it mean, for instance, to make the case that Tantra (meaning loom, continuity, tool for expansion or a weaving), which persists today, ‘belongs’ to the past? To conceptualize a resurgence or reversion means that we do not look to capitalism to provide the conditions for understanding its own historicity. From this point of view, fabriculture is a form of resurgence, or a reversion, of something that went dormant or took on other forms.

The emergence of capitalism was a moment where craft was transformed into industrial labour, the spaces of production were codified into private/public, and process was diminished in favor of product (commoditization). But crafting never disappeared; it persisted and proliferated in the cracks and interstices of capitalist culture. The commodified and industrialized forms never eliminated fabriculture, they only spatially organized it and ascribed value to certain iterations of it, while simultaneously devaluing the others. Its resurgence is neither solely new nor old; it is a way of reworking the old and of rethinking the capitalist industrialization moment along with the patriarchal division of space. This notion of time, appropriately enough, fits with some basic technical characteristics of craft-work (e.g. refusing to fetishize newness). Innovation itself changes—it can mean recrafting the material, unraveling a product to start again, or reworking the same material (differently); as it goes with fabric, so, too, with fabriculture.

Breaking history up into segmented eras and placing craft into one of them would simply cut up fabric into strips. Relegating fabriculture to a past folk or to a purely new phenomenon would diminish its critical powers, thus continuing the project of devaluing affective labour and disciplining gendered production. Instead, we can take the cycles of composition usually applied to class subjectivity, and bring them to bear on this neglected kind of labour. The resurgence may be understood as part of a recomposition of subjectivity, as well as a set of production dynamics. What we might be witnessing is the revival of the transition from commons to enclosures, from a variety of production processes to capitalism.

As Sylvia Federici (2004) argues, the rise of capitalism via primitive accumulation was not just an economic intervention into the commons made on the bodies of male workers (e.g. the spinners who were absorbed into the factories). Before this violence

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As Peter Lamborn Wilson (1998) puts it, a reversion can have revolutionary qualities (a la the Zapatistas) if it means reviving and affirming latent traces of previous customs that warded off the accumulation of power (see especially pp. 89-91, 136).
could take place, another violence was enacted. This clearing for capitalism involved the dispersion, de-authorization and expropriation of women’s skills and knowledges along with the destruction of many women’s bodies, for example through the witch hunts. Female-to-female relationships–friendships and sexual intimacy–were seen as subversive (2004: 186). A wholesale transformation of the conception of the body took place. Skills related to birthing, healing, protection and nutrition, based on an extensive knowledge of plants and medicines, depended on a notion of the body as a ‘receptacle of magical powers’ (2004: 141). This occult body was redefined (through a long and bloody history) as a mechanical system, which paved the way for a mechanistic conceptualization of labour power. What remained of these female knowledges and practices was consigned to the domestic sphere as ‘mere’ reproduction.

What returns in craft-work’s resurgence, then, is also this memory, all of the cunning crafts, which had been relegated to the cracks and margins. Crafting has not been ‘incorporated’ in the hegemonic sense, because it never emerged from an outside position (like a subculture). Craft-work is not simply folk culture, a use-value ‘before’ or ‘outside’ capital. Elements of it had been originally subsumed at capital’s inception. Crafting was bifurcated, taking on new forms and spaces of concentration. Its real subsumption means there is nothing purely new here; just another point in the cycle that began with handicraft’s integration into newly industrializing forms. Subsumption transforms the spaces and forms of production, and, thus, the new possibilities for politics. To understand this more, we need to return to our discussion of craft as affective production, now situated in another, ontological, temporality.

**Temporality 2: Ontological accumulation and recomposition**

The persistence of craft before, through, and in spite of capitalism has broader implications, linked to what Nick Dyer-Witheford calls ‘the Return of Species-Being’ or ‘Species-Being Resurgent’ (2004). Species being is ‘humanity’s capacity to co-operatively change the conditions of its collective existence’ (2004: 3). This involves ‘a combination of self-consciousness, material capacity, and collective organization’ (2004: 5).

There is a recursive ontology here, as we find ‘a species-being whose nature is to change its nature, and whose only essence is the capacity for transformation...[it is] a virtuality’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2004: 6). Dyer-Witheford locates the contemporary conditions for species-being in a number of struggles and developments (ecological, gender, counterglobalization movements, biological contestation). I would like to add the particularly gendered practice of craft culture to this persistent and resilient ontological resurgence.

As we have seen, craft is a form of affective production. Here, we can point to another meaning of craft, the Old English cræft, originally meaning ‘power, strength, might’ (Online Etymology Dictionary). In German we see power as kraft, and in Italian as abilita. Power here is not equivalent to hierarchy and domination (potere in Italian; pouvoir in French) but is more like capacity, or ability (potenza and pouissance).
English versions of this meaning include terms like tradecraft, statecraft, spycraft, and witchcraft: all sets of skills and practices that have systematic effects in the world.

According to Negri there are four powers that comprise affective production and its ontological qualities (1999: 85-86): 1) the power to act (capacity agency, ability to produce effects); 2) the power of transformation (to combine activities, to connect an action to what is common – here we can locate the recursivity of species being as a self valorization); 3) the power of appropriation (in which every obstacle overcome determines a greater force of action; actions absorb the conditions of their realization); and 4) expansive power (as appropriation persists in an omnilateral diffusion, the capacities to act themselves increase to the point of a transvaluation of their conditions).

Affect is not only a type of labour, but a type of subjectivity—one with an ontological quality. Species-being encompasses all four powers; it is a series of virtues that persevere, even expand, over time. This formulation of species-being is tied to the capital/labour relationship. Negri (2005), like many autonomists, argues that capital, rather than being a structure that produces positions and agents, is itself an agent. Its relation to labour is precisely one between subjects. What kind of subject is capital? An interventionist one, acting through expropriation and exploitation. Alienation, according to Dyer-Witheford, refers to

‘who or what controls and limits the processes of ceaseless species self-development. Social systems that appropriate and sequester resources for particular strata or segments of species-beings block or reverse the circular access of social and individual powers that enables the common growth of species-being.’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2004: 7)

Capitalist production of subjectivity necessitates blocking the political expression of productive forces, specifically their communicative capacities, and especially with the socialization of productive forces found in immaterial labour (Negri, 2005: 132).

Accumulation thus belongs not only to capitalist regimes of value-production, but ‘from below, from the base of life’; it also involves ontological accumulation (Negri, 1999). Species-being, taking its own powers (crafts) as objects of will, consciousness, and practice has a development that encounters capital without being reduced to its interruptions and forms of violence. The concept of self-valorization refers, then, to how this value-generation of creative acts infuses the immanent needs and desires of the producing community and avoids being fully captured by capital (Negri, 1991; Dyer-Witheford, 2004; Cleaver, 1979; Virno and Hardt, 1996). For Negri, self-valorization means reviving the ‘world of solid values’ formed in historical struggles (2005: 138). It means defining

in this past a deep line, a concrete substratum which neither the conscience nor the memory attest, but only the continuity of struggles. And all the modifications, breaks and radical innovations gather around that constructed and re-found base, around that dynamic profile of a subjective ontology. (Negri, 2005: 138)

This subjective transformation requires self-consciousness, but it is an ‘already-known self-valorization – one which had perhaps never ceased’ (2005: 138). The persistence and resilience of this ontological development is located in ‘the thousand clandestine stories of a never-destroyed movement’ (2005: 139).
Negri, with his workerist legacy, foregrounds the waged labourer in this ontological development. These struggles involve resistance by (primarily male) workers. But, what happens if we take these claims about history, subjectivity, power, and ontology and extend them to craft-work, the social home, and the gendered spaces of reproduction/production? We can still find moments of struggle, but we can also locate other rhythms and accumulations: the interventions of severe and prolonged violence, the massive decomposition of women’s knowledges and skills, the expropriation of powers and wisdom, the destruction of bodies, the marginalization and diminution of practices into trifling spheres. All of these were encountered by craft-work. And yet, persistence, the preservation of knowledge, the transmission of skills and wisdom across generations of affinity circles, the extension of craft into new spheres are all processes of subjectivity demonstrating an exemplary resilience central to any constitutive ontology. Craft-work withstands capitalism’s founding violence, one that eventually subsumed some of craft into the factory while marginalizing others into domestic affinity circles.

While crafting is a paradigmatic case of capitalist subsumption, as power, capacity, and social value it is never eliminated or fully captured by capital. These shadow practices allow for an endurance that sets the stage for a longue durée of accumulation and self-valorization, one that can be examined as a site of value-production outside of the circuits of capitalist capture. Craft-work, that which pre-existed capitalism and persisted through marginalization, burnings, and commodification, now resurges as global and extensive. Its current popularity is a sign of its strength, not as incorporated into new modes of value-creation, but as an enduring practice in spite of capitalism and patriarchy. Its resurgence is a moment in a cycle, part of the warp and woof in the rich tapestry of species history.

Rethinking autonomist attachments

Defining craft-work as part of an ontological process of affective production tied to species-being pushes us to rethink some autonomist attachments when it comes to digital labour. There is a tendency among some analysts to focus on the most advanced capitalist sector (the hegemonic fraction of the labour force) to find the type of worker who best functions as a revolutionary subject. This informational worker, or digital labourer, moves from the physical factory (mass worker) to the social factory (socialized worker). But, if we operate with a notion of the social home, we do not simply trace a path from the factory outwards. Leopoldina Fortunati (2007) argues that the immaterialization of waged labour processes is actually the expansion of traditionally feminized domestic labour into the waged sphere. Once this key insight is taken seriously, there is no need to privilege an ‘advanced’ labour sector. Immaterialization does not come from capital as its innovation in the waged sphere, but from occulted labour and its history of preservation and struggle.

In addition to expanding the types of labouring subjects who ‘count’ as digital, craft-work complicates and enriches the notions of exodus, breaking, and defection from capital. The autonomist concept of exodus depends on a moment of auto-valorization characterized by a surplus: an accumulation of value, power, and social relationships.
that no longer depends on capital to realize its virtues. This pertains quite well to high tech sectors (e.g. the skills of gaming software developers analyzed so thoroughly by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter [2009]) but also needs to be applied to the immaterial digital labour of craft-workers, on and offline. Fortunati argues that the increase in immaterial labour in the domestic sphere, with all its ambivalences, still produces a ‘strategic moment of self-valorization’ (2007: 153).

When it comes to crafting, this self-valorization is not primarily a break from capitalist valorization; the more conventional sense of autonomy presumes an attachment and dependence on capitalism for value-production. But, as I have been arguing, craft-work was the target of a break by capital; it was split, interrupted, and bifurcated at capital’s inception. Its ontological accumulation, its virtual development, then, was short-circuited, expropriated, segmented. Capitalism is an obstacle to the ontological process in this formulation through its disruptions and deprivations. As a result, it makes more sense to define exodus as the preservation and expansion of craft against breaks.

Creating the optimal conditions for the four powers of affect and the ontogenic process of species-being entails a kind of a popular security, what Paolo Virno calls a ‘safeguarding’ of rights and customs from capital and state’ (2004: 42). When we locate craft’s resurgence within cycles of composition, we might see more than cycles of struggle. The ontological process still involves antagonism (as long as capitalist exploitation continues) but a fuller notion of re-composition sees solidarity as communal, or as species-being whose expansion and transmutation needs to be acknowledged and cultivated as its own subjective process. Antagonism would take the form of preservation and popular security and would involve the defence and nurturing of emergent experiments and resurgent powers against forces that would decompose them.

Another autonomist attachment needs addressing here, namely the ‘cycle of struggles’ model and its concomitant mode of organizing around hegemonic subjective labour figures. Craft-work troubles and, therefore, enriches the compositional analysis based on subjective figures (professional worker, mass worker, socialized worker, knowledge worker, cognitariat). The ‘cycles of struggle’ model focuses on composition at a sweeping, molar level, teetering close to totality. If we examine composition from those occulted spaces in everyday life where craft persists, we need to revise our notions of cycles and temporality. The waves of composition, de-composition, and re-composition can be transferred to these other spheres, but only if they take on nuanced, microlological qualities. These cycles are accompanied by (perhaps grounded in or surrounded by) ‘spirals of struggle’ formed in these spaces (Shukaitis, 2009: 38, 105). This does not mean dispensing with the workerist model of the cycles, but it does mean situating them as the site of waged value production rather than the site of value production per se. As autonomist feminists bring to light, every cycle in the conventional compositional

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8 Virno argues that what connects the current multitude with its seventeenth century predecessors is the ‘right of resistance’ (2004: 42). This jus resistentiae is defensive, by ‘safeguarding forms of life which have already been affirmed as free-standing forms, thus protecting practices already rooted in society’ (2004: 42).
analysis has its corollary mode of women’s work; each subjective figure of waged labour depends on the care work and domestic labour of social (re)production.

We can see this gendered element within Marxism’s own ambiguous use of the term ‘craft’. Craft functions as both a de-valued, marginalized act (a residual activity that does not produce value) as well as a particular form of labour (the professional worker, with specialized knowledge). Craft refers to those skills and expert knowledges that create distinctions within industrial labour, namely skilled vs. unskilled. Spinning and weaving were among the first professional, skill-based work, based partially on the previous hierarchies of the guilds. In other words, the dual meaning of craft within Marxism runs along gender lines; the result is a gendered distinction between the amateur and the professional, which leaves affective qualities (the amatus) in the margins.

Craft culture’s modes of subjectivation demonstrate that new social compositions occur not just in the organization of advanced technologized labour, but also in the fabrication of affective craft-work. Crafting, for instance, also produces a general intellect, though less administrative and mechanical than the one found in Marx’s ‘Fragment on Machines’ (1973). The social element of knowledge is not predicated on a split between the objective (machinery) and subjective (general intellect). From the perspective of crafting, tools, patterns, weavers, and products are connected in the transmission of skills, tips, history, family knowledge, cultural rituals, and other immaterial/material practices. It is capitalism that cuts into this fabric to split subjects from objects in order to professionalize and commodify them.

Moreover, the gendered character of primitive accumulation and of the precapitalist guilds, as argued above, also complicates the cycle of struggle. The decomposition of craft began before capitalism accelerated its de-structuration. Compositional analysis, therefore, would have to begin earlier and in another place than those imagined in these molar subjective figures that arrive with the capital/labour relation.9

The ‘cycles of struggle’ model produced relevant modes of organizing the hegemonic subjective figures within each cycle. Is the craft subject now the hegemonic one and, thus, a privileged revolutionary subject? This view would simply duplicate similar desires, such as those of liberal second wave feminists, to enter the capitalistic work force. Rather than seek substitution, crafting questions this autonomist fixation on the most advanced sector itself. This position wards off the vestiges of vanguardism that attach to higher tech political figures (e.g. the hacker), and pushes us further into micrological spheres to look for composition. Once we stop privileging the waged producer of surplus value, the whole notion of a subjective figure is transformed. We have to be wary of unifying an expanse of networks and practices into something like the ‘crafter’. Crafting is a dispersed practice that alters what we mean by ‘organizing’.

9 And just as Federici and others in the Midnight Notes collective argue that primitive accumulation is an ongoing process with perpetually ‘new enclosures’, so, too, we can examine the revivals of these precapitalist decompositions in the contemporary moment. For instance, Etsy, the massive online crafter market community not only contains the ambivalence presented by commodification of craft mentioned earlier, but is also a gendered site insofar as the majority of producers and consumers who use it are women, while the site founders and owners are male (Mosle, 2009).
J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) argues that the historical composition of feminism operated through spaces by ‘link[ing] feminists emotionally and semiotically, not primarily organizationally’ (2006: xxiii). Eschewing an external organizational mechanism (as in the traditional Leftist party or union), feminist politics and imaginaries took hold via an ‘ontological substrate: a vast set of disarticulated ‘places’–households, communities, ecosystems, workplaces, civic organizations, bodies, public arenas, urban spaces, diasporas, regions, government agencies, occupations–related analogically rather than organizationally and connected through webs of signification’ (2006: xxiv). These affective relations create a transformation based on ‘ubiquity rather than unity’ (2006: xxiv).\(^\text{10}\)

The collaborative authorship of Gibson-Graham invites us to rethink capitalism’s existence as totality, opting instead to make it one set of practices among other co-existing economic ones. Thinking of a post-capitalist politics means seeing capitalism not as a monolithic system or structure (which is how capitalism’s discourses, pro and con, see it). Rather, it asks us to shift our perspective regarding capitalism (our investment, representations, orientation). Gibson-Graham’s emphasis on community economics projects wagers on a re-composition in which capitalism is no longer a structure/system but an agent and machine. Autonomists also see capital as one type of subject, and highlight it as a hostile and rapacious one. How does craft’s resurgence fit within this view?

Gibson-Graham’s book A Postcapitalist Politics (2006) was published near the end of one of capitalism’s high points, involving especially the development of digital media and information technologies. Post-capitalism was more a matter of perspective, an invitation to see economics differently. But, like Marx waiting for the Paris commune, an event arose in history to concretize and reinvigorate this perspective, namely capitalism’s crisis in late 2008. This ongoing crisis opens a crack where resurgences and re-compositions can take place. Experiments in community, in economies and value-production have begun to take root.\(^\text{11}\) In this re-composition, perhaps, we can include a type of repetition: a refurbishing, a restoration, a renovation, among capitalism’s ruins. Amidst these ruins, the old cracks begin to expand; the occulted circles reach out beyond the sewing room to weave their fabric again. This re-composition sees a return of those technics and knowledges that have comprised biopower, the power of life itself. But, this is a return of an ‘already-known self valorization – one which had perhaps never ceased’ (Negri, 2005: 138). Speculations on futures, digital and otherwise, need to remember the ontological accumulation of affect and the persistence of the crafts despite the catastrophic decomposition called capitalism.

\(^{10}\) Organization means finding units of affinity from a purely political (polis as space of public and city) or economic one (oikos as household) to ethical (through affective connection, autovalorization, open-ended communities, or ethos). Before the factory the guild, before the guild, the wiek.

\(^{11}\) For a contemporary analysis of these emergent forms of organization, see Van Meter, Hughes, and Peace (2010).
references


Craftster (2006) [http://craftster.org/]


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The copyright policy paradox: Overcoming competing agendas in the digital labour movement*

Samuel E. Trosow

abstract

This paper discusses the varying and often disparate approaches that Canadian associations representing intellectual and creative labourers have taken to copyright policy. Copyright policies are important to intellectual and creative workers as they set the framework for their rights and obligations with respect to the works and performances they create, and to the intellectual goods they utilize in their own production processes. Copyright is now in a state of transition as policymakers grapple with the effects that technological, cultural and economic changes have had on established business models and practices in education and in the entertainment and publishing industries. Although the relationship of creators to the fruits of their labour varies in different settings, it is increasingly tenuous. While resulting rights are retained in some situations, in many others the creator is alienated from their rights at the outset, and in yet others they are subsequently assigned away. In comparing the differences in approach to copyright issues taken by different intellectual and creative labour groups, the paper asks what accounts for these disparities, and how they might be ameliorated to the benefit of a progressive politics of digital labour.

Intellectual labour and the copyright paradox

Copyright policies are important to intellectual and creative labourers in all areas of work, whether they are teachers, performers, composers, artists, librarians or writers, because they provide the foundation for the rights and obligations in the works and performances they create. Just as importantly, they set the ground rules for intellectual labourers’ capacity to draw on the works and performances of others that they utilize in their own production processes. Recently, copyright has become a much more visible and contested public policy issue. For groups representing the interests of intellectual and creative workers, copyright issues are particularly important not least because they have become a point of disunity and discord within the creative labour movement itself. This divergence of positions is treated in this paper as a paradox because, on the one hand, these groups have much in common and share similar values. They share a basic unity of purpose on many work-related and other social and policy issues ranging from

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support for the arts to opposition to censorship, and within the realm of copyright policy, they generally share similar positions with respect to the rights of creators vis-à-vis their employers. That is to say, they agree that whatever rights flow from copyright in works and performances, they should primarily benefit the creator, not the employer or other contracting party. At this level, there is broad agreement that the ‘work for hire doctrine’, which generally assigns initial ownership rights to the employer, needs to be scaled back and limited, as do waivers of the authors’ moral rights in their creations.

On the other hand, their differences concerning the rights of end users regarding their works and performances is prominent. The groups fundamentally disagree on the scope of users’ rights and to the extent owners’ rights should be enforced in the digital environment. Two particular issues have emerged as especially divisive in this regard. The first issue that has divided intellectual and creative labour groups is ‘fair dealing’, largely due to its perceived relationship to the flow of licensing revenues. Fair dealing, which is discussed in more detail below, generally refers to the right to use portions of a work without permission from, or payment to, the copyright owner. It is analogous to ‘fair use’ in the US. The issue here is the extent to which owners’ rights should be limited or tempered by the doctrine of fair dealing. Educational, library and consumer interests generally favour expanding fair dealing (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2008; Canadian Library Association, 2010) while the content industries (labour and management alike) and licensing collectives have seen it as a threat to their revenue streams (The Writers’ Union of Canada, 2010; Access Copyright, 2010).

The second issue that has generated significant disagreement among intellectual and creative labour groups in Canada involves the implementation of the 1996 World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Copyright Treaty, particularly its provisions on technological protection measures (TPMs). Rules protecting TPMs (or digital locks as they are commonly called) from acts of circumvention have been proposed in both Bill C-61 (An Act to Amend the Copyright Act, 2008) and again in the current Bill C-32 (the Copyright Modernization Act, 2010) in a form similar to those in the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) (United States, 1998). While these provisions are supported both by industry and labour groups in the content industries (Canadian Recording Industry Association, 2010a; Creators’ Copyright Coalition, 2008)\(^1\), they have been opposed by the education and library sectors (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2007: 6-7; Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2008: 5; Canadian Library Association, 2010: 4; Canadian Federation of Students, 2010: 2-3).

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\(^1\) The Creators’ Copyright Coalition platform published in January 2008 was signed by: Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA), American Federation of Musicians (AFM), Canadian Actors’ Equity Association (Equity), Canadian Artists Representation (CAR/FAC), Canadian Artists Representation Copyright Collective (CARCC), Canadian Music Centre, Canadian League of Composers, Guild of Canadian Film Composers (GCFC) League of Canadian Poets, Literary Translators Association of Canada, Playwrights Guild of Canada, Professional Writers Association of Canada (PWAC), Songwriters Association of Canada (SAC), Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada (SOCAN), Writers Guild of Canada (WGC) and The Writers’ Union of Canada (TWUC).
At least on these wedge issues, the copyright landscape seems to be host to two increasingly hostile and disparate camps. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) explains the primary contradiction in copyright policy as ‘an intensified struggle over access and use of information’ (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2008: 1).

On the one side are advocates of more restrictions on copyrighted material to protect the proprietary interests of rights owners. On the other side are those who want to ensure broader access and use. The intensity of this debate has been sharpened by the development of digital information technology that creates opportunities for both complete copyright control and, conversely, instantaneous illegal duplication. (ibid)

Yet for those engaged in intellectual labour, the problem should be more nuanced. For instance, CAUT characterizes creators as having ‘always been caught in the middle since they typically use other works as part of the creative process but also become rights-holders themselves’ (ibid). They characterize their own members in this dual capacity:

Academic staff occupy an important position in this debate, sharing the concerns of owners, creators and users. As creators and owners of copyright material, academic staff understand the importance of protecting their scholarly work. As users of copyright material in their teaching and research, academic staff are also aware of the importance of ensuring access to copyrighted works in order to advance knowledge. (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2008: 1)

Students are in the same position:

As creators and owners of copyright material (essays, articles, theses and multi-media productions), students need to protect their work from unjust appropriation. But to study, research, write and create new knowledge, students also need ready access, at a reasonable cost, to the copyrighted works of others. This tri-part perspective – of use, creation and ownership of copyright – gives students special credibility in the struggle for fair and balanced copyright law. (Canadian Federation of Students, 2008: 1)

Freelance writers, artists and musicians are also similarly situated. As creators who rely on the existing works of others as part of their production processes, they benefit from rules that limit the reach of the copyright monopoly such as fair dealing and the public domain. Yet they often show the same hostility to users’ rights as their employers, industry trade groups, and licensing agencies such as Access Copyright and the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada (SOCAN), whose board includes members affiliated with Sony/ATV Canada, Universal Music Publishing Canada, and various publishing trade groups. Access Copyright in particular provides an essential function besides licensing works and distributing funds to creators and publishers. It provides a stable and well-funded organizational forum for various creator groups to come together, to litigate, to lobby and generally to ‘circle the wagons’, so to speak. This function of holding together what otherwise could be a loosely coupled, unstable and fragile coalition is built into Access Copyright’s governance structure: ‘Operating as a ‘member guided’ organization, our elected board of directors (nine representing publisher member organizations and nine representing creator member organizations) is the driving force behind our organization’s policies’ (Access Copyright, 2009a: 4). The publisher representatives on the board include officers of

What are the stakes for digital labour in seeking and achieving greater unity on copyright policy questions? Or to put the question another way, what are the costs if this effort is not made? While copyright issues were not central to the concerns of industrial labour, they become increasingly central in the digital environment. What is at stake here is not only the ultimate ownership and control of the output of information and knowledge production processes, but also the rules governing crucial aspects of the terms and conditions of the employment of intellectual and creative labour. While intellectual workers certainly vary in their levels of precarity, status, and compensation, they share a common, pivotal position with respect to their relationship to the object of their own labour and the labour of other creative workers.

Since an overarching objective of this paper is to seek greater unity within the intellectual and creative labour movement on the copyright issue, various stances taken need to be reviewed and assessed in order to identify issues where differences can be mitigated and agreements can be emphasized. Before turning to this analysis it would be useful to review some general copyright concepts, including works and other subject matter, moral rights, ownership allocation issues, licensing and infringement as well as fair dealing and technological protection measures.

**Some copyright basics**

*Works and other subject matter*

Copyright is a form of intellectual property that protects original expression that has been fixed in a tangible form. The traditional subject of copyright is ‘works’, which include original literary works, dramatic works, musical works and artistic works. In addition to the traditional forms of works, copyright now also extends to performers’ performances, sound recordings and broadcast signals. In Canada, copyright law is statutory and is part of the jurisdiction of the federal government. While the Copyright Act itself sets out the basic rules, the courts are often called on to interpret the meaning of the Act. Copyright protection in a work or other subject matter has a limited duration, and at the end of the term of protection, the work or other subject matter becomes a part of the public domain. The general rule in Canada is that copyright in a work lasts 50 years after the death of the author (Canadian Copyright Act, sec. 6; Murray and Trosow, 2007: 49-51).

Rights in works may be characterized as either economic rights or moral rights. Economic rights are transferable exclusive rights described in section 3 of the Act, and include the reproduction right, the public performance right, the first publication right; translation, and adaptation rights; the right to communicate the work to the public by telecommunication, exhibition rights for artistic works, rental rights for computer programs and musical works, and the right to authorize any of the preceding rights (Canadian Copyright Act, section 3; Murray and Trosow, 2007: 53-63).
These rights are sole and exclusive, meaning the owner may exclude others from doing any acts that implicate the particular right (e.g. making a photocopy in the case of the reproduction right or uploading the work in the case of the communication right). Each of these rights is severable from the others and may be individually transferred. The owner ‘may assign the right, either wholly or partially, and either generally or subject to limitations relating to territory, medium or sector of the market or other limitations relating to the scope of the assignment, and either for the whole term of the copyright or for any other part thereof’ (Canadian Copyright Act, section 13(4); Murray and Trosow, 2007: 70-71).

In addition to rights in works, copyright also subsists in performers’ performances, sound recordings and broadcast signals, often referred to as non-traditional subject matter. A performer has a separate interest in their performance, the maker of a sound recording has a separate interest in the sound recording, and a broadcaster has a separate interest in the communication signals they broadcast. These multiple interests can become complex, where, for example, a performer performs a work which is fixed into a sound recording and then broadcast. Even if the work itself is in the public domain there are distinct copyrights in the performer’s performance of the work, its fixation in a sound recording and a broadcast signal that is transmitted to the public.

*Moral rights in a work*

In addition to the owner’s transferable economic rights, the author also holds moral rights in a work, which include the rights to integrity of the work, the right to be associated with the work by name or by pseudonym, and the right to remain anonymous. (Canadian Copyright Act, section 14.1(1)). Moral rights are considered an extension of the persona of the author, and unlike economic rights, they cannot be assigned to another person or entity. However, in Canada they can be waived (ibid, section 14.1(2); Murray and Trosow, 2007: 63-65; Rajan, 2010: 492-493).

The application of moral rights in Canada is best illustrated by the case brought by the visual artist Michael Snow against the Eaton Centre in Toronto. Snow was commissioned to create a set of 60 sculptured geese in flight. While the ownership of the pieces as well as the economic rights in the copyright were transferred to the Centre, there was no waiver of moral rights. When the management of the centre put red ribbons on the geese as part of a holiday promotion, Snow objected on the grounds that his moral rights, which he had obtained, had been violated. Accepting that the modification was prejudicial to the honour and reputation of the artist, the court ordered the ribbons removed (Snow v. The Eaton Centre Ltd, 1982; Rajan, 2010: 493).

The protection and extension of moral rights is an issue that unifies intellectual labour groups. While the provisions in Bill C-32 extending moral rights to performers (see Rajan, 2010) are not controversial, there is broad agreement within the labour community that they do not go far enough. It is not clear why creator groups have chosen not to make this a more visible issue.

The Creators’ Copyright Coalition (CCC) platform sought to strengthen moral rights by making them non-waivable as well as unassignable (Creators’ Copyright Coalition,
2008: 4). Along the same lines, CAUT argued that the Act be amended to make moral rights non-waivable or to at least impose further limitations and conditions on such waivers (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2008: 7). The Canadian Federation of Students also argued for limitations on waivers of moral rights in order to protect students who often enter into contracts to write reports (Canadian Federation of Students, 2008: 4).

**Allocating the initial ownership of the copyright**

The threshold copyright issue that confronts all intellectual workers is the question of initial ownership. The general rule is that the creator is the first owner of the copyright. However, there is a significant exception to this general rule that results in the initial ownership falling to the employer in many cases:

Where the author of a work was in the employment of some other person under a contract of service or apprenticeship and the work was made in the course of his employment by that person, the person by whom the author was employed shall, in the absence of any agreement to the contrary, be the first owner of the copyright... (Canadian Copyright Act, section 13(3))

In the U.S., the author is generally the first copyright owner (U.S. Copyright Act, section 201(a)), but this is subject to a similar employer-friendly exception where the work for hire is owned by the employer or person for whom it was prepared, absent an agreement to the contrary (id, section 201(b)).

It should be noted that ‘work for hire’ is further defined in section 101 of the U.S. Act and in the case of works that are specially ordered or commissioned; its scope is limited to defined categories of works. In other words, the exception favouring the employer is actually broader in Canada where all works done under contracts of service are owned by the employer. These Canadian and American provisions are ‘default rules’, that is, they can be altered by contractual agreement which typically favours parties with superior bargaining power.

The work for hire doctrine thereby ‘intervenes into the cultural workplace and divides authors from non-authors, primarily on the basis of the employment relationship and secondarily on the basis of the kind of intellectual property that is being produced’ (Stahl, 2009: 55). In addition to claiming ownership of the initial economic rights in a work, employers commonly demand waivers of whatever moral rights the creator would otherwise retain, even if they do not own the economic rights.

The end result is that intellectual workers often become alienated from the fruits of their labour with respect to the transferable economic rights. And with respect to the moral rights in Canada, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) claims that ‘[e]mployers often apply economic coercion in order to force workers to waive their moral rights’ (Canadian Labour Congress, 2009: 2). An example of this sort of coercion arose in 2007 when Canadian broadcaster, cablecaster and newspaper publisher CanWest presented a new contract to freelance writers at the Ottawa Citizen and other CanWest papers demanding they relinquish their moral as well as economic rights in their writings (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2008a; Trosow, 2008).
At least with respect to the allocation of ownership issues arising out of the employment relationship, there is common ground among intellectual workers in all of the education, media, and cultural sectors. They agree that whatever rights flow from copyright in works and performances, they should primarily benefit the creator, not the employer or other contracting parties. This unity begins to dissolve, though, once we discuss the scope of those rights and how broadly they are enforced.

**Infringement, fair dealing and collective licensing**

‘It is an infringement of copyright for any person to do, without the consent of the owner of the copyright, anything that only the owner of the copyright has the right to do under the Act’ (Copyright Act, section 27(1)). So in the case of a work, if anyone does any of the acts listed in section 3 of the Act (e.g., reproduce, publicly perform, translate, etc.) without the consent of the owner, there is a technical infringement. However additional analysis is necessary in order to determine whether or not a particular act of infringement will result in liability because of fair dealing and other limitations and exceptions.

‘Fair dealing for the purpose of research or private study does not infringe copyright’. (Copyright Act, Section 29). Section 29.1 similarly provides that fair dealing for the purposes of criticism or review does not infringe copyright if attribution is provided, as does section 29.2 for the purposes of news reporting.

CAUT characterizes fair dealing in broad terms as an important users’ right:

Fair Dealing is the right, within limits, to reproduce a substantial amount of a copyrighted work without permission from, or payment to, the copyright owner. Its purpose is to facilitate creativity and free expression by ensuring reasonable access to existing knowledge while at the same time protecting the interests of copyright owners. (CAUT 2008: 1)

If the use can be characterized as being for one of the listed purposes (for example, research, private study, criticism, review or news reporting) then the particular facts are analyzed under the fair dealing criteria to determine if the dealing was, in fact, fair. \(^2\)

The unanimous decision of the Supreme Court of Canada in CCH v. Law Society of Upper Canada in 2004 was a significant watershed in Canadian copyright law because it recognized fair dealing as a substantive user’s right that should not be interpreted restrictively. However, the full implementation of the decision has been resisted (see Craig, 2005; Murray and Trosow, 2007: 74-85; Nair, 2010).

While the opposition to expanding fair dealing (indeed, even to just applying the principles of the CCH decision to current practices) has been overt from Access Copyright and other industry interests, fair dealing has also been covertly weakened by

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2 While the Copyright Act is silent on the fairness criteria, the Supreme Court adopted six factors in the CCH v Law Society of Upper Canada (2004) case: (1) the purpose of the dealing; (2) the character of the dealing; (3) the amount of the dealing; (4) alternatives to the dealing; (5) the nature of the work; and (6) the effect of the dealing on the work (CCH: para 53). It is important to emphasize that just because the use qualifies as one of the enumerated purposes, that is no guarantee that the dealing will be considered fair under the factual analysis using the six criteria.
educational administrators through overly-conservative, risk-averse policies that avoid confronting the issue (Trosow, 2010; Nair, 2010).

While the fight against fair dealing in Canada has been largely driven by content industry trade associations, licensing collectives, and their lawyers/lobbyists, their efforts have been bolstered and significantly legitimated by creative labour groups. Licensing collectives have been central to the formation and maintenance of this bloc as they offer an organizational structure and corporate form that has the means to engage in sustained litigation and lobbying strategies. Access Copyright has been the most active in these efforts and its submission to the 2009 consultation stresses the negative effects of fair dealing on revenues flowing from collective licensing. They argue that broadening fair dealing would ‘undermine existing business models’, diminish compensation to copyright owners and ‘take money out of the Canadian creative community’ (Access Copyright, 2009: para. 3-B4). Their approach to fair dealing and other exceptions is that they should not interfere with existing or emerging business models. They call for the ‘elimination of those exceptions currently in Canada’s Copyright Act which are today better served through licensing arrangements’ (ibid: para. 3C). Since Bill C-32 was tabled, Access Copyright’s main emphasis has been on working to defeat the proposed addition of ‘education’ as a new fair dealing category, which it claims will ‘undermine the ability of creators and publishers to get paid for the use of their works’ (Access Copyright, 2010). Some of the creator groups have followed Access Copyright’s lead on this issue even though their members individually benefit from fair dealing insofar as they must utilize the works of others as part of their production processes.

Technological protection measures and the anti-circumvention rules

The other significant wedge issue that separates the groups discussed in the next section is the implementation of the anti-circumvention rules modelled on the DMCA in the U.S. The government’s previous Bill C-61 and the current Bill C-32 prohibit not only acts of circumvention of technological protection measures, but also the distribution or provision of devices or services which could aid in such circumvention. The negative effect of these rules on innovation and research has been noted in the United States (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2010; Samuelson, 1999) and these provisions have proven to be the most controversial parts of Bill C-61 and now C-32. The main point of contention is whether the anti-circumvention rules and device prohibitions will override the legitimate rights of users of copyrighted materials. In neither Bills C-61 nor C-32 is the prohibition on acts of circumvention limited to actions that would otherwise be infringing. In other words, even if the ultimate use does not constitute actionable infringement, the circumvention of TPMs to accomplish that otherwise legitimate purpose is still prohibited, as would be the provision of services or devices to aid in such activities. For example, the distribution of code that helps consumers disable country codes in a device, to enable the usage of lawfully purchased works, would violate these device prohibitions (see Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2010 and Samuelson, 1999 for additional examples).

The alignment on this issue is similar to fair dealing, pitting educational and consumer interests against the content industries and licensing collectives. Retailers, Internet
service providers, broadcasters, and electronic equipment manufacturers have also expressed opposition to these anti-circumvention measures, arguing that Canadians must not be prohibited from engaging in non-infringing activities. They also pointed to the risk of harm to emerging Canadian industries if the measures are not properly limited (Business Coalition for Balanced Copyright, 2008: 1).  

The justification for enacting the digital locks provisions is largely based on the 1996 WIPO Internet Treaties, which Canada has signed but not implemented through domestic legislation. The Writers Guild, which represents writers for screen, radio and Internet in Canada, has stated that ‘Canadian copyright law must be brought up to international standards. Canada must live up to its international obligations. The Canadian government must immediately ratify the WIPO Treaty’ (Writers Guild of Canada, 2009: 194).

Labour’s competing copyright agendas

As suggested above, the copyright policy advocacy work of Canadian labour groups reflects significant divisions between academic staff on the one hand and other artistic, musical and literary creators on the other. While there are some issues in which there are no direct conflicts, and agreement even exists on certain issues, agendas have frequently clashed. An underlying question is whether this clash is inevitable, or whether it can be mediated. This section identifies a number of groups in English speaking Canada that represent different segments of intellectual and creative labour in Canada and briefly describes their recent copyright stances.

Alliance of Canadian Cinema Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA)

ACTRA claims a membership of 21,000 self-employed performers working in film, TV, radio, digital media, corporate videos and commercials (ACTRA, 2010). They are certified under the Status of the Artist Act to negotiate collective agreements in this sector. ACTRA also engages in political advocacy on behalf of its members on a number of policy issues including copyright. At the 2009 Toronto Roundtable (which was part of the government’s consultation process that resulted in Bill C-32) their Executive Director said:

> With respect to protecting the integrity of performers’ own performances, which are known as moral rights, every performer, whether an international star or just starting out, needs moral rights to ensure that their performances are not modified or distorted without their consent. Without moral rights, we risk not only our international reputation with our trading partners, but also we may do irreparable harm to our arts and culture industries. (Waddell, 2009)

While ACTRA signed the 2008 Creators Copyright Coalition platform, they were not among the signers of the joint submission to the 2009 consultation (Sookman and

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3 The Coalition includes the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, Canadian Association of Internet Providers, Canadian Cable Systems Alliance, Canadian Wireless and Telecommunications Association, Computer and Communications Industry Association, Retail Council of Canada, Google, Third Brigade, Tucows, Yahoo! Canada, Cogeco Cable, EastLink, MTS Allstream, Rogers Communications, SaskTel and TELUS.
They were also instrumental in crafting the important Canadian Labour Congress (2009) document (see below) and their recent statements seem to downplay their opposition to fair dealing and their support for digital locks. As they represent the interests of performers, and therefore have less of a concern with the reproduction of works, ACTRA is not affiliated with Access Copyright.

**American Federation of Musicians – Canadian office**

The Canadian branch of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) claims 1,700 members and has been instrumental in lobbying for the inclusion of performers’ rights in the Copyright Act and for the passage of the Status of the Artist Act (American Federation of Musicians – Canada, 2009), under which they are a certified representative.

AFM’s consultation submission strongly opposed broadening fair dealing and they are also in favor of enacting strong versions of the TPM measures. While copyright owners are under varying contractual obligations to share revenues with its members, it is not clear why an association presumably representing the interests of performers places so much emphasis on copyright owner’s rights. Strong TPMs and weak fair dealing do not advance the position of performers struggling to make a living in an industry that has already marginalized the importance of live performances.

**Canadian Artists’ Representation / le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC)**

CARFAC represents professional visual and media artists and has been certified to negotiate with national organizations on behalf of visual artists in Canada. They have advocated for a new resale right (droit de suite) that would give visual artists a percentage royalty from the subsequent resale of their work, and have expressed disappointment that this position was not included in the Bill. This proposal is an example of an issue where there is no conflict with users’ rights advocates, some of whom have even endorsed this concept of droit de suite (Murray and Trosow, 2007: 206).

But CARFAC has been opposed to expanding fair dealing and has been in favour of the digital locks provisions, and it signed both the 2008 CCC platform and the 2009 joint submission. While in a more recent statement made after Bill C-32 was tabled, they indicated support for adding ‘parody and satire’ to fair dealing, they oppose adding ‘education’ because:

> adding a fair dealing exception for education purposes could jeopardize small but important income sources for visual artists. The lack of clarity about what is considered “fair” means that artists may need to go to court to determine what their rights are – something that many can not afford. (CARFAC, 2010)

While CARFAC continues to oppose the expansion of fair dealing for educational purposes, their overall approach seems geared towards protecting their members from large rights holders as much as from end users:

> While the public debate about copyright has centred on the fight between heavy handed corporate rights holders and users, copyright was originally designed to encourage creativity by providing a
source of income for creators. As such, CARFAC . . . encourage[s] their members not to sign their rights away to galleries or corporations. (CARFAC, 2010)

The Writers’ Groups

Various groups represent different segments of the writers’ community in Canada including The Professional Writers Association of Canada (PWAC), The Writers Guild and The Writers’ Union of Canada (TWUC). The positions of all three groups are closely aligned with Access Copyright, and they have all signed both the 2008 Creators’ Copyright Coalition platform and the joint submission to the 2009 consultation.

PWAC counts approximately 600 freelance writers as its members and is the certified representative for professional freelance writers who are authors of works in a language other than French. PWAC has also been a strong advocate for the rights of freelancers with respect to ownership and waiver issues in the media industry.

The Writers Guild is certified to represent screenwriters of independent English language film, television, radio and multimedia productions in Canada, and they administer several collective agreements on behalf of their 2,000 members. In their 2009 consultation submission, they stressed the need to expand collective licensing.

It also seems unfair to us that the current Private Copying Levy applies to only sound recordings and to limited forms of storage media. There is no legal principle that restricts private copying to only sound recording. . . The WGC proposes that the Copyright Act be amended to allow common consumer uses of copyright works and in return use the current Private Copying levy as a model for a more expanded collective licensing scheme. (The Writers Guild of Canada, 2009: 189)

TWUC has, in its own words ‘opposed the expansion of fair dealing consistently and vociferously’ (Paris, 2010), and they especially do not want it to be used where a license is available:

The government should not expand it further. Nor should fair dealing be used to avoid the effort and cost of licensing copyright works. Both the educational sector and documentary producers have argued that it is too difficult to license excerpts from copyright works and therefore fair dealing should be expanded. The WGC has great difficulty with an argument for changing law that is based on ‘ease of use.’ Laws should be amended because it would be just and fair to do so – not to make life easier for one group of people (users) at the expense of another (creators). (The Writers Guild of Canada, 2009: 192)

The Writers’ Union of Canada (TWUC) claims a membership of over 1,800 members, who must have published at least one book with a trade or university press or the equivalent in another medium. They have provided one of the strongest responses in opposition to the educational fair dealing provisions of Bill C-32. Stating that they ‘are outraged by the inclusion of a new provision for educational uses in Bill C-32’ the Writers Union claims ‘[t]his new “fair dealing” for the purpose of education is a wholesale expropriation of writers’ rights and opens the door for the education sector to copy freely from books and other copyright material without paying writers’ (The Writer’s Union of Canada, 2010). In addition to vowing to lobby against the provision, they add that ‘if we are unsuccessful, we will consider litigation on behalf of writers for the loss of rights and income resulting from this serious removal of copyright protection’ (ibid).
In addition to their advocacy on copyright issues, TWUC has been an outspoken opponent of censorship and a strong proponent of extending Status of the Artist legislation, which would effectively broaden the bargaining rights not only for its own members, but for intellectual and creative labour across the board. While TWUC has been certified under the federal Status of the Artists Act, this certification does not extend to negotiating with most book publishers who are outside of the scope of the federal act. This is because they are considered provincial producers. Consequently, TWUC has been working towards stronger Provincial Acts especially in Ontario where there is a large base of publishers (The Writer’s Union of Canada, 2010).

**Songwriters Association of Canada and the Canadian Music Creators Coalition**

The Songwriters Association of Canada’s (SAC) main advocacy focus has been to seek a new right to remuneration for Canadian songwriters. SAC President Eddie Schwartz recently stated:

[SAC] has proposed that Bill C-32 be amended to legalize music file-sharing in conjunction with a remuneration system for creators and rights-holders. Consumers who wish to file-share would be asked to pay a reasonable monthly licence fee. The revenue received could be distributed to performers, songwriters, and rights-holders on a transparent, pro-rata basis… [this proposal] would not only go a long way toward eliminating the need for ‘locks and lawsuits’, but would create a new business model that would be fair to consumers and creators alike. (Schwartz, 2010)

While this proposal is opposed by the music industry (Canadian Recording Industry Association, 2010; Sookman, 2008), other pro-users’ rights groups have not opposed it, and it represents a potential avenue of compromise that is less objectionable than the strict digital locks provisions. But notwithstanding SAC’s claim that they are not pushing for the digital locks provisions, they did sign on to the 2009 joint consultation submission, which stressed the adoption of strong digital locks provisions and vehemently opposed the open-ended fair dealing provision that was being sought by the educational sector and others. However, given SAC’s current emphasis on their equitable remuneration proposal, these other positions seem secondary at best:

Regarding WIPO implementation, we are not opposed to the legal protection of Technical Protection Measures (TPM) or "digital locks", however we believe the obvious economic benefits of our model make such protection measures obsolete. Given the consumer aversion to TPM’s, we believe their use will inhibit the success of recordings in which they are embedded, and they will simply fall out of use. (Songwriters Association of Canada, 2009: at item 11).

SAC’s proposal has been supported by the Canadian Music Creators Coalition (CMCC), a group of musicians that has also been asserting more independence from the record labels, whose spokesman, Andrew Cash, has stated:

This is the first progressive proposal we’ve seen in Canada to address file-sharing… It’s telling that creators, the people who actually make the music being shared, are the people showing leadership and pushing for a made-in-Canada approach to file-sharing. We can only hope that the Canadian government will follow the Songwriters’ lead and begin exploring alternatives to the failed ‘locks, lawsuits and lobbying’ strategy of the major labels’. (Canadian Music Creators Coalition, 2007)

Taking a stronger position against the digital locks provisions, than against SAC, the CMCC explicitly opposed Bill C-61:
Rather than building a made-in-Canada proposal to help musicians get paid, the government has chosen to import American-style legislation that says the solution to the music industry’s problems is suing our fans . . . Suing fans won’t make it 1992 again. It’s a new world for the music business and this is an old approach. (CMCC, 2008)

More recently, they have opposed the digital locks provisions in Bill C-32:

CMCC is concerned that the interests and voice of multinational corporations are being allowed to trump even those of the Canadian government. For example, the bill purports to allow format and time shifting. However, by putting [digital rights management] on their media, corporations are able to trump this approach and criminalize the actions of users. (CMCC, 2010)

**Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT)**

CAUT has played an important role in the development of copyright policy within the intellectual and, by association, the creative labour movement. Within the post-secondary education sector, the CAUT has been the primary advocate of copyright reform from a users’ rights perspective. CAUT has been an advocate of broader users’ rights, including the expansion of fair dealing and opposition to the digital locks positions. In 2003 CAUT stated that it:

…has consistently articulated a plea for balance. Unfortunately, the voices for balance from organizations such as CAUT have too often been drowned out by those arguing for ever greater owner rights. The mostly non-government and non-profit groups defending the public interest in access have not been a match for the private, commercial voices arguing their own economic cause. (CAUT, 2003: 2)

For many years, CAUT’s positions on copyright policy matters were virtually indistinguishable from the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), which represents university administrations. Indeed, throughout the 1990’s, the educational and library associations worked through an umbrella of a broader coalition. During the 2001 copyright consultations, CAUT continued to support special exemptions that would only be available to specified institutions. These included the request for a special exemption for the use of publicly available Internet materials on the premises of educational institutions. As late as 2003, CAUT concurred with the AUCC’s proposal for this special Internet exemption.

But after the landmark 2004 Supreme Court decision in CCH v Law Society of Upper Canada, which gave fair dealing a much broader interpretation than had previously been the case, CAUT moved away from this position in favour of a broader implementation of fair dealing. By 2007, they formally disassociated themselves from seeking further special institution-based exemptions because they felt the new special exceptions unnecessary and because fair dealing was a better way to achieve the goal of balance (CAUT, 2007).

The special educational amendment, however, is still supported by AUCC, CMEC, the Canadian School Boards Association, the Canadian Teachers’ Federation and the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CMEC, 2008: 2), and it has become an increasingly controversial point of contention within the educational and library sector. In its 2009 consultation submission, CAUT provided further reasoning for why they had
rejected the approach of seeking special exemptions in favour of working towards a broader application of fair dealing:

This open-ended approach would serve the interests of educators, researchers, librarians, students and other life-long learners not currently affiliated with an institution, and would avoid a situation where the educational sector is seeking exemptions not available to the general public. (CAUT, 2009: 5)

While the purpose of this paper is not to detail specific differences within the educational sector (on which see Trosow, 2010), this issue is relevant to our broader concern with the copyright positions of labour groups as it is important to evaluate the extent to which they have taken stands that are independent from, or even in conflict with, those of their employers. Labour organizations often adopt the positions of their employers or industry trade group with respect to copyright issues. In the primary educational K-12 sector, the Canadian Teachers Federation continues to support the special educational Internet exemption (Canadian Teachers Federation, 2008; Donnelley, 2009), placing it at odds with CAUT and in alignment with their employers on this issue.

**Canadian Labour Congress: Seeking a common position**

What is at stake for digital labour, and is it even possible to think of digital labour as a coherent force when it comes to copyright reform? Despite all of the differences that have been outlined in this paper, the CLC thinks this remains a possibility. Their Policy Statement on Copyright and Net Neutrality (2009) is an example of how labour groups with diverging positions can work towards a cooperative solution on copyright issues. The Congress is an umbrella organization for affiliated unions claiming over three million affiliated workers (Canadian Labour Congress, 2010).

In February 2009, the CLC was set to consider a resolution that would have reversed their previously balanced approach to copyright (Geist, 2009). In response to concerns raised by members, a working group was established to craft a broader copyright policy for the organization. While the process began with major differences on the table, in the end a compromise document was prepared which stressed areas of common ground. Michael Geist noted that ‘the results much better reflect the diversity of interests within Canada’s largest labour organization. In fact, the policy combines both copyright and net neutrality, adopting a broader approach to digital policy’ (Geist, 2009a). In the long run, the efforts that went into crafting this document may be more significant than the text of the document itself, as they may foreshadow new efforts on the part of labour groups to begin a discussion on how to ameliorate some of the existing differences in copyright policy, all the while stressing the areas of agreements that already exist.

**Breaking with management’s copyright policy and forging our own**

Many of the copyright policy positions taken by the artists’, musicians’ and writers’ groups discussed here reflect and reinforce the stances taken by their employers, industry groups and the licensing collectives. What accounts for this paradoxical
alignment, given some of the contradictions inherent in the labour processes in these sectors? For example, why has the struggle to eliminate or at least scale back the scope of moral rights waivers not taken on more prominence, while at the same time, many of the independent creator groups seem more concerned in joining their employers in the battle against fair dealing? A parallel alignment between labour and management groups had traditionally been present in the educational and library sector, although in recent years CAUT has broken from some of the positions taken by AUCC.

In stressing their proposal for equitable remuneration for music file sharing, the Canadian Association of Songwriters is taking a similar step towards independence from the music industry, and the CMCC has done so even more directly. ACTRA is similarly positioned to become more of an independent voice. The AFM and the writers’ groups, however seem less likely to break away from their respective industry groups on wedge issues such as fair dealing and TPMs. The writers’ groups in particular are closely aligned with Access Copyright, whose influence in the overall constellation of copyright policy cannot be overestimated.

How best to grapple with the copyright paradox? First and foremost, we need to show how contradictions in the labour process have an underlying unity – even when they present themselves in different manners in different sectors. Such a unity could be based on the similar positions that intellectual labour finds itself holding with respect to the ultimate ownership and control of the fruits of creative labour processes.

Building an effective counterpart to the forces of digital enclosure, one that can function independently from industry employers, their trade associations and licensing collectives, is a crucial task for the intellectual and creative labour movements. While considerable work still needs to be done, some strong and laudable efforts have already been made to build bridges between different labour groups. Despite differences that sometimes appear irreconcilable (especially, perhaps, when legislation is on the table), striving for a higher degree of solidarity remains imperative if digital workers, both intellectual and creative, are to continue to possess any sensible degree of affiliation with the fruits of their labour, and if a thriving digital commons is to emerge any time soon. Those organizations who have, to date, shown some understanding of the gains that a greater solidarity on copyright may well muster, ought to be encouraged to continue thinking and acting along collaborative lines. Such admirable work was done under the auspices of the CLC. It must be taken up again and emulated in other venues both in Canada and abroad.

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Primitive accumulation, the social common, and the contractual lockdown of recording artists at the threshold of digitalization

Matt Stahl

abstract

This article examines the apparent paradox of the persistence of long-term employment contracts for cultural industry ‘talent’ in the context of broader trends toward short-term, flexible employment. While aspirants are numberless, bankable talent is in short supply. Long-term talent contracts appear to embody a durable, perhaps inherent, axiom in employment: labour shortage favours employees. The article approaches this axiom through the lens of recent reconsiderations of the concept of ‘primitive accumulation’. In the case of employment, this concept highlights employers’ impetus to transcend legal and customary barriers to and limits on their capacity to capture and compel labour. The article supports this argument through the analysis of contests between Los Angeles-based recording artists and record companies over the California and federal laws that govern their political-economic relationships. These struggles reveal a pattern of attempts by record companies to overcome or change laws that limit their power in the employment relation. The article suggests that as contractual norms change under digitalization, familiar political dynamics continue to characterize the relationships between recording artists and the companies that depend on their labor.

[W]hen a statesman looks coolly on, with his arms across, or takes it into his head, that it is not his business to interpose, the prices of the dexterous workman will rise.’ (James Steuart, 1767, quoted in Perelman, 2000: 155)

Introduction

Binding, long-term employment contracts for creative labour (or ‘talent’, in industry jargon) are important to the recording industry and have featured in legislative and courtroom battles between recording artists and record companies for decades. Today, points of contractual friction are shifting as artists and companies explore new contracting conventions in response to challenges stemming from digitalization and the unauthorized distribution of music via the Internet. Where record companies and recording artists often argued before lawmakers and judges over the allowable duration of their contracts, they are increasingly concerned with negotiating the contract’s coverage of formerly off-limits recording artist activities such as touring and merchandising. Drawing mainly on legislative and judicial documents and trade journal reportage, this article examines ongoing changes in contracting conventions. It traces
late 20th century contests over laws that governed recording contracts, and considers the ‘360 deal’, one of the main contractual innovations emerging in response to the recent destabilisation of the recording industry. The article links the political-economic logics of contracting under the old and emergent regimes through the lens of ‘primitive accumulation’, a Marxian concept that highlights capitalists’ ongoing drive to overcome legal and/or traditional limits to the extension of the capital relation (De Angelis, 2004, 2001; Bonefeld, 2001; Midnight Notes Collective, 1990; Perelman, 2000). It argues that even in the contemporary context of labour’s increasing casualisation, the impetus of cultural capitalists toward contractual capture and control of valuable talent exemplifies the usefulness of the ‘primitive accumulation’ perspective in the analysis of work and employment.

Option contracts, rules, and the ‘360 deal’

Unsure of new artists’ potential value, record companies typically require new artists to sign open-ended ‘option’ contracts. Option contracts give companies the exclusive right periodically to renew or end the employment; if an artist under contract becomes (or shows promise to become) profitable, the company will typically exercise its option(s) to continue the relationship, if not, they can ‘drop’ the artist. Option contracts essentially guarantee employer control of the artist’s creative labour and products on an exclusive and assignable basis for as long as the employer chooses to exercise it; artists under such contracts face severe penalties for breach. The benefit to employers of this kind of control is a substantial legal claim on the forms of income that can be generated from the marketing of the artist’s work and likeness which, conversely, obligates the company to very little. Moreover, most new artists sign their first contracts from positions of bargaining weakness, as relative unknowns. While artists may be able to renegotiate for better terms as they become more successful, these contracts prevent them from offering their talents to other bidders on an open market, thus keeping their costs to their initial employer artificially low.1

Despite the option contract’s general auspiciousness for employers, companies making use of it sometimes encounter obstacles or limits to the full exploitation of the contract’s advantages. Among the impediments to the maximisation of the option contract are labour and bankruptcy law, which preserve some rights for artists in their status as employees by setting limits on what can be included in the contract. Employers of valuable talent have long chafed against the legal obstacles and limits posed by these forms of law; their legislative activities evince a pattern of attempts to change law in order to reduce or remove these impediments.

As a result largely of digitalization and file-sharing, however, recording artist contracting is taking place in a business environment that is extremely different from the one in which these longstanding conventions developed. In particular, record sales have begun to lose their pride of economic place as the ‘hole in the universe’ rent by

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1 The logic of the long-term option contract is so favourable to entertainment-industrial stability, in fact, that some contemporary Hollywood observers are suggesting the film industry ought to revisit some of the legal labour practices of the system that were tossed out along with the system’s many illegal aspects (Moore, 2009).
file-sharing threatens record industry revenues (Pareles, 2010: AR1). One way around this problem has been the development of the ‘360 (degree) deal’, so named because it enables the company to ‘participate’ in virtually all artist activities and revenue streams, including such formerly off-limits areas as merchandise and touring (Leyshon et al., 2005). With the 360 deal comes a shift of attention and emphasis from the public/legislative to the private/contractual arena. The RIAA’s member companies are developing a new contractual form in which terms that are governed by law (such as duration) concede priority to terms that spell out the number and kinds of activities that the contract covers. However, not all has changed: a ‘primitive accumulation’ analysis highlights crucial continuities between the fading and emerging regimes. Under the 360 deal, this analysis suggests, ‘unconscionable’ conditions of indentured or even involuntary servitude that some analysts find codified in the recording contract (Anorga, 2002; Gardner, 2006; Brereton, 2009), ‘in which the victim is forced to work...by use or threat of coercion through law or legal process’ (United States v. Kozminski, 1988), appear to become more rather than less of an issue in the record industry.

**Primitive accumulation**

In both the royalty-driven, individual unit sales era and the internet-destabilised, still-working-on-a-stable-business-model era, record companies use recording contracts to secure control over certain of the recording artists’ activities. They do this by requiring that artists (voluntarily) make themselves contractually vulnerable – legally unable to say ‘no’ without penalty – to certain kinds of demands. Many of the earlier era’s demands had to do with how long a successful artist could be held to a relatively narrow contract; many such demands were limited by forms of law that endowed employees with some countervailing powers and rights. Today’s demands increasingly concern the breadth of the range of artist activities in which a company may ‘participate’ (by claiming some portion of revenue related to given activities and/or some rights of decision-making power over them); legal limits have become less important in determining which activities can be contracted for. In both cases the dynamic at issue is the extension of employer power, whether across greater lengths of time or over a wider range of activities. In each case, this analysis argues, extension requires the transcendence of former (legal or customary) limitations or obstacles to increased employer power, of which the obvious corollary is increased employee vulnerability.

Employer efforts to increase employer power and worker vulnerability are not new; the efforts of record companies under both regimes have an illuminating analogue in a phenomenon first called ‘primitive accumulation’ by Marx’ translators, and recently elaborated in Marxist political theory and economic history. For Marx, capital is not a

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2 File sharing is far from the only culprit in the music industry’s crisis of profitability (Leyshon et al., 2005; Peitz and Waelsroech, 2004).

3 The question of substantive vs. formal voluntariness is beyond the scope of this paper. For an illuminating treatment see Macpherson (1973).

4 Of course, recording contracts could not legally require artists to do anything illegal; such a contract would be invalid.
thing (e.g., Adam Smith’s ‘stock’) but a relation: the separation of people from direct access to the means of subsistence and production. This separation renders some people – those who have not already accumulated or inherited wealth – dependent on markets in which they must sell their labour and, with their money wages, purchase what they need to survive. Primitive accumulation has conventionally been understood to describe a historical period when nascent or proto capitalists advanced the preconditions for capitalist development through the enclosure of common lands. Enclosures curtailed people’s rights and access, for example, to land on which they could grow food for themselves, increasing the pressure on them to buy rather than grow what they needed, and to undertake paid work to earn the necessary wages.

Recent reinterpretations of Marx’ writing, however, suggests the concept plays a much more central and ongoing role in economic life. Massimo De Angelis argues for a broadening of primitive accumulation to include all efforts by capital – personified by its owners and their agents – to transcend various limits and barriers to the extension of capital’s relation of separation. As a political-theoretical category, De Angelis writes, primitive accumulation ‘define[s] a strategic terrain among social forces’ not locked in the past (2001: 68). The logic of primitive accumulation is starkly visible, for example, in present-day efforts to privatise public utilities such as water and water services. Public utilities prioritise people’s rights and access to necessary means of life, demarcating areas of life protected from (excessive) commodification; their privatisation represents capital’s transcendence of prior limits on the penetration of markets into hitherto protected (non- or less-marketised) areas of life.

A ‘social common’

The privatisation of water is an easily legible example because it so clearly rehearses the spectacular enclosures of the early period at the same time as it exemplifies the continuous nature of primitive accumulation in the modern world. Axiomatically speaking, in a fully marketised society (an impossibility in all but the most extreme contractarian fulminations), you have no right to anything you have not purchased. The maximal proliferation of markets in drinking water depends on the elimination of non-market or traditional or human rights to water. Without a right to clean water, thirsty people are at the mercy of those who hold title. Alongside plainly visible enclosable commons like clean water is a less legible but equally important ‘social common’ which ‘sets a limit to the extension, the scale’ of the capital relation in everyday life (De Angelis, 2001: 18). According to De Angelis, ‘socio-economic rights and entitlements’ are bulwarks (often resulting from ‘past battles’) that protect people’s standard of life, as do rights to water their ability to live. ‘State institutions’, he writes, ‘have developed and attempted to accommodate many of these rights and entitlements with the priorities of a capitalist system. The entitlements and rights guaranteed by the post-war welfare state for example, can be understood as the institutionalisation in particular forms of social commons’ (De Angelis, 2001: 19).5 ‘A classic example’, De Angelis writes, ‘is

5  De Angelis notes that this dynamic is captured in Polanyi’s account of the social-protective ‘double movement’:

[O]n one side, there is the historical movement of the market, a movement that has no inherent limits and that therefore threatens society’s very existence. On the other, there is society’s
the body of rights, provisions and entitlements universally guaranteed by the welfare state in spheres such as health, unemployment benefits, education, and pensions” (2004: 80). These serve as limits to the extension of the capital relation, or marketisation, because they underwrite people’s capacity to say “no” to degrees of domination and exploitation considered excessive by the social movements and policymakers responsible for them.

The rights and entitlements embedded in the forms of labour- and debtor-protective legislation attacked by the RIAA in the cases I recount below are not identical with those rights to resources and public wealth named by De Angelis above. I nominate them, however, as an intermediary form that ought to be considered as part of the social common because they share with those rights the practical function of limiting the power of employers to compel people in and to work. The barriers to market influence created by the “rights and entitlements” De Angelis names are not impermeable; these rights and entitlements can be more or less influenced by markets and yet still have incrementally egalitarian effects. In the U.S., for example, the quality of ‘public’ primary and secondary education your children can expect is determined to an enormous degree by the property taxes collected in your neighbourhood; market values of homes thus play a role in determining how much public money is directed to schools in different neighbourhoods (Barry, 2005: 67-68). No progressive would deny, however, that full marketisation of education would pose a disastrous advance from this partial market influence. However imperfectly, publicly-funded education mitigates the influence of markets on the distribution and quality of education. Similarly, labour-protective legislation attenuates the power of markets to set the terms of employment, without creating totally non-market social spaces.

The rules of contract duration, minimum compensation, and bankruptcy protection attacked by the RIAA help(ed) protect working people from being held under contract by a single employer, guaranteeing them the limited but real right periodically to take advantage of competition between employers for their services or to leave the employment altogether. These rules put limits on employers’ market power without rendering affected working people invulnerable to market power. In each case, where the record company-recording artist relationship met certain conditions, the rule could intervene and open an exit for the artist, even when the artist had voluntarily agreed to unfavorable terms. In each case, the RIAA sought to place obstacles in front of these exits, in order to make it easier to keep valuable artists under contract for as long as could be desirable. All three of these efforts are better understood in the context of the significant autonomy enjoyed by successful, late 20th century recording artists.

propensity to defend itself, and therefore to create institutions for its own protection. In Polanyi’s terms, the continuous element of Marx’s primitive accumulation could be identified as those social processes or sets of strategies aimed at dismantling those institutions that protect society from the market. (De Angelis, 2004: 69)
Recording artist autonomy

Part of the reason why record companies work so hard to establish control over the labour and output of recording artists is the unusually high degree of autonomy typically enjoyed by many recording artists. The extraordinary position of recording artists relative to other forms of talent in film, television, publishing and other popular media has at least two medium-specific explanations. First, and most significantly for the present discussion, recording artists’ unusual autonomy is rooted in their historically-developed ability to derive significant incomes from activities not covered by their recording contracts. This pattern emerged in an exemplary form among mid-20th century U.S. swing bands. As Jason Toynbee writes, these touring ensembles, like the rock’n’roll and rock groups that followed them, ‘were able to sell their services directly to several buyers’ – of live as well as recording studio performances – “and so avoid dependence on any single one” (Toynbee, 2003: 44). This self-sufficiency has shaped the terms of record deals for many popular music performers. It has become institutionalised and can limit record companies’ capacity to control the labour of their artists. (As I show below, this theme appears in record companies’ arguments for laws that would increase their leverage in contractual relationships with performers.) Second, the market value of a popular musician can rest to an unusual degree in the public’s perception of the artist as autonomous. This principle has long been understood to operate primarily in jazz, folk, blues, and rock cultures, where evidence of an act’s authenticity is important to fans’ monetizable investments (Frith, 1981; Keightley, 2001), although recent scholarship has shown that this principle is also important in other genre cultures (Leach, 2001; Stahl, 2002; Tregoning, 2004).

The combination of these factors positions many recording artists at what might be called a frontier of employee control and autonomy in market society. Recording contracts are contracts for employment, but these artist-workers’ autonomy seems to call that status into question, making them appear more like independent contractors. Employment presumes dependence, but recording artists are already quite independent. Employment law limits employees’ vulnerability to employer fiat; the unusual independence of recording artists is (or rather was – see section 4, below) further consolidated, supported and protected by such law. The recording artist’s significant degrees of independence often (but not always) translate into significant degrees of autonomy in their contractual employment, and are often perceived by their employing record company firms as a threat to the stability and profitability of their business. If the profitability of the recording industry depends in large part on the power of record companies to capture, elicit, and control the ‘recording services’ (and resulting ‘phonorecords’) named in recording contracts, then recording artists’ capacity to avoid, thwart, or mitigate record companies’ power of capture and control constitutes the

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6 Recording artists’ asserted ownership of copyright in their sound recordings may constitute an additional explanation of their autonomy. See Nimmer and Menell, 2001; Stahl, 2008.

7 The case of George Michael (Panayiotou v. Sony Music Entertainment (UK) Ltd., 1994) illustrates the nonidentity of independence and autonomy. When blockbuster artist Michael began to change musical directions, Sony, he charged, refused to promote a new album reflecting his emerging (autonomous) musical vision, believing that fans would not accept it. Michael lost a subsequent suit to be released from his contract (Soocher, 1999: 43-63).
degree to which (companies fear) artists can hold companies at ransom over various contractual issues’.

In the latter decades of the 20th century, in response to real and perceived threats to their power to capture and control recording artist labour, the major record companies (to whom many of the most successful artists were under contract) sought to set limits on the autonomy of their artists. Through the RIAA, the major record companies pursued, resisted, and sometimes obtained significant changes to law that could or would alter the bargaining ‘playing field’. Artists, with less success, have struggled against and also pursued legislation. The lion’s share of these changes has benefited record companies by expanding their power to command recording artists’ labour.

### Legislative contests

#### 1979-87: The ‘Olivia Newton-John problem’ and California’s ‘seven year’ rule

The late 20th century era of record label-recording artist legislative battles was initiated by the RIAA following the resolution of a 1979 court contest between the singer Olivia Newton-John and her record label, MCA Records. The singer had given notice of her intention to stop recording under their 1975 contract, and MCA, who had been reaping significant profits from the deal, sought to induce her to keep recording for them (or at least inhibit her from competing with them) by preventing her from recording for any other record company. Superficially, the decision in the case favoured MCA: the appellate court approved and enforced an injunction to prevent the artist working for any other record label for the two-year remainder of the term of her contract with MCA. However, when the dust settled it was clear that the interests of Olivia Newton-John (and of recording artists as a group) had been better served by the decision than those of MCA (and of the other major record labels). This discovery led to the RIAA’s successful effort to change California labour law to its advantage.

At both the lower and appellate levels, the Olivia Newton-John case involved the interpretation of a century-old California law that limited the duration of employment contracts to seven years: both courts held that no injunction could extend past that law’s seven year limit. This finding alerted artists to an interesting fact: the only penalty to which an artist in breach of contract could be subject was a period of recording studio idleness that would end on the seventh anniversary of the artist’s contract. For artists who could earn income by touring or appearing in films, for example, such idleness might not pose a compelling hardship. Moreover, this interpretation seemed to promise an immediate way out for artists under contracts that had already exceeded seven years.8 ‘The effect of the Newton-John decision upon the recording industry’, Robert Steinberg noted already in 1981, ‘has been tremendous’ (1981: 104). It demonstrated to the industry that a contract with a fixed duration weakens the employer’s bargaining

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position, and spurred executives, attorneys and lobbyists to create a way around this newly discovered hazard.9

In response, the RIAA set out to eliminate ‘seven year rule’ protection for recording artists. In 1985, acting explicitly on the association’s behalf, California state senator Ralph Dills (D-Montebello) introduced a bill to achieve that end. The bill foundered in various forms until, two years on, Dills finally introduced a version that appeared less coercive than earlier versions. Rather than extending the duration limit for all California workers for an additional number of years, this version specified that a person hired to produce ‘phonorecords’ could still leave the employment at the old seven year mark, but only if she had produced all the albums that could contractually have been required under the contract. If the departing artist had not fulfilled all possible album options set out in the contract she would be vulnerable for damages on ‘lost profits’ on those uncompleted albums. Thus, while the power of injunction expired at the seventh anniversary, the new law created a right for the company to demand damages of sufficient magnitude to keep the artist under contract. This version passed in 1987.

The arguments over the various versions of the bill are fascinating and I treat them in detail elsewhere (Stahl, 2010, forthcoming). Here, I want only to highlight some of the main themes in the RIAA’s 1985 arguments for the change. ‘[C]urrent law in California’, the association claimed, ‘has been used as a weapon by prominent, highly successful recording artists.’ By invoking the seven year rule, recording artists could ‘force their record company employer/financiers into renegotiating contracts under circumstances in which the record company is not even sure it will get the benefit of the new bargain.’ If the record companies did not submit, they argued, ‘the alternative to renegotiation is that the artist will sit out the balance of his contract term with impunity.’ The RIAA argued that the artist’s bargaining power, moreover, is unfairly enhanced ‘because he can and does earn substantial sums from ‘live’ entertainment tours and personal concert appearances’, reducing the artist’s dependence on the recording agreement for income. These ‘inequities’, they argued, would be corrected by Dills’ bill (Gang et al., 1985: 4). The bill passed, the ‘Olivia Newton-John problem’ (Passman, 2006: 101) was solved, and through their vulnerability to damages for records that could contractually be required (whether or not the options are ever exercised by the company), recording artists may be kept under contract for indefinite periods.

1992-3: Minimum compensation and negative injunctions

The seven year rule provides the employer with the remedy of an injunction against the employee within the seven year limit. The 1987 damages provisions, opponents to the carve-out argued, effectively extend the injunctive power beyond that limit.10 However,
in order to be able successfully to petition a California court for an injunction against a non-performing employee, the employer must pass a simple test. The employer must have guaranteed and paid compensation at or above a minimum dollar amount set by a 1919 law. If they have not done this, they cannot obtain an injunction, no matter the behavior of the artist. In 1992, recording artist advocates sought to update that figure to an amount reflecting seven decades’ worth of inflation. Their efforts, though partially successful, actually ended up weakening a central aspect of the law’s public policy.

Injunctions against employees were prohibited in California until 1919, when the Legislature sought to grant employers more power to induce employee performance and found a precedent in the 19th century case of a concert promoter stymied by a recalcitrant singing star (Lumley v. Wagner, 1852). However, in recognition of the extreme nature of injunction’s power of compulsion, the Legislature set a strict condition on their issuance: the worker had to have been guaranteed and paid no less than $6000 per year under the contract (California Civil Code, Section 3423). At the time, that sum – about five times the average annual wage for a working American – was thought to demonstrate both the extraordinary value of the performer to the employer and the good faith of the employer, thereby establishing the case for the injunction. The value of this sum has evaporated through inflation; the law has since been interpreted as an assignment of a ‘counterweight’ to the employer’s ability to (otherwise costlessly) restrain a performer from performing for any other employer (Lucas, 1985: 1073). In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, a handful of cases (including MCA v. Newton-John) interpreted the law. In cases involving the comedian Redd Foxx (1966) and the singer Teena Marie (1984), the performers were released from their contracts because their record companies had neither guaranteed nor paid the statutory (and paltry) minimum of $6000.

In 1992 California State Senator Henry Mello put forward a bill that would update the minimum compensation law in line with 70 years of inflation. Mello’s bill replaced the $6000 figure with $50,00011 and passed in both houses without a single ‘no’ vote. Almost immediately an alarmed RIAA contacted the legislature, arguing that the new minimum would have a ‘severe’, potentially ‘destructive’ effect on the industry (Lopez, 1993). Mello then convened a working group that came up with new legislation that was passed in 1993. The new legislation raised the 1919 figure to $9000 in the first year of the contract, $12,000 in the second, progressing to $45,000 in the seventh year. The reduction in the revised 1993 bill of 1992’s $50,000 minimum – particularly pronounced in the first years of a contract – was very well received by smaller firms. ‘This is the greatest thing for a small record company’, an independent music executive told Billboard, ‘because it protects us against being outbid’, as can happen once a small record company’s artists become successful and attractive to bigger firms (Fitzpatrick, 1993: 23).

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While five times the average annual wage of a working American in 1992 was $100,000, the rationale of the BHBA was that 1919’s $6000 were worth $47,000 in 1992, and that $50,000 would sufficiently increase the ‘counterweight’ against the power to enjoin an employee to restore the teeth to the 1919 law.
However, the new law contravened a public policy rationale expressed by the courts in the earlier cases. The law’s original rationale is protective, it denies employers access to an injunction unless the employee has been well paid up to the moment of disagreement. In the 1960s record companies began inserting a new kind of option clause in their contracts which gave them the option to make (or make up) the minimum payment in response to an artist’s announcement of his or her intention to stop performing under the contract. The Teena Marie court’s opinion oozes with disdain for this practice and finds that it violates the law. If this new form of option is found to be legal, that court wrote,

the company may wait until the last possible moment to exercise its option. Motown and Jobete filed suit against Teena Marie in August 1982 but waited until September 1982 to exercise the option clauses. The request for a preliminary injunction was filed two months later. Thus, the companies purchased an insurance policy worth a considerable sum [Motown’s profits on Teena Marie’s recordings were quite high] for a minimal premium just prior to the time they could be fairly certain a loss would occur. If the option clause [could be found to] meet[] the statutory requirement of minimum compensation, [then] the company can buy its insurance policy on the courthouse steps on its way to seek an injunction. (Motown Record Corporation v. Tina Marie Brockert, 1984)

‘Indeed’, the court continued, ‘the company may be able to buy its insurance policy after the “accident” has occurred; that is, after the artist has already signed and recorded with another company’ (Motown Record Corporation v. Tina Marie Brockert, 1984). The 1993 law, however, allows precisely this ‘courthouse steps’ insurance policy. As Billboard reported,

the new bill allows a company to retain an artist even if the company does not meet the minimum compensation rate – as long as it agrees to pay 10 times the difference of the original compensation. For example, if an artist is paid only $7,000 on a one-year contract, which is $2,000 below the minimum, the company may keep the artist by paying $20,000. (Fitzpatrick, 1993: 23)

The company, in other words, may buy the right to enjoin the artist, if the artist attracts attention from another company, even if they’ve paid the artist nothing up until that time. The very strategy scorned and invalidated by the Teena Marie court as contravening the law’s founding logic became fundamental to the operation of the law, which underwrites the (albeit more expensive) ‘courthouse steps’ insurance policy. Guaranteed and paid minimum compensation is no a longer necessary precondition for an injunction, as long as the original company is willing to cough up a larger amount of money to obtain the injunction and thereby prevent the artist from accepting other bids.

1998: Bankruptcy and the rejection of contracts

In the mid- to late 1990s, a handful of recording artists – notably including African-American performers Run-DMC (1993), TLC (1995), and Toni Braxton (1998) – sought bankruptcy protection. The latter’s filing was particularly big news because at the time her hit song ‘Unbreak My Heart’ ‘was still generating countless radio royalties’ (De Lisle, 2000: 72). One feature of a successful bankruptcy petition is the release of the petitioner from obligations known as ‘executory contracts’, that is, contracts that require the performance (‘execution’) of some specified action in the future. Debt is one such contract but there are many others, including the recording contract (Brewer, 2003: 346)
Shortly after Braxton’s bankruptcy filing, the RIAA attempted to change pending federal legislation (then being pushed by credit card companies) in order to make it more difficult for recording artists to declare bankruptcy and void their recording contracts. This effort was rebuffed, and the 1998 legislation failed. However, the recording industry’s position – along with those of the consumer credit industries – was strengthened when sweeping bankruptcy reform legislation was passed several years later.

The important place of bankruptcy provisions in US law was first recognised in Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution; despite this recognition, it was not until 1898 that bankruptcy law became a permanent feature of US law (Landry and Mardis, 2006: 94). The first major reform of the law took place in 1978, which, according to Robert Landry and Nancy Mardis ‘did not alter the fundamental policy [that had long been] in favor of debtors’ (2006: 94). For most of its history US bankruptcy law placed a significant burden on creditors to demonstrate that individuals seeking bankruptcy protection were doing so ‘for reasons other than financial distress’ (Pritchard, 1998: 8). The same burden to show ‘bad faith’ and/or ‘substantive abuse’ applied to record companies trying to enforce their contracts by contesting artist bankruptcy claims. Only a very small percentage of recording artists turn to bankruptcy; trying to escape a contract through the declaration of bankruptcy ‘is risky’, write MacLane and Wong, ‘because there is no guarantee that the bankruptcy court will reject the contract in question’ (1999: 27). In the wake of the successful bankruptcy gambles of Braxton, TLC, and Run-DMC, the credit card companies’ legislative push offered the RIAA an opportunity to put obstacles in the way of artist bankruptcy.

In May of 1998, just a few months after Braxton’s January bankruptcy filing, the RIAA pushed Representative Bill McCollum, a Republican from Florida’s entertainment industry-dominated city of Orlando, to insert a provision into the pending bankruptcy reform legislation that would demand a higher standard of court scrutiny for recording artist filings than for those of any other kind of person.12 A favorable Chapter 7 bankruptcy judgment empowers a court-appointed trustee to ‘reject’ executory contracts if it appears that doing so will facilitate a person’s economic rehabilitation (Brewer, 2003: 589). In asking McCollum and other representatives to support the provision, the RIAA argued that artists were increasingly using the bankruptcy code’s Chapter 7 language to escape from their recording contracts. ‘Unscrupulous lawyers’, acting on behalf of recording artists, argued RIAA president and CEO Hilary Rosen, ‘are extorting record labels into rewriting existing record contracts – ones they freely entered for their clients – by threatening bankruptcy’ (Stern, 1998: 6).

The RIAA advanced legislation that would alter the ‘playing field’ in their favour. They induced McCollum to insert their proposed language into the pending bankruptcy reform legislation after the bill had been discussed, ‘without benefit of debate at the subcommittee and committee level’ (Holland, 1998). Union officials discovered the new

12 Justin Pritchard noted that ‘[s]ince 1995, McCollum has received $3,000 from the RIAA political action committee, campaign records show. House Judiciary Committee members overall received $8,700 from the RIAA’s PAC during the 1997-98 election cycle, including $1,000 contributed to McCollum’ (1998: 8).
language prior to its coming up for a vote. When made public, the legislation led to an outcry from artists and their professional and legislative allies. The RIAA (and, in this case, the sponsoring lawmaker) then contended the legislation was technical rather than substantive. The association insisted ‘that the legislation is not seeking a “special interest” exemption as its opponents are claiming, but instead is trying to close a loophole in current law’ (Seelye, 1998: A18). The RIAA provided no evidence that any of the recent bankruptcies had been pursued in bad faith, and little that any more than the handful of cases mentioned above had actually been threatened or taken place. In declining to document the scope of the problem, an RIAA lobbyist said ‘I simply can tell you based on personal conversations that there’s a problem that should be addressed’ (Pritchard, 1998: 8). McCollum acknowledged ‘I don’t recall the number precisely, but it strikes me that there’s three or four cases they cited to me’ (Pritchard, 1998: 8). Thus, while observers acknowledged the likelihood that recording artists’ bankruptcies were driven by artists’ desires for substantive re-negotiations, they also looked sceptically on the RIAA’s unwillingness or inability to substantiate its own claims.

Finally, concerned senators sent the RIAA to recording artist representatives to hammer out a compromise and ‘craft substitute language that does not specifically mention recording artists’ (Holland, 1998: 12). The two groups agreed on language suggesting somewhat toothlessly that bankruptcy judges may consider ‘whether an individual debtor seeks to reject a personal services contract and the financial need for such rejection as sought by the debtor’ (Holland, 1998: 12).

The bankruptcy reform legislation that ultimately passed (the Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act of 2005) made it more difficult for most Americans to pursue bankruptcy protection, though it contained no language pertaining solely to recording artists. By introducing means-testing and by shifting more of the burden of proof away from creditors and onto individuals seeking bankruptcy protection, the new legislation made it much more difficult for bankruptcy courts to excuse individuals from their financial obligations (Landry and Mardis, 2006).

**Atavism at the threshold of digitalization?**

*Primitive accumulation and protective legislation*

California’s seven year rule and its requirement of minimum compensation as a precondition of injunction, and federal bankruptcy law’s low pre-2005 threshold for voiding executory contracts, established and enforced limits on record companies’ power over recording artists’ labour. In order for record companies to maintain and advance their stability and profitability during turbulent times, the RIAA argued, recording artists had to be constrained in their capacity to invoke these legal limitations of employer power. I have suggested that the efforts of this group of employers to extend their control over their artists bears an obverse, corollary dimension: the ratcheting up of employer control requires and produces increased employee vulnerability. This is the salience of the primitive accumulation analysis: when capital encounters an obstacle or a limit it often works aggressively to overcome it; the limit’s
transcendence often requires and results in the erosion of the employee’s political position.

The record industry’s continued dependence on the long-term option contract might seem to contradict the 21st century’s prevailing logics of digitalization and employment casualisation. In digitalization’s brave new world of ‘convergent media’ and ‘liquid life’ (Deuze, 2007) contractual labour subordination seems as obsolete as the mortal coils of magnetic tape and vinyl grooves recently shuffled off by the record industry. It is tempting to understand record companies’ legal paroxysms over capture and control, after Ernst Bloch and Frederic Jameson, as an ironic example of the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’, the ‘the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history[. of] peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the distance’ (Jameson, 1991: 307 (drawing on Ernst Bloch)). Yet the rigid enforcement powers on which companies still depend for their control of labour are not only not inimical to corporate flexibility, they are central to it. ‘Casual’ is an attribute of the job and not the worker. As Guy Standing writes, prison labour is ‘the most casual form of all, in that the worker has no rights, cannot bargain, and can be made to do as much labour as somebody sees fit’ (2010: 71). The option contract is a one-way arrangement of obligation: employees are locked in, employers are free to exit at any time.13 Employer efforts at extending the capacity to capture, elicit, and control creative labour through primitive accumulation are consistent with casualisation in that they push past prior public policy or traditional limits on marketisation, on capital’s freedom and expansion. When successful, such efforts diminish impediments that might otherwise constrain employer fiat.

When the RIAA pushes state and federal legislators to tilt the record industry ‘playing field’ in their favour, they are engaging the state in a project of primitive accumulation through the latter’s power to impose what Marx called ‘[d]irect extra-economic force’ (De Angelis, 2004: 67). The argument here is not about contrasting abstract or idealised states of ‘freedom’ and ‘unfreedom’ but about showing, with Michael Perelman, how employers and politicians incrementally adjust the rights of working people in different ways, at different times, in response to different constellations of forces and priorities. The constraining of recording artists’ liberty by the restriction of their access to a market for their labour (case A), and by making it more difficult for them to pursue bankruptcy relief (case C), began ‘with the identification [by capital] of a concrete limit and the deployment of strategies for its transcendence’ (De Angelis, 2004: 72). Such ‘strategies also target any given balance of power among classes that constitutes…a resistance against the further process of capitalist accumulation’ (De Angelis, 2004: 70). The legalisation of the ‘courthouse steps’ option to justify an injunction in the absence of actual minimum compensation (case B) was a response to the resistant assertion of a new limit, in the form of a required $50,000 annual payment to artists to justify injunction.

13 This standard industry deal framework is discussed in exhaustive detail in a number of recording industry reference works, including Passman (2006). Passman, a respected entertainment industry attorney, writes ‘DON’T BE FOOLED! OPTIONS ARE NEVER GOOD FOR YOU!! They only mean you’ll get dropped if you’re not worth the price, or you’ll get too little if you’re a smash. So repeat after me: “OPTIONS ARE NEVER GOOD FOR ME!!!”’ (2006: 99, emphasis original).
The 360 deal and the extension of the scope of the contract

A ‘hole in the universe’ cannot simply be plugged. As the record industry scrambles to reproduce itself around file-sharing, how are these relations changing? Music industry players and observers have proposed numerous models and strategies following the disruption of the CD-sales-based business model. Among the main innovations along these lines is the 360 deal. ‘360’ describes a situation in which the artist is contractually surrounded by corporate toll gates through which pass most or all artist revenues – not just record royalties – now subject to record company ‘participation’. In fact, in many such agreements, companies not only gain significant percentages of formerly inaccessible streams of revenue, but also decision-making power over those activities.14 ‘By expanding the scope of their relationships with artists’, notes Sara Karubian, ‘labels are shifting their focus from trying to reverse the trend of declining CD sales to compensating for the decreased sales by participating in more profitable arenas’ (2009: 422). This language of an expanded scope immediately suggests the identification by record industry capital ‘of a concrete limit and the deployment of strategies for its transcendence’ (De Angelis, 2004: 72). However, with the 360 deal, it is strategies of class power more than state power that are involved, reshaping the content rather than the legal conditions of the long-term talent option contract. The main target of this force is the longstanding barrier between artists’ record royalty income (customarily claimed by the record company) and artists’ traditionally independence-sustaining revenues from live performance, licensing of music (including to television and film producers, video game companies, advertisers), and merchandise (from tour t-shirts to deals with retailers like Hot Topic).

There are numerous practical advantages to both record companies and artists to engaging on these terms: not only are record companies – increasingly recreating themselves as what Edgar Bronfman Jr. calls ‘music based content companies’ (quoted in Schultz, 2009: 700) or what James McQuivey calls ‘music talent managers’ (quoted in Basch, 2008: E1) – invested in music marketing in a range of new and profitable venues, able to replace revenue lost to declining sales and reposition themselves better to take advantage of unforeseen licensing or marketing opportunities. New recording artists themselves may enjoy lowered pressure to produce hits and thus more time to develop their act and fan base, as well as a larger relative royalty percentage (Leeds, 2007); established artists can trade some relatively calculable profit for ‘a measure of financial certainty’ (Pearlstein, 2008: D1) as they shift some risk onto a big company like concert promoter Live Nation.

Observers disagree regarding the degree to which 360 deals might be becoming the new normal.15 In any case, according to Karubian, it appears clear that ‘the bargaining power dynamic remains relatively consistent in the shift from traditional to 360 deals’ (2009:__________

14 As is the case with Nickelback’s deal with Live Nation (Gallo, 2008: 1).
15 Some observers suggest the form is ‘used by all the major record labels’ (Leeds, 2007), that ‘it’s everywhere’ (producer Josh Abraham, quoted in Leeds, 2007). One record company president said that he didn’t ‘think there’s a deal being made today where the 360 model doesn’t come up’ (Morrissey, 2007). Others suggest that ‘those types of contract are still far from the norm’ (Sisario, 2009: C1).
In fact, her analysis indicates incremental gains in employer leverage as ‘labels have used their publicised crisis to their advantage in negotiating terms with artists’, appearing ‘justified in their claims that they need to dip into non-recording revenues when they insist that their full reliance on the recorded music business will lead them to extinction’ (2009: 443). Against this, Karubian notes that ‘many artists and their advocates worry that companies are invading and planting their flags in territories traditionally belonging to artists’ (2009: 443). Again, Karubian’s language points to the usefulness of a primitive accumulation analysis for understanding struggles over the boundaries to maximal marketisation of terrains of employment set by labour and finance law.

Michael Perelman’s account of the ‘secret history of primitive accumulation’ illuminates the strategic regulation by early liberal political economists and policymakers of ‘self provisioning’, the capacity of people to meet their own subsistence needs outside of, or without dependence on, the employment relationship (Perelman, 2000). Alongside the enclosures of common lands, 18th and 19th century policy makers and their political economist allies learned carefully to manage a mix of self-provisioning and wage labour in order to minimise the cost of labour. ‘They wanted’, Perelman writes, ‘to make sure that workers would be able to be self-sufficient enough to raise the rate of surplus value’ – self-provisioning as a wage subsidy – ‘without making them so independent that they would or could resist wage labor’ (2000: 107). The continuous form of primitive accumulation through the regulation of self-provisioning was ‘a matter of degree. … capital would manipulate the extent to which workers relied on self-provisioning’, and hence the degree to which they depended on employers, ‘in order to maximize its advantage’ (2000: 32).

As Toynbee (quoted above) argues, popular music performers’ ability to sell their services to a number of buyers enabled them to avoid dependence on any single one. Although the recording contract is an employment contract, and state law treats recording artists as employees, their relative independence along these lines renders them more like independent contractors, market participants with little or no capital who ‘are able to protect themselves, to some extent, from work-related risks…because they self-insure themselves, to some extent, by spreading their risks’ among a number of clients (Davidov, 2002: 394). Michael Perelman argues that ‘the struggle against self-provisioning is not confined to the distant past. It continues to this day’ (2000: 11). I’m suggesting that popular music performers’ incomes from live appearances, licensing and merchandising functioned as a form of self-provisioning (within the market, yes, but not subject to record company claims), relieving recording artists from total dependence on record companies. This is precisely what the RIAA was

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16 An exemplary target for this kind of policy was the English kitchen garden, the size of which was carefully regulated in the early 19th century. Perelman quotes Robert Gourlay, who in 1822 declared that ‘[i]t is not the intention to make labourers professional gardeners or farmers! It is intended to confine them to bare convenience’ (2000: 108).

17 At the same time, of course, artists’ non-recording income subsidizes record companies. See producer Steve Albini’s grim (1997) calculations.
complaining about in its 1985 arguments for the (1987) legislative carve out of recording artists from protection by California’s seven year rule (quoted above).  

This principle is at the heart of recent legal analyses of the 360 deal. According to Ian Brereton, in addition to their income participation,

\[ \text{[t]he major labels’ retention of final-decision making rights on all recording, touring, merchandising, and publishing activities forces artists, and ultimately their creative endeavors, to be subject to the complete control of their record label.} \]

Casting this new relationship as a partnership, he writes, would be false; ‘under this new type of agreement, the complete sacrifice of control to one party violates an important principle of partnership law’, which requires mutual rights of control (2009: 195-196). Before the advent of the 360 deal, argues Tracy Gardner, an artist attempting to avoid involuntary servitude (‘in which the victim is forced to work…by use or threat of coercion through law or legal process’) by breaching her contract would be faced only with the loss of recording revenues. Under the new deal, where companies participate administratively and economically in non-recording activities like touring, licensing, merchandising, and so on, the artist ‘is faced with a lack of alternate revenue streams upon which artists before her could rely’ (Gardner, 2006: 755). 360 deals ‘only add to the unconscionability of the artists’ situation because artists have lost control over the ability to convert their musical fame into other financial opportunities’ (Gardner, 2006: 750). The 360 deal represents capital’s identification as a limit of what before had been simply a conventional separation between spheres of economic activity under its control and those under the control of the artist.

Despite radical challenges to the industry’s business model, the major labels offer opportunities for which (aspiring) recording artists compete vigorously; pressure on aspirants to sign anything in order to enter what Steve Greenfield and Guy Osborn call the record deal’s ‘holy of holies’ (1998: 177) means that if the 360 deal is what’s on offer, few without significant bargaining power or attractive alternatives will be able to resist it. Abandoned by increasing numbers of file-sharing (non-) consumers, record company capital pushes in another direction, transcending former barriers, colonizing new regions of musical economic activity, and consolidating new dimensions of political control, particularly over legions of new artists in weak bargaining positions.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the 80s and 90s the RIAA engaged in a series of public, political contests with recording artists over several of the elements of state and federal legislation that set the terms of their contractual engagement. The two sides experienced differing degrees of success and failure in these contests, but the largely or apparently stable nature of the ‘playing field’ itself assured the incremental nature of most of the resulting changes. In the early 2000s, in the face of digitalization and file-sharing’s apparently tectonic destabilisation of the record industry, the emerging ‘360 degree deal’ promised

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18 This argument was also made in MCA’s complaint against Newton-John.
a way in which record companies and recording artists could continue to profit in the face of declining sales through the record companies’ investment and participation in formerly off-limits forms of economic activity such as touring, licensing, and merchandising. ‘Given their command of the entire recorded music industry’, writes Tracy Gardner,

it is hardly surprising that the record labels are quickly gaining control over new revenue streams as well as traditional revenue channels that once belonged solely to the artist (2006: 751).

Yet, while this ‘new deal’ is still nascent, it appears to herald intensified relations of control and appropriation between record companies and recording artists.

This article has argued that both incremental changes in legislated authority relations and in private contractual conventions can be understood through the theoretical lens of primitive accumulation, a mode of political and class power exercised by capital to overcome limits to its expansion. Recording artists can be understood as an illuminating case of continuity and change in the social relations of cultural production under conditions of digitalization and the widespread unauthorised distribution of cultural commodities enabled by internet technologies. Seen from the primitive accumulation perspective, the persistence of binding, long-term option contracts is not anomalous in the context of digitizing, flexibilizing, 21st century terrains of employment. Rather, these new contracts are admirably suited to the maintenance of low-obligation cultural industry ‘options’ where the principal difference is found in the types of boundaries, limits, and obstacles encountered by record company capital in its pursuit of greater freedom favourably to arrange its artist employment relations. In this light, the impetus of cultural industry enterprise toward the intensification of long term capture and control of ‘golden-egg’ laying talent appears not to subside but to change form and venue.

When applied to the work of recording artists, categories like ‘involuntary servitude’ and ‘primitive accumulation’ sound strange. Their use in this context depends on a degree of abstraction that itself requires the putting aside of popular images and narratives of expressive individuals enjoying un-alienated lives and sometimes great fame and wealth. But it is precisely recording artists’ extraordinary autonomy that constitutes certain aspects of their value, that makes their legal protections the targets of repeated employer attacks, and that makes their struggles so dramatic, so capable of bringing obscure logics into high relief. This examination of some of the legal dynamics of their unusually autonomous careers, of the laws that enable and constrain their capacity to say ‘no’ to the various historically-conditioned demands of their employers, argues that problems of autonomy and control have been and remain central to the relationships of recording artists and their record companies. Laws and conventions that preserve and protect this capacity pose impediments to the ability of record companies to extend their advantage, provoking reactions that, until recently, often took place in public, before legislators, and that now appear increasingly to be taking place in private negotiations over new contractual territories.
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the author

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Enterprise content management systems and the application of Taylorism and Fordism to intellectual labour

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abstract

Enterprise Content Management (ECM) Systems confer numerous advantages to corporations including superior data management, streamlining of office workflows and potential cost savings. However, a content analysis of ECM system technical white papers reveals that such systems are potentially disastrous to intellectual workers. The trends of increasing management control, routinization and deskilling observed and critiqued by Harry Braverman in the 20th century in industrial labour are fully realized in intellectual labour by such systems. In addition to the detailed surveillance capabilities of content management systems (CMS), the employer captures and retains the entire iterative history of the documents produced by its workers. Content management systems deskill workers by subdividing intellectual tasks into the smallest possible constituent parts and automating as many tasks as possible. Content management systems provide some potential opportunities for the reskilling of workers, but a critical examination of the effects of these systems is necessary to determine their exact influence on digital work.

Introduction

Business to business (B2B) software is rarely the subject of public discourse, which is unsurprising given that the name implies that it does not concern individuals. However, in the same way that theories of scientific management and assembly line production techniques revolutionized industrial labour in the 20th century, B2B software is reshaping intellectual labour in the 21st century. Over the past 25 years there has been a proliferation of enterprise wide information systems including Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software and knowledge management systems and yet there has been a distinct lack of studies on Enterprise Content Management (ECM) systems. Though there is a lack of empirical evidence on such systems, the product literature produced by ECM system vendors displays a strong potential for the deskilling and degrading of intellectual labour. ECM systems extend both Taylorist and Fordist principles to intellectual labour giving management unprecedented control over the work process. ECM systems not only allow but encourage the subdivision, routinization, and where possible automation of workflow processes. These systems incorporate sophisticated systems for surveilling workers while on the job and advanced auditing capabilities for analyzing performance. They
facilitate the creation of an intellectual assembly line, while providing management panoptic surveillance over each employee and piece of work. Despite the lack of empirical studies about the implementation of ECM systems, the product literature from vendors of such systems suggests ECM systems possess considerable potential to routinize intellectual work. Through a review of such vendor literature, this paper shows how ECM systems threaten to fulfill predictions of information capitalism’s tendencies towards technological de-skilling.

As the techniques of Taylor and Ford became increasingly popular last century, criticism of the Taylorist/Fordist work paradigm also flourished. One of the most thorough and insightful critiques that emerged was Harry Braverman’s deskilling thesis. Though Braverman did explore some trends in office work, his work predated the emergence of technologies that could pervasively expand management’s control over intellectual labour. With the 21st century poised to be dominated by prevalence of the intellectual/knowledge worker it is clear that ECM systems possess the potential to revolutionize such work. It therefore becomes necessary to analyze whether such systems present the same threat of deskilling for the intellectual labour using the framework provided by Braverman.

The first part of this paper will examine Braverman’s deskilling thesis and his observations on intellectual work. A review of the applications of Braverman’s thesis and literature on content management systems is provided for context. A content analysis of ECM product literature from EMC vendors then explores how these systems represent a tool of management, decrease employee control over the labour process, and subdivide and routinize work. The paper concludes by exploring some possibilities for minimizing the deskilling effects of such systems and calling for empirical studies of such systems to critically evaluate whether the potential for deskilling inherent in the design of such systems is realized in practice.

Braverman’s deskilling thesis

No author has more comprehensively explored the potential ability for technology and management techniques and tools to cause the deskilling of workers than Harry Braverman. In its simplest form his ‘deskilling’ thesis suggests that owners and management (the agents of capital) seek to use technology and management tools to constantly subdivide and routinize the labour process to gain more control over it. This trend in turn decreases the need for skilled labour, and facilitates its substitution with general, unskilled (deskilled) labour. Braverman stressed two important factors in his deskilling thesis. First, technology alone does not deskill. Braverman rejected such a technologically determinist framework, arguing that deskilling is a result of the use of technology by management seeking increased control. Second, deskilling is not the only effect when management uses technology to gain more control over the labour process as there must be some workers or managers who are re-skilled or up-skilled.

Although his seminal 1974 work, Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century, was focused primarily on physical/industrial labour, the framework he provides can still be used to examine intellectual labour. Braverman
highlighted several nascent trends in the deskilling of intellectual work. He noted that in the 1970s the trends toward rationalization and mechanization, so prevalent in industrial labour, were starting to emerge in office work, and were coupled with increasing rates of dissatisfaction among white collar workers (1998: 23-4). Much of Braverman’s criticism of the deskilling of office work was focused on the increasing numbers of low paid, female clerical workers, who were needed to help management coordinate its increasing control over the production process (1998: 90, 170). He noted that the increased mechanization of offices facilitated greater supervision of employees by management, which in turn allows the machine-pacing of office work (1998: 230). Focusing specifically on secretarial work, Braverman noted that it was increasingly being routinized. He argued that work in stenographic pools had shifted from the drafting of documents, to simply the arrangement of pre-written paragraphs (1998: 238). Surveillance and routinization reinforced the subdivision of office work into ever smaller tasks. The result was the deskilling of clerical work, and increased alienation among clerical workers as they lost their personal relations and connections with management (1998: 239). Braverman emphasized that one important factor limited the deskilling trends at play in office work, noting that

[the greatest single obstacle to the proper functioning of such an office is the concentration of information and decision-making capacity in the minds of key clerical employees. (Braverman, 1998: 239)]

However, he also noted that this limitation on management’s control of office work could be overcome if management had the ability to record and move all information in a mechanical form (1998: 239). Thirty years after Braverman’s analysis of office work, such a management technology has finally been realized in ECM, which provides management the means for achieving an inordinate level of control over office work.

Applications and critiques of Braverman’s deskilling thesis

Braverman’s work has attracted significant attention from labour process theorists. Critics have suggested that Braverman uncritically characterized traditional craftwork (Meiksins, 1994: 48; Heisig, 2009: 1642), underemphasized the role of cooperation in capitalist production (Knights and Willmott, 2007: 1370), oversimplified his conception of skill (Huws, 2003: 119; Meiksins, 1994: 46), and exaggerated the degree to which capitalist workplaces embody Taylorist principles (Friedman, 1977: 44; Meiksins, 1994: 49). Specifically Friedman has argued that in many workplaces Taylorist direct control has not increased, and instead that there is an expansion of responsible autonomy which, while not eliminating the alienation felt by workers, reduces its effects (1977: 53). While Thompson notes that deskilling is a major tendency in the capitalist labour process (1989: 118), Adler argues that the long term trend under capitalism has been one towards increasingly complex work (2007: 1314). Numerous empirical studies have, however, supported Braverman’s thesis that deskilling occurs in some work conditions. Deskilling has occurred in occupations as diverse as nursing (Rinard, 1996), librarianship (Hannah and Harris, 1996), journalism (Liu, 2006), and even law (Wall and Johnstone, 1997). This broad range of occupations in which deskilling has been noted suggests that Braverman’s thesis can be applied to intellectual as well as industrial forms of labour. Scholars have also examined other types of enterprise wide
information systems and found evidence of deskilling. Knowledge management systems have been found to have a deskilling effect (Hasan and Crawford, 2003), and computer integrated manufacturing was found to deskill machine operators while up-skilling managers (Agnew et al., 1997).

While there is no academic consensus on the deskilling thesis (Littler and Innes, 2003: 73; Carey 2007: 94), some authors have suggested that the criticism of Braverman reflects a trend of increasing political conservatism (Meiksins, 1994: 46; Spencer, 2000: 239). Furthermore, Braverman did not posit that deskilling was an invariant law of capitalist labour processes (Spencer 2009: 63). The primary value of Braverman’s thesis lies not in objective tests of whether it is invariably correct, but as an analytical tool for the examination of the dynamic interaction between management policy, technology and workers skill (Huws, 2003). Despite a considerable volume of literature on content management, there is a lack of literature scrutinizing content management systems using Braverman’s insightful and applicable framework.

The failure of business process reengineering

While critical literature on ECM systems and their deskilling of workers is absent, one central component of such systems, workflow software, has been critiqued for the deleterious effects it has on workers. In the early 1990s there was considerable interest in what was then called Business Process Reengineering (BPR). BPR was conceived in management and business schools (Davenport and Short, 1990: 11), and found its intellectual roots in Taylorism (Davenport, 1993: 316). Its early proponents stressed that it empowered workers and increased their skill base (Hammer and Champy, 2001: 245); however, they also emphasized BPR’s ability to deliver cost savings in the form of staff reductions. Michael Hammer highlighted that Ford Motor Company used reengineering to reduce its North American accounts payable division from 500 to 125 employees (Hammer, 1990: 106), while Taco Bell was able to cut the number of area supervisors it employed by two-thirds even while increasing the number of restaurants (Hammer and Champy, 1993: 250). Unsurprisingly, academic criticism followed. Iden noted BPR had the potential to limit the flexibility and creativity of workers (1995:76). Vanderburg labeled BPR the ‘intellectual assembly line’, and noted that the literature on BPR empowering workers was contradicted by the Taylorist and Fordist principles embodied in BPR (2004: 333). Grey and Mitev argued that BPR inevitably resulted in layoffs for some workers, while remaining workers would be subject to intensification (1995: 11). Several scholars noted that BPR was particularly threatening to middle management as their duties would be automated and the managers themselves made redundant (Vanderburg, 2004: 336; Grey and Mitev, 1995: 11). While Abbott and Sarin did find that while some users benefited from BPR, these outcomes were not universal, and that BPR had the potential to exacerbate problems in some workflows (1994: 113). These criticisms were not lost on Hammer, who when profiled by Time in 1996 noted that reengineering had been misinterpreted and hijacked by CEOs who achieved ‘efficiencies’ through staffing reductions (Time, 1996). While Evans (1994) contends that the majority of attempts at BPR failed due to worker resistance, a major empirical study of corporations that attempted BPR projects found that the primary source of failure was the inability of management to effectively plan for change (Grover et. al.,
1995: 139). Willmott (1994: 40) noted that BPR proponents and management adopted an overly simplistic view of workers as passive commodities stating:

> it is not BPR’s inflated sense of novelty so much as its shallow, technicist appreciation of human dimension of organizational change that renders it vulnerable to failure. (Willmott, 1994: 40)

The early corporate enthusiasm for BPR in the 1990s attracted scholarly attention, which included some criticisms of reengineering. However, these criticisms were muted by the proponents of BPR who emphasized the success that could be achieved through such projects (Teng et. al, 1998; Carr and Johansson, 1995; Sedera et. al. 2001). Though BPR (now called Business Process Management) is a central component in ECM systems, these wider systems have not received the same critical examination.

While there is a fairly extensive body of professional literature on ECM systems, there has been relatively little critical scholarly attention. Andersen notes that much of the professional literature, found in publications such as KMWorld, and Infonomics Magazine (formerly AIIM E-DOC) is written by and CEOs, CIOs, marketing directors and vendors and therefore lacks critical analysis (2008: 68). Her examination of the rhetoric used in these publications finds that technical writers become increasingly isolated and less able to resist strategic control by management (2008: 72). Iverson and Burkart’s analysis of ECM systems for nonprofit organization highlights the dangers of reification and alienation of workers (2007: 414). They note that by reifying and automating business workflows into computer programs, workers’ ability to be creative is stifled, and the ECM focus on making content permanent and reusable accelerates trends towards commodification (2007: 413-414). Both of these studies highlight some of the potential dangers of ECM systems. Neither uses Braverman’s framework, but both articles fail to examine in detail the technical white papers provided by ECM companies that explain the full range of management controls provided by these systems. Examining the ECM product literature is necessary because there is a distinct lack of empirical and unbiased investigations on such systems, though there are many brief and positive case studies provided by ECM vendors that trumpet the institutional benefits of their software (ECM, 2010: 21-24; IBM, 2009; IBM, 2010b; Xythos, 2010a; Xythos, 2010c). Before examining how content management systems further extend management’s control over the labour process it is necessary to examine the computer software that comprises an ECM system.

**An enterprise content management system overview**

The term ‘content management system’ describes a diverse number of applications used by both individuals and institutions to manage information and documents. At the institutional level these systems incorporate a wide variety of software modules that facilitate the management, storage, capture, preservation, and delivery of information, and are often differentiated from personal content management systems by being referred to as ‘Enterprise Content Management’ systems (AIIM, 2008b). At their fullest, ECM systems incorporate a broad range of software including document and records management, email and web portal management, video and audio file management (referred to as ‘Digital Asset Management’), indexing, classification and retrieval software, collaboration technologies, security functionality including digital
and information rights management software, and Business Process Management software (BPM). The various modules in an ECM system are unified through a central, institutional repository in which all content is stored. Though different organizations may use only some of the modules within an ECM system, the primary advantage is that it allows the coordination (and control) of not only structured content (final versions of documents that are have historically been the purview of records management), but also all unstructured content (documents drafts, emails and other related materials) (Blair, 2004: 65). Simply, ECM systems coordinate all the steps in the production of documents and capture and retain all the content that is produced in the process.

ECM systems are differentiated from other enterprise information systems such as CRM and ERP by their unique focus on unstructured content. Estimates suggest that roughly 80 percent of the information within large enterprises is unstructured (Shegda and Gilbert, 2009: 4), and that office employees spend 40 percent of their work time managing and repurposing unstructured content (Oracle, 2007b: 3). Furthermore, time spent searching for such information decreases productivity (Laugero and Globe, 2002: 51). As office workers produce content in an increasingly diverse array of formats, enterprises are looking to strategically manage such information to increase productivity and profits.

Two major impetuses are driving the increased adoption of ECM systems by organizations. Content management allows for the more efficient management of information within an organization as employees produce and use large volumes of electronic documents. ECM systems aim to ease searching and retrieval of information for employees, while at the same time ensuring that information is properly classified and stored on the central repository. Equally important is the need for large institutions to manage their information securely and in compliance with legal regulations on document management. As the amount of electronic information has significantly increased over the past 15 years, so too has the amount of compliance legislation. These include the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and Department of Defense Regulation 5015.2 in the United States, the Data Protection Directive (EUDPD) in the European Union, and the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA) in Canada (Saxena, 2008: 282-289).

Despite the complexities of implementation and the costs involved, the global ECM market has grown considerably over the past decade generating an estimated $2.7 billion (USD) worth of revenue in 2007, and industry consolidation has resulted in the market being dominated by a few large ECM providers (EMC, IBM, Oracle, Microsoft, and Open Text) (Bell et al., 2009). The numerous advantages offered by ECM systems to employers suggest that such systems will become increasingly popular for large organizations, and this is reflected in continued expectations of growth in the ECM sector (Natividad, 2007). The benefits offered by ECM systems and the increasing burdens of regulatory compliance have resulted in numerous corporations and government organizations adopting such systems. Major corporations such as AT&T, Boeing and Con Edison have implemented content management systems (IBM 2009: 4, 11, 14). ECM vendors and other proponents of such systems are quick to highlight
successful cases where return on the investment (ROI) in these expensive systems can be achieved through staffing reductions. Wells Fargo, Standard Bank of South Africa, Equitable Life Insurance Company, the Miami-Dade County Clerk of Courts office and the New Jersey Department of Revenue all implemented ECM systems that resulted in staff reductions (IBM, 2009: 6-7; Christian, 2004: S5; Joelson, 2010). IBM suggests that ECM systems are particularly well suited to any industry that processes large volumes of information, faces regulatory challenges, incorporates complex work processes, or is content-centric, and specifically notes that this includes the communications, financial services, healthcare, government, manufacturing, retail, transportation and utilities industries (IBM 2009: 3).

While ECM systems offer clear benefits to employers, they also have the potential to be quite useful for employees. An important aspect of content management is collaboration software, and AIIM stresses that working collaboratively can increase motivation, participation, reflection, and engagement by workers (AIIM, 2008a). Optical character recognition (OCR) and intelligent character recognition (ICR) technologies can be leveraged to reduce the amount of data workers must enter manually (AIIM, 2008a). Improved indexing and searching capabilities can allow workers to retrieve documents more effectively and with less frustration (AIIM, 2008c). Finally, some ECM systems allow for employees to personalize the types and subjects of information they receive (AIIM, 2008b). However, concomitant with potential advantages to employees are the pervasive control powers that accrue to management. Foster, Banthorpe and Gepp even note that ‘by automating the process where possible, cost savings through reduction and de-skilling of the workforce are achieved’ (1998: 350). Others cast deskilling in a more positive light by arguing that it is beneficial to workers as it removes the drudgery from many tasks (Brunwin, 1994: 29; Jobshout, 2009). Given the experiences with BPR and staffing reductions in the 1990s and the fact that even proponents of ECM systems acknowledge (and in some cases support) deskilling, it is necessary to critically examine enterprise content management systems and their potential for deskilling.

**ECM systems as a tool of management**

Braverman’s framework necessitates the presence of two factors for deskilling to occur. He does not suggest that technology alone is the source of deskilling. The introduction of a new technology to a workplace only becomes a mechanism for deskilling when it is accompanied by a desire by management to examine and decompose work processes to its most granular level so that the tasks involved can be subdivided (1998: 180). Numerous facets of an ECM system show the desire by management to pre-coordinate and control work processes. Nowhere is evidence of an ECM system as a management tool clearer than in the business process management (BPM) module. BPM software, which governs workflows by pre-coordinating tasks and the workers responsible for those tasks within an overall project, demonstrates that a content management system is not just a piece of technology, but also a management tool (AIIM, 2008b). Further evidence that an ECM system is a management tool is provided by the inclusion of the security controls that restrict document access and editing to specific groups, and auditing applications that allow management track every minute change in a document’s history (EMC, 2006: 3). IBM uses Taylorist language.
such as, ‘processes can be broken down into their component parts for subsequent analysis’, (2008a: 10), and ‘BPM’s graphical process definition provides consistent, comprehensive view of the processes under management’ (2008a: 14) in promoting their ECM software. ECM system literature is explicitly aimed at CIOs and other senior executives, evincing that the adoption of ECM systems is driven from the top-down (EMC, 2008a: 5; EMC, 2009b: 5). ECM product literature contains explicit references to expanding management’s power. IBM emphasizes that their monitoring software when combined with the BPM system provides, ‘a whole new level of control’. (IBM 2008a: 14). Oracle notes that their information rights management software, ‘enables organizations to expand their enterprise content management vision to desktops and places beyond their corporate reach’ (Oracle, 2007a: 7). IBM explicitly notes that its BPM software can maintain employee discipline, which it suggests is a key component for successful implementation and use of ECM software (IBM, 2008a: 13). Thus, it is clearly evident that an ECM system is not just a piece of technology, but also a tool by which management gains greater control over the content creation, distribution and storage processes. Since an ECM system is both a technology and management tool, it is justifiable to examine whether a content management system can lead to the deskilling of workers as set out by Braverman.

**ECM systems and the loss of employee control**

According to Braverman’s thesis, deskilling occurs when technology is combined with management tools to subdivide a skilled task into smaller components, which can then be preformed by a greater number of individuals with less skill (and at less cost). The first element of deskilling is a shift of control. The work process changes from one governed by skilled workers (who know all the required elements in a process) to one where control is concentrated in the hands of management with individual workers given increasingly simple and routine tasks (Braverman, 1998: 170). An ECM system has such an effect. Management and system administrators predetermine a myriad of factors in the content production, editing and storage process. Electronic document and record management systems operating in accordance with policies determined by management control who and at what stage documents can be accessed by employees (EMC, 2006: 2). The ability of an employee to access various documents created by the company is restricted on a pre-coordinated basis. Access controls can limit employees’ ability to forward, print, copy and paste not only entire documents, but specific sections of documents (EMC, 2006: 2). The level of control provided is granular enough that employees using spreadsheet software can be restricted from editing or viewing specific cells or even the formulas used within cells (Oracle, 2010a: 12). These control features are complimented by an ECM system’s ability to include automatic expiration dates for documents preventing employees from accessing documents longer than management feels is necessary (EMC, 2006: 4). Furthermore these controls do not end when an employee leaves their employer. ECM software can extend or revoke access to information after termination even if the employee has copied documents to their own storage medium (Oracle, 2007a: 3). Users can even be prevented from deleting documents they personally create, further extending management’s control (EMC, 2009b: 18). An ECM system’s access controls are dynamic, allowing systems administrators to revoke access even after documents have been distributed (EMC,
While it is not unreasonable to suggest that there should be some restrictions on what internally produced materials an employee should be able to access, the extent of control provided ensures that management and system administrators have the ability to restrict workers’ access to content to a minimum, depriving them of a broader knowledge of the work going on within their own institution. The potential limiting of access to information supports Braverman’s accusation that owners frown on knowledge sharing (1998: 57). Knowledge is taken and separated from employees and reified into capital in the form of the ECM system.

The power of ECM systems to strip employees of control is not limited to pre-coordinated document restrictions, as auditing applications also increase management’s control over the work process. The sophisticated information rights management software that is incorporated into ECM systems allows for usage restrictions to extend to laptops and mobile devices used by employees that are outside of the institutional firewall (Oracle, 2010b: 2). So advanced are ECM systems in their information management that documents stored on USB drives, CDs, DVDs and home computers can be audited and subjected to information rights management restrictions (Oracle, 2010a: 6). EMC, a major ECM system provider, notes that:

An enterprise-ready IRM [information rights management] solution should provide a granular audit trail of what recipients did with documents and when they did it, as well as who was denied access and from what IP [internet protocol] address a denied access attempt was made. Auditing should also be continuous, online and offline. (EMC, 2008b: 7)

The use of documents and email offline can be monitored (Oracle, 2010a: 10). In the most extreme scenario management can monitor the exact amount of time an employee worked on a document (and using the audit trail they can determine the exact amount of work an employee did in that specific time period). While the product literature does not explicitly detail the exact nature of the monitoring capabilities (namely if the software logs individual keystrokes), ECM vendors note that the auditing capabilities, ‘provide evidence of who did what when’ (IBM, 2007: 7), and allow one to, ‘track who accessed a piece of information, when, and what they did with it’ (EMC, 2009a: 18). Audit trails that document worker activity are complimented by the ability to monitor workers in real time (EMC, 2010: 17). Even if such Orwellian oversight is not employed by management, its specter alone represents a considerable degree of control over the work process.

ECM systems are also designed to foil attempts to circumvent their extensive controls. ECM systems rely on a trusted system clock for monitoring and auditing instead of the local PC clock that could be manipulated by employees (Oracle, 2010a: 16; EMC, 2009a: 8). Embedded watermarks can be placed on printed documents to allow tracking (EMC, 2009b: 19), and the ability for employees to perform screen captures can also be eliminated (Oracle, 2010a: 16; EMC, 2009a: 17). These tamper-proofing measures along with the advanced security and auditing functionality give management, not employees, control over information. Given the degree of control that ECM systems provide management, it is necessary to examine how this control manifests itself in terms of changes to the labour process. Specific attention must be paid to the ways in which management employ such technology to routinize and subdivide work ultimately deskilling the workers involved.
BPM and the subdivision and routinization of work

Of all the modules in an ECM system, the Business Process Management module provides the greatest degree of control over the work process. The aim of BPM (and BPR, which went before it) is to make work processes more efficient through automation (AIIM, 2008b). A BPM module allows workflows to be programmed into the system as a series of steps involving both content and users. The BPM system then moves content between users according to steps in the workflow, which are pre-coordinated in advance by management and system administrators. While at first glance such a system may appear innocuous or even beneficial to employees who participate in such workflows, BPM software puts an inordinate amount of control over such processes in the hands of management.

Control over workflows begins with the conceptualization of work processes. While end users can be consulted in the conceptualization phase, before they are subjected to being managed by the BPM module, literature by ECM providers suggests that only management and business and process analysts need be involved in the design and deployment of workflow software (EMC, 2008a: 5-6). Even if users are consulted in the design of workflows, the degree of control which management exerts over the workforce is considerable. Management encourages the most granular subdivision of tasks, as each minute task in the workflow can be assigned a deadline (IBM, 2008a: 14). As with the extensive auditing capabilities of ECM systems generally, the BPM module identifies missed deadlines or bottlenecks in workflows and alerts management to such delays (Open Text, 2010). EMC’s BPM system updates management every five seconds, allowing management to be updated on delays 12 times in one minute (EMC, 2008a: 19). Through an easy to use graphical interface, managers can monitor an individual employee’s workload (IBM, 2008a: 14). If an employee has too much work waiting in his or her queue, that work can be reassigned to another employee (EMC, 2009b: 9). Though this may prevent a worker from becoming burdened with too much work, it can also be used to ensure that no worker is ever idle. EMC celebrates the ability of its BPM module to intensify work volumes (EMC, 2009b: 7). Workflows can be altered by management, but not employees, at any time resulting in a work environment where, ‘users are simply presented with tasks in accordance with the new version of the process and may even be unaware of the change to the process’ (IBM, 2008a, 13). EMC systems give management a panoptic view of any work process within the BPM module, realizing an unprecedented level of control over office workers.

Through BPM software individual workers may be reduced to nothing more than employees of an intellectual assembly line where they simply perform their predetermined responsibility to a document, and then send it along to the next employee. Furthermore, when the system requires tasks to be preformed within a specific (often narrow) timeline, the ‘intellectual assembly line’ more closely resembles its Fordist counterpart (the subject of Braverman’s critique). Workflows become a reification of the human process of content creation. No more is the work process an exchange of ideas and responsibilities between human agents, but instead it becomes a simple algorithm preprogrammed into a BPM module that is controlled and administered by management and the system administrator. Ironically, the more
complex the workflow, the simpler and more routinized the tasks within that workflow become. BPM software does not just facilitate subdivision and routinization of a workflow; it is premised on such a concept.

Deskillings

As individual employees lose control over the work process and are given increasingly smaller, routine tasks, they become deskilled. While an employee may have been free to perform a wide range of tasks before the deployment of an enterprise content management system, such software ultimately casts the employee’s role within a narrow range of simple, scheduled functions. Within this narrow range of responsibilities a worker is not only deskilled, but also easily replaced. However, even though there is a decline in the level of skill of the worker, Braverman argues that the reduction of an understanding of the labour process is an even greater loss to the worker (1998: 294-5). Thus not only is an employee faced with a loss of their skill (making them easily replaceable), they no longer are knowledgeable of the broader work process, and as such they have virtually nothing to offer their current or future potential employers. It is not the loss of specific skill that is the greatest impact of an EMC system on a worker, but the loss of knowledge over the work process in general. The more knowledge is codified and reified within the ECM system, the more the worker becomes an appendage of the machinery alienated from his own intellectual labour. This problem is compounded by the access restrictions enforced by an EMC system. An EMC’s ability to limit access to information ensures that workers will be deskilled in both the absolute and relative sense.

The decline in skill of office employees under an EMC system is compounded by copyright laws. The copyright for material produced by an employee under the scope of employment is the employer’s, unless there is a written agreement to the contrary (United States Code). Given an EMC system’s ability to capture content not only the final version of documents, but all the ancillary and supporting content including draft versions and electronic communications, a prodigious number of copyrights accrue to the employer. More importantly, an intellectual worker’s most important resource, his or her own knowledge, is transformed from tacit knowledge, which is theirs exclusively, to the legally protected property of the employer. The ability of ECM systems to capture tacit knowledge is one of their primary attributes, with IBM noting that their system can, ‘capture critical undocumented information from the aging workforce’ (IBM, 2010a: 3), and stating that companies, ‘need to capture all of their [workers’] undocumented knowledge and experience without disrupting day to day operations’ (IBM 2009: 3). Thus employees working for an organization using an ECM system see themselves deskilled on three fronts: the loss of skill as work is subdivided and routinized, the diminishing of knowledge about work processes in general, and the transformation of their own knowledge into the private property of their employer. For Braverman, automation and Fordist assembly lines were the implements of the degradation of physical/industrial work in the 20th century. The same potential for the degradation of intellectual labour in the 21st century is present in enterprise content management systems.
Reskilling and minimizing the negative effects of an ACM system

Braverman’s analysis of industrial labour in the twentieth century reveals that deskilling is not the only outcome when management deploys technology to gain greater control over the work process. While deskilling is the fate of most employees, some must be reskilled or upskilled, and he specifically notes that computerization creates a special group of skilled administrators (Braverman, 1998: 234). Several authors have noted that the introduction of computer technology does not deskill intellectual workers in the same linear manner as machinery deskills manual labourers (Thompson, 1989: 115; Meiksins, 1994: 49; Heisig, 2009: 1645). Zuboff specifically notes that the introduction of computer technology can result in significant upskilling of intellectual workers (1998: 243). The crucial question must not be simply, do ECM systems deskill? Instead, one must ask how are the skills of creative workers changed, and how is their work experience changed (Thompson, 1989: 120). If skills are being transformed by such systems into those that are more easily routinized and quantified, then workers face an increased danger of being made expendable (Huws, 2003: 165-166). As work becomes increasingly reified within ECM systems and measured by performance indicators, the work process loses its spontaneity and the workers lose their autonomy (Huws, 2007: 10). While literature from ECM proponents highlights the advantages of such systems to institutions (not necessarily the employees) and vendor literature speaks of ‘enabling people’ (IBM, 2008b: 2), there is a need to empirically study this claim. Optimistic accounts of ECM implementations by software vendors fail to discuss how such systems change the skill levels of employees.

Information technology departments clearly benefit from upskilling by ECM systems. System administrators require considerable technical skills to operate EMC systems. Furthermore, as content and content management systems become increasingly important to an organization, so too do the system administrators. The information rights management and auditing protocols extend not only to the office workers, but to all aspects of the organization. As such, EMC system administrators have the potential to access information from the highest ranking officials. Because of the complexity of such systems, IT departments may have to hire additional workers to administer and maintain the system or spend time upskilling existing employees. While EMC systems pose a threat to both employees and middle management, they are a source of considerable reskilling for system administrators.

But while the reskilling of system administrators is inevitable in a work environment that uses an ECM system, there is no reason why reskilling must be limited to this group. The efficiencies gained through automation do not have to necessarily result in staffing redundancies, and can instead lead to a more productive workplace. The introduction of an ECM system at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston has allowed staff there to better coordinate grant proposal writing, helping them to secure over $40 million in new funds since the introduction of the system (Xythos, 2010b). Mundane tasks can be eliminated, and instead of eliminating those who perform such tasks, these workers could be reskilled for other more complex functions. While a review of the technical literature on ECM systems identifies the potential for deskilling, there also exists a potential for upskilling and using the collaborative features of such
software including blogs, wikis and instant messaging, to make work more social, though workers must remember that even new mechanisms for social exchange created by information systems can fall under the panoptic control of management (Zuboff, 1988: 382). The limited case studies provided by ECM providers that highlight how such systems can provide a return on investment are not a substitute for the critical examinations of how the content management software both quantitatively and qualitatively changes the labour process.

**Conclusion**

Enterprise Content Management systems are filled with contradictory potential. As their proponents claim, they do have the capacity to remove much of the drudgery from office work and empower employees. Collaboration and other software within an ECM system can enrich the working environment. However, it would be naïve to believe that such systems offer only benefits. ECM systems are clearly a tool used by management to gain greater control over the labour process. The pervasive surveillance and monitoring capabilities deprive employees of control. BPM not only allows for but is focused on subdividing and routinizing tasks. Does the increased automation offered by ECM systems really remove drudgery from intellectual work, or does constraint by a computer automated workflow make the creative work more repetitive and tedious?

ECM systems do not merely embody a dynamic tension between the deskilling and reskilling potentials of digital technology: they also crystallize a more general dyadic contradiction over the nature of work. On the one hand such systems reflect a broader trend of large institutions to rely on capital in the form of enterprise software to increase efficiency and profitability, while at the same time standardizing the labour and processes involved. On the other hand ECM systems could allow for the radical democratization of labour processes because of their ability to coordinate complex labour processes and the degree to which they facilitate cooperation between various individual laborers, who would thus become transformed into a ‘collective worker’ (Marx, 1976: 469). However, any such gains will be limited by the degree of alienation produced by such systems as employees are separated from their most important productive capability – tacit knowledge.

The increased adoption of ECM systems by large organizations suggests that Braverman’s deskilling thesis continues to possess analytical potential in the digital workplace. While several commentators have suggested that Braverman’s analysis was based on a romanticized view of traditional manual labour that has become outdated (Meiksins, 1994: 52; Heisig, 2009: 1642), the Taylorist underpinnings of ECM systems emphasize that the managerial trend of worker control and profit maximization remain. Despite the empiricist critiques of Braverman (Spencer, 2000: 228, Adler, 2007: 1314) his work continues to highlight the importance of viewing work as a dynamic process comprised of living labourers and not simply a reified production algorithm. Future research must be aimed at determining the effects of these systems on workers once deployed. A failure to critically examine such systems will ensure that the worst traits of Taylorism and Fordism that befell industrial labourers in the 20th century will extend to office workers in the 21st century.


Association for Information and Image Management (AIIM) (2008a) [http://www.aiim.org/What-is-Collaboration.aspx].


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The successful self-regulation of web designers

Helen Kennedy

**abstract**

In the absence of a professional body, code of ethics, or any other successful form of regulation, web designers deploy a range of strategies to self-regulate their own professional practices. These include the web standards movement and initiatives relating to web accessibility for users with disabilities. Indeed, with regard to accessibility, self-regulation has arguably been more effective than limited attempts to regulate web accessibility that have their origins outside the collective selves of web designers. The success of these self-regulatory strategies calls into question some of the negative readings of self-regulation in the growing body of literature about the cultural industries. What’s more, the ethical foundations of web designers’ self-regulation in relation to standards and accessibility suggest that, in this context, self-blaming (as one form of self-regulation) does not represent an absence of social critique, as has been suggested. Rather, self-blame is social critique.

**Introduction**

Web design has come a long way since its early anarchic days. It has undergone a process of professionalisation (Kennedy, 2010) that has seen the emergence of recognizable job titles, core skills, and standards. Web designers themselves are concerned about this process, and express this concern through debate about their own professionalism on the blogs of the industry’s gurus and of lesser known web workers. This debate takes place in the absence of a professional body, a code of ethics or any other successful form of regulation. In place of external regulation, web designers deploy a range of strategies in order to self-regulate. These include the Web Standards Project (WaSP), a grassroots coalition fighting for standardization in web design and development, and a commitment to accessibility, or the inclusion of people with disabilities amongst website audiences. Initiatives relating to standards and accessibility in web design are the subject of this paper.

This article engages specifically with ‘governmentality’ approaches to cultural work, which propose that self-government, self-regulation and self-exploitation practices prevail amongst cultural workers, as a result of the immanent operation of power, which trains workers to ‘reproduce for themselves the precise conditions of their subordination’ (Banks, 2007: 42). In this context, accessibility and standards-adherence can be considered as forms of self-regulation. Web accessibility and web standards are
close companions, and often, a website built to the standards advocated by the WaSP will be more accessible than one which is not. But designing an accessible website involves more than writing standardized code, and the best measure of a website’s accessibility, it is often argued, is to test it with disabled web users. An important distinction between standards and accessibility that is central to the concerns of this paper is that, whilst some efforts have been made to regulate accessibility from outside of the web industry, the standards movement has been entirely self-regulatory.

Because of the public good that results from successful self-regulatory practices – websites that are accessible to people with a range of disabilities, for example – this paper questions the negative readings of self-regulation that can be traced in some of the literature about the cultural industries, proposing instead that such self-regulatory practices as those discussed here could also be conceived as an etho-politics, to use Rose’s term (Rose, 1999a). As such, these practices have not entirely negative consequences. It should be noted that the aim of the article is not to celebrate an absence of state regulation, or capitalism’s stealthy absolution from social responsibility, to paraphrase McRobbie (2002a). Rather, it is to suggest that not all practices on the self-government spectrum can be read as necessarily de-politicised and corroded, as is suggested in some of the literature. Instead, we should acknowledge the good that sometimes comes of such practices. Thus the paper proposes thinking about self-regulation as, sometimes, both ethical and more effective than legislative regulation.

In this paper I draw both on the wealth of online material about web accessibility and standards, and on recent research. This includes interviews with some of the web design gurus who have been leading figures in the web standards movement, and Inclusive New Media Design (INMD)¹, a project which aimed to explore the best ways to encourage web designers and developers to build websites accessible to a very marginal, misunderstood and invisible community of web users: people with intellectual disabilities (ID)². The 31 participants on INMD were all experienced web professionals from a range of backgrounds. They provided the project team with ‘data’ about their work and accessibility practices over an 18-month period, through questionnaires, interviews, training workshops, online files including their blogs and websites, and ongoing email exchanges about accessibility and other web design issues. The article proceeds with an overview of debates about self-regulation in cultural work, followed by a discussion of accessibility and standards-adherence as self-regulatory practices.

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² People with intellectual disabilities represent a community frequently left out of discussions about web accessibility, for a number of reasons, not least the complexity of conditions that constitutes an intellectual disability, the lack of standardization in terms of assistive technologies used by these populations, and the fact that the expertise of the individuals driving the WAI and other accessibility initiatives usually lies in the fields of sensory or physical disability.
Self-regulation and cultural work

Governmentality, the set of practices and techniques through which governments produce citizens best suited to those governments’ needs, achieves its ends through the immanence of governmental power – not imposed from above, but decentralized, circulating through multiple agencies and channels. Such dynamics of power operate through a range of technologies. In this model, power works on and through individual bodies and selves, individuals’ desires are manipulated through the promotion of lifestyle and the subsequently felt need to shape one’s own life (Rose, 1999a). Government, therefore, ‘operates through subjects’ (du Gay, 1996: 54).

Rose proposes that the political terrain within which such models of power operate can be characterized as a kind of etho-politics – people are considered to be essentially ethical, and governments act upon ‘the ethical formation and the ethical self-management of individuals’ (Rose, 1999a: 475). What follows is ‘engagement in the collective destiny in the interests of economic advancement, civic stability, even justice and happiness’ (1999: 475). As a result, individuals take on social responsibilities which were formerly the domain of the state, and self-government replaces state government: ‘etho-politics concerns itself with the self-techniques necessary for responsible self-government’ (1999: 478).

Cultural work is not exempt from such processes. In the governmentality model, cultural work promises cultural labourers all kinds of advancements and happinesses. These include the promise of pleasure in work and a range of associated freedoms – to self-determine, self-govern, self-regulate. Thus cultural workers are active (but governed) subjects, embracing the freedoms prescribed for them. This sense of freedom and autonomy is crucial to cultural workers’ active participation in self-governmental mechanisms of rule.

Two narratives from Richard Sennett’s *Corrosion of Character* serve as examples of self-government (Sennett, 1998). The first concerns the character Rico, who assumes individual responsibility for the unemployment he experiences as a result of company downsizing in the ICT sector. He accepts the need for companies to make operations more efficient, and does not see the point of fighting redundancy. According to Sennett, he ‘treats uncertainty and risk-taking as challenges at work’ (Sennett, 1998: 28). The second narrative is about a group of dismissed IBM workers and the increasingly self-blaming stories that they told themselves about the reasons for their dismissal. First, the workers talked about how the company had betrayed the them; then, they came to see the company as the victim of external, globalising forces, compelled to make efficiency cuts. Finally, they assumed individual responsibility for their experiences at work, seeing their redundancy as their own doing: they could have done a better job of re-skilling, or bailed themselves out and set up as entrepreneurs.

There is an intimate relationship between self-government and the kind of individualization at work that Sennett discusses. As Banks points out, following Foucault, ‘techniques of active individualization are central to the exercise of power relations, and… individuals are complicit in the execution of power through their own situated practices’ (Banks, 2007: 46). McRobbie supports this proposition, arguing that

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in the absence of permanent social relations, individual cultural workers are their own micro-structures, or enterprises, and as a result need to be self-monitoring (McRobbie, 2002a). In this context of individualisation, Banks suggests that cultural workers may be resigned to competitive individualism:

Dazzled by the promise of future fame and locked into discourses that promote the virtues of ‘making it’, primarily through individual effort and creative talent alone, alternative forms of (self) government appear unlikely to emerge (Banks, 2007: 65).

In her discussion of Sennett’s book, McRobbie bemoans its gloomy implications (McRobbie, 2002b). She argues that, when applied to new, young workforces who only know work in fleeting, unstable and networked environments, Sennett’s proposal that such workplaces corrode would seem to suggest that this young workforce is always-already corroded. But McRobbie’s own work also has gloomy undertones. As the title of her 2002 article suggests – ‘Clubs to Companies: notes on the decline of political culture in speeded up creative worlds’ (McRobbie, 2002b) – she adopts a pessimistic tone, stating that it is more difficult to perceive radical democratic politics amongst cultural workers in 2002 than it was at the time of her earlier work on the topic in 1999. At that earlier date, McRobbie used the notion of ‘craft entrepreneurialism’ to talk about an approach to work that marries strategies necessary to survive in work (entrepreneurialism) with a commitment to values, standards and to what she calls ‘radical social democracy’ (McRobbie, 2002a: 521). Three years later, she argues that such a strategy is hard to envisage in the speeded up creative sector, where individualization and looking out for the self have become intensified. She claims that, in what she defines as second wave cultural work, there is ‘little possibility of a politics of the workplace’ (McRobbie, 2002a: 519), in part because there is no fixed workplace – instead there is ‘network sociality’ (Wittel, 2001). Workers can therefore only find individual ways of coping with structural difficulties. In these conditions, and at their worst, self-government or self-determination result in self-exploitation or self-blame. McRobbie writes: ‘Self blame, where social structures are increasingly illegible or opaque, serves the interests of the new capitalism well, ensuring the absence of social critique’ (McRobbie, 2002a: 521). Like Sennett’s always-already-there corrosion, there is an always-already-there de-politicisation in some of what McRobbie says.

This literature does important work in problematising the working conditions in the contemporary cultural sector which are uncritically embraced by more celebratory writers like Deuze (2007), Florida (2003) and Leadbetter (1999). The hidden costs of no collar labour, to paraphrase the title of Andrew Ross’s study of new media workers, need this kind of attention (Ross, 2003). And capitalism’s ability to absolve itself of social responsibility and offload that responsibility onto self-governing individuals is a problem for sure. But it may not be that all practices on the self-determination/self-government/self-regulation/self-blame/self-exploitation spectrum can necessarily be read as de-politicised and corroded. The danger is that this is implied in the assertions of McRobbie, Sennett and others.

The application of governmentality approaches to work in the cultural economy raises a number of questions that are pertinent to this analysis of web designers’ self-regulation. Are all practices that reflect an internalization of technologies of the self necessarily de-
politicised and devoid of social critique? Are all such practices the same? Self-blame, self-exploitation and self-regulation would appear to be three rather different things. Similarly, a fashion designer blaming herself for the failure of her business is very different from a web designer blaming herself for failing to include people with specific disabilities amongst her website’s audience. Attending to the specificities of these practices will advance our understanding of them, for, as Banks (2007) warns, one of the problems with this governmentality thesis is that government is undifferentiated.

So is cultural work. Yet different kinds of cultural work have distinct characteristics, which call into question generalized claims about all cultural work. For example, the assertion that cultural work is increasingly individualized is challenged by arguments about the collective intelligence, hive mind and intercreativity of Net production (for example Bruns, 2008 and Benkler, 2006). The voluntary sharing of knowledge and ‘open participation, communal evaluation’ (Bruns, 2008) that exist amongst web producers, whether they are paid for their labour or not, are modes of collectivity which do not take on traditional, unionized contours. They form part of the ethos of the World Wide Web (WWW) as an open, creative commons, a collective space for sharing creative works and for universal access, which drives professionals, amateurs and Pro-Ams alike to ‘produce culture for the digital economy’ (Terranova, 2000). Web designers belong both to communities of cultural workers and communities of Net producers. Therefore both of these contradictory sets of claims apply to them – pessimistic claims about individualised self-regulation, and celebratory claims about open and collective practices. Studies of web standards-adherence and accessibility need, then, to attempt to make sense of both of these forces that, together, suggest that self-regulation can be a collective as well as individual practice.

Another problem with the governmentality thesis for Banks is that workers are powerless – occasional acts of resistance are read as minor tactics rather than significant challenges to existing structures. One example of this can be seen in Moore and Taylor’s (not explicitly governmental) argument that participation in the free and open source software movement (FOSS) is a form of self-exploitation, through which subjects take responsibility for their own software and programming training, in preparation for re-entry into the marketplace through employment in companies like Microsoft or IBM (Moore and Taylor, 2009). Thus even the FOSS project is seen as serving the needs of capital, not challenging or undermining them. So it is necessary to ask whether it is possible to do cultural work outside the regimes of governmental power. Where, if anywhere, do the possibilities for critical action lie?

In order to address this question, and to make sense both of celebrations of the collective intelligence of Net production and of concerns about individualized self-regulation, it is useful to return to Rose’s emphasis on the ethical dimensions of self-governance, the appeal to the ‘values that guide individuals, their sense of duty, obligation, honour’ (1999a: 475). Although for Rose this is a problematic politics which fails to address real inequalities, it is through this appeal to ethics that politicized cultural work is possible, and that practices like accessibility and standards-adherence can form a part of critical self-governance. Arguably, it is because accessibility has an ethical dimension that, when web designers reflect on the accessibility of their websites, self-blame is social critique. The ethical dimensions of self-regulation and the notion of
Net production as ‘open participation, communal evaluation’ do not seem so contradictory, and together they provide a useful way to make sense of practices like accessibility and standards-adherence. The next section of this article maps such practices, in order to suggest that these are spheres where critical cultural work is possible.

‘The right thing to do’: the practice and ethics of web standards and web accessibility

The web standards project

The Web Standards Project (WaSP) was founded in 1998 by a small group of leading web designers and developers frustrated by the incompatibility of Netscape and Microsoft’s web browsers, which, at the time, each claimed around half of the browser market. The WaSP argued that the Web would ‘fragment into a tower of digital Babel’ (WaSP website) if these big players continued to insist on building incompatible browsers and fighting for web supremacy. Such deliberate incompatibility – with each other, and with what came to be known as ‘web standards’ – meant that websites appeared broken in some browsers, web developers had to build multiple versions of the same site, or they developed complicated workarounds. Both of these latter two solutions were ultimately costly to clients, not only in terms of time taken to build a site, but also because, as browser versions updated, sites quickly ceased to function and so became redundant. To avoid this ‘digital Babel’, the grassroots coalition that was the WaSP argued that all browser makers should support the recommendations of the World Wide Web Consortium, or W3C, a consultative, international body which develops technical specifications intended to ‘lead the Web to its full potential’ (W3C), with regard to scripting languages like HTML (HyperText Markup Language). Driving this campaign was a passionate commitment to Tim Berners-Lee’s ideal of the web as an ‘open, interoperable and accessible’ medium (WaSP website), an ethical ideal which, it was felt, could not be realized without the co-operation of the big browser companies.

One example of a ‘web standard’ advocated by WaSP and the W3C is the separation of content from style in website development. Content should be contained in a HTML document, and the presentation of the webpage should be managed through a separate, linked Cascading Style Sheet, or CSS. Such an approach ensures interoperability across browsers and a range of access devices, including mobile phones. It also facilitates accessibility for people with disabilities who access the web with assistive devices like screenreaders, which can ignore the visual styling of a site in the CSS and go straight to its marked-up content.

Dave Shea, a Canadian web designer keen to encourage the adoption of web standards, to promote the aesthetic possibilities of CSS-based design and to defy critics of standards-based, accessible websites created css Zen Garden in 2003 (css Zen Garden). The css Zen Garden website invites web designers to submit different designs of the same standard HTML page, and then showcases the best of these, demonstrating the beauty and stylistic variety possible with CSS. Figures 1-4 below show the unstyled HTML page that all web designers were invited to style, followed by the first three
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designs on the current version of the website (where 200+ of the 1000+ submitted designs have been displayed). css Zen Garden is an example of an initiative that has developed out of web designers’ self-regulation of their own adherence to standards. Nobody (or no body) is making them do this. Rather, in order to promote standards, such initiatives are voluntarily undertaken.

Figure 1: css Zen Garden unstyled HTML page, http://www.csszengarden.com/, by Dave Shea (published under a creative commons license)

Figure 2: Under the Sea, http://www.csszengarden.com/?cssfile=213/213.css&page=0, by Eric Stoltz (published under a creative commons license)
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Figure 3: Make ‘em Proud, http://www.csszengarden.com/?cssfile=/212/212.css&page=0, by Michael McAghon and Scotty Reifsnyder (published under a creative commons license)

Figure 4: Orchid Beauty, http://www.csszengarden.com/?cssfile=/211/211.css&page=0, by Kevin Addison (published under a creative commons license)
The WaSP message was not initially well received by the browser manufacturers who found the notion that they should share the same open standards bizarre – they were, after all, vying for market share. As the WaSP website states, they were also uncomfortable with the idea that ‘anyone – including the people who actually built the web – had the right to tell them what they should or should not do’. But over time, browser-makers listened, so today browsers are, on the whole, standards-compliant. This is one measure of the success of the WaSP – today, the most commonly used browsers (Internet Explorer 6, 7 and 8, Firefox, Google Chrome and Safari (w3schools)) provide support for many web standards. Thus, the WaSP website states that ‘The WaSP’s mission would seem to have been accomplished’.

But the degree to which web standards have been successfully implemented is contested. In one interview, British web design guru Andy Clarke, author of Transcending CSS: the Fine Art of Web Design (2006) and former WaSP member, described web standards techniques as ‘done and dusted’. In another, Eric Meyer, web standards veteran and author of most web designers’ CSS bible CSS: The Definitive Guide (2000), argued that as long as there is more than one browser, there is will incompatibility. He said:

> every browser will do things a little bit differently, whether on purpose or not ... because they have legacy behavior. The history of each browser’s behavior is expressed through how it handles the web.

Former WaSP leader Molly Holzschlag agrees, arguing that ‘web standards are not a done deal’, not only because the technologies in question are still being specified, but more importantly, they are not sufficiently widely implemented – in her words, ‘implementation trumps specification’. This would appear to be the view of the WaSP, which claims that ‘most of the web remains a Balkanised mess of non-valid mark-up, unstructured documents yoked to outdated presentation hacks and incompatible code fragments’ (WaSP), pointing to the need for designers and developers, not just browser manufacturers, to implement standards. But the work that still needs to be done ensuring that all websites are built to standards notwithstanding, the achievements of a handful of self-selected web professionals in persuading the powerful browser companies to support standards is a noteworthy example of web designers’ successful efforts to govern themselves.

**The accessibility imperative**

In contrast to the grassroots origins of the Web Standards Project, the story of its close companion web accessibility begins with the establishment in 1997 of the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) by the web’s governing body, the W3C. Despite their less organic roots, accessibility initiatives like the WAI have, like the WaSP, grown out of the belief expressed by WWW founder Tim Berners-Lee that ‘the power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect’ (Berners-Lee, undated). Thus the very founding principle of web accessibility is ethical, perhaps more so than the WaSP, which was also motivated by a desire for efficiency and cost-effectiveness.
The WAI develops guidelines and technical documentation targeted at the different communities who shape how users experience the web, such as their Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) for web designers and developers. The purpose of the WCAG guidelines, now in their second version, is to outline design principles for creating accessible web content. WCAG 2.0 states that people with disabilities, who may be using assistive technologies, need to be able to perceive and understand website content and to operate websites, and those sites need to be built with web technologies which are sufficiently robust to be interpreted by the wide range of devices used to access the web, including assistive devices. Common accessibility techniques include: alternative textual descriptions of images which can be read out by a screenreader; grouping links as a list, so they can be identified easily; or including a link at the top of the page that allows a screenreader to jump over a long list of links and go straight to the page content.

There are, not surprisingly, many problems with the WCAG guidelines, which have been subject to fierce critique. The most common criticism is that adherence to them does not necessarily result in genuine accessibility. The WCAG 2.0 document acknowledges that the guidelines ‘are not able to address the needs of people with all types, degrees, and combinations of disability’ (WCAG); the diverse needs of people with different sensory, motor or cognitive disabilities make this a virtually impossible task. Other criticisms of the WCAG guidelines focus on their actual usefulness for their target audience – web designers and developers. They are criticized for being full of jargon; definitions are as hard to understand as terms being defined, argues Moss (2006). Our participants on Inclusive New Media Design echoed these concerns. Whilst some participants acknowledged the value of WCAG 1.0 guidelines (which were current at the time of the research), describing them as ‘nice to test against’ or ‘very thorough documents’, on the whole they were criticized for the complexity of their language, which made it difficult to implement them. ‘Because of their nature as standards, the language used and because it is so comprehensive, it can be off-putting’, said Tom, who was responsible for advising employees of a large telecommunications company on accessibility practices (see Clark, 2006 and Sampson-Wild, 2007 for further criticism of WCAG; both are former WAI members).

These criticisms highlight some of the imperfections of WCAG, both in terms of their usability by web designers and whether they actually lead to accessible websites. But despite these limitations, there is a wealth of evidence that testifies to a commitment to accessibility amongst web designers. Acknowledgement of this commitment is important, in order to counter studies of accessibility which simply conclude that the web is inaccessible (for example Coyne and Nielsen 2001, Kelly 2002) or that web designers systematically disable web users through what are described as ‘oppressive practices’ (Adam and Kreps, 2006: 204). Such a commitment can be traced in the few academic studies of accessibility from producers’ perspectives. Lazar et al’s study of webmaster (sic) perceptions of accessibility published in 2004, for example, found that the majority of the 175 webmasters surveyed were committed to accessibility. Likewise, a small scale survey that I carried out with web designers and developers in the north of England found that 48/49 respondents aim to produce accessible websites. Within key international events for web designers, slots are consistently given over to discussions of accessibility. To give just two examples, The Future of Web Design in London in
2009 featured Robin Christopherson from AbilityNet, and @Media 2007 in London featured Joe Clark, author of *Building Accessible Websites* (2002) and Shawn Lawton Henry, WAI member and author of *Just Ask: Integrating Accessibility Throughout Design* (2007), all talking about accessibility. Such events are attended by thousands of web designers in the megacities of the developed world, where much web design takes place. Online, there is a plethora of resources and organizations whose primary aim is to support web designers and developers in their accessibility efforts, beyond the WAI’s own webpages. And there are associations such as The Guild of Accessible Web Designers promoting accessible design standards.

Legislative efforts have also been made to further the accessibility cause. In the US, Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act spells out accessibility requirements for federal website. In the UK, changes made to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in 2004 made it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in the provision of services, information, education or employment. However, legislation in these countries and elsewhere is limited in its effectiveness. Section 508 applies only to federal websites, is limited in scope, and the DDA’s requirement of ‘reasonable adjustments’ for people with disabilities can mean that an inaccessible flight booking website is supplemented with a *telephone service* for people who cannot access the website, rather than the website itself being made accessible. With an out-of-court settlement on a case against two unnamed companies in the UK, a settlement before a full trial by the US company Target and one legal success story in Australia, in the case of Maguire v. the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, the legislation has not been extensively tested. What’s more, the legislation targets the site owner, not the designer or developer. Consequently, legislation does not play a major role in driving web designers to accessible practices. When we asked some of our INMD participants what made them start wanting to produce accessible websites, only one mentioned the DDA, stating ‘In the first instance it was client driven. A lot of our clients are bound by the DDA to make their sites accessible’. Others said that their motivation was user-driven – either an understanding of the difficulties disabled users face, or a love of the web and a commitment to the principle of access for all. Similarly, when asked why they were willing to dedicate up to seven days of their time to attend INMD workshops (which, for freelance participants, meant seven days without pay), the following were amongst the reasons given:

I consider accessibility to be a core part of my discipline. (William, senior web developer)

I would like to improve my practical knowledge of web accessibility to improve my professional practice generally. (Frances, lecturer and freelance web developer).

Need to adhere to best practice, or at least try to get there. (Billie, web developer).

None of this suggests that legislative regulation is the main driver to accessibility. Instead, self-regulation – of both individual and collective selves – has been central to the spread of accessibility. Many web designers and developers choose to adopt WCAG guidance, despite its complexity and the absence of clear or routinely enforced legislation.
Further evidence of this self-regulated commitment to accessibility could be seen amongst INMD participants, both in the fact of their involvement with the project, and in what they did as a consequence of their attendance, as all participants took action to enhance accessibility for intellectually disabled web users as a result of what they learnt on INMD. This included: discussing issues at work, or joining accessibility boards or user testing sessions; using CSS for accessibility; using more supportive imagery to communicate core content; ensuring fonts are big enough and legible; using simple layouts and simple language; checking existing work for accessibility. Participants’ commitment to sharing knowledge gained on INMD was evident both in the reasons that some of them participated (to meet committed peers, share knowledge, advise and encourage others) and in the extent to which they acted on this, passing on what they had learnt, either in their workplaces or by blogging about INMD. This voluntary sharing of knowledge and giving away their newfound expertise for free reflect the collective ethos of many people who are active on the web. Such activities call into question the proposal that cultural workers in the speeded up creative sector are resigned to competitive individualism (McRobbie, 2002b) and demonstrate how self-regulation can be collective, as well as individual. This is one example of an effort to collectivise, or a mode of collectivity, that does not take traditional shape.

But web designers such as our INMD participants recognize external factors that impact on their ability to self-regulate their accessibility practices. These include: clients (or equivalent decision-makers) not caring about accessibility, or wanting something inaccessible; lack of access to disabled web users and related assistive technologies in order to user test; the nature of the projects they work on or the tasks they undertake; timetables and budgets; and, in relation to intellectual disability accessibility, the lack of guidelines for this user group. In addition to these external barriers, web designers sometimes blame themselves for their failure to achieve full accessibility. For example, in the INMD workshops, some participants were highly self-critical of their own efforts to engage intellectually disabled web users in user testing:

Planning for someone I couldn’t really judge stayed a very vague thing for me and hence failed today! (Sofia, design agency director)

Some of the answers to my questions made me realize that my questions were stupid. (Timothy, self-employed web developer)

The strong language of ‘failing’ and ‘asking stupid questions’ represents a highly critical form of self-regulation. This critical self-blaming can be read as a form of social critique, not an absence of it, as McRobbie suggests (2002b). The drive to build a more inclusive web is part of a bigger commitment to a more inclusive society, so that when individual web designers feel that they are failing to build such a web, self-critique is a form of acknowledgement that society itself is not inclusive enough.

Where does such self-regulatory commitment – to accessibility, to the voluntary sharing of knowledge – come from? My argument is that it comes from ethics, from the ethical formation of individuals, which results in their ethical self-management (Rose, 1999b). Web designers themselves debate the ethics of web accessibility, on web design sites and their gurus’ blogs. For some, ‘accessibility is simply the ethically/morally right thing to do’ (Patrick Lauke, Opera web evangelist and member of WaSP accessibility
task force, commenting on the WaSP website in 2005). A UK-based web developer, programmer, author and speaker who goes by the name of Brothercake says on his blog: ‘if you’re not producing accessible content – if you’re not prepared to try – then you have no business in this industry at all’ (2007). Furthermore, Lazar et al (2004) concluded that, as 166/175 of their respondents said that they considered ethics when planning and updating their websites, most web professionals view accessibility as an ethical issue.

Whether such ethical practices should be regulated or self-regulated is also the subject of debate. Web design guru Andy Clarke referenced Foucault in a 2005 blog post entitled ‘Accessibility and a society of control’, which generated almost 50 responses (Clarke, 2005). Here Clarke argues that, because control societies rob individuals of their freedom to act responsibly, accessibility should not be subject to regulation or legislation. If it is regulated, it becomes viewed as a matter of compliance, rather than a matter of professional craft. In contrast, another guru Andy Budd writes:

\[\text{I would love to live in a world where everybody acted in a socially responsible way. However the reality is we need to have legislation to help enforce equality in the cases where social, commercial or political pressure alone aren’t enough. (Budd, 2005)}\]

But whether the self or the state should regulate accessibility, the reality is that it is governed by the self. In relation to accessibility (and web standards), where state-like regulation is either ineffective (or absent), self-regulation has had some success. Perhaps with greater and better state-like regulation, greater and better accessibility would be achieved. Perhaps it is the dependence on the self to regulate that results in the limited achievements of the accessibility movement, as Joe Clark suggests in his criticism of the failure of self-regulation in relation to video-captioning (Clark, 2008). But even if accessibility practices and guidance are flawed, something has been achieved. The accessibility journey is underway, and it is largely self-regulated.

**Accessibility, standards and etho-political self-regulation**

The range of activities, practices and debate discussed in the previous section gives an indication both of the pervasiveness of accessibility in the working lives of web designers and of the achievements of the web standards movement. The diffusion of accessibility into web design events, in discussions amongst web designers and developers about their professionalism, and in online and offline resources about web design is evidence of accessibility’s pervasiveness. The success of the WaSP in persuading browser manufacturers to build standards-compliant browsers is evidence of its achievements. And whilst the WWW is neither universally accessible nor consistently built according to the standards advocated by WaSP, accessibility and web standards are core components of many web designers’ everyday practices.

The accessibility practices and standards-compliance of web designers are a form of self-regulation. Occasionally clients and employers require web professionals to build accessible websites, but more often, designers and developers voluntarily engage in accessibility practices and attempt to adhere to guidance. Indeed, many INMD participants spoke of their clients’ resistance to accessibility, and of their desire to share
what they learned on our projects with their clients, as well as their colleagues and committed peers. Participation in INMD itself could be seen as a kind of self-regulation – to improve professional practice, adhere to best practice, improve accessibility techniques, as some participants said.

This self-regulation is both individual and collective. The individual web designer validates her own code to ensure standards-compliance, signs up for projects like INMD, follows the blogs and Twitter updates of leading proponents of standards and accessibility for their latest views. At the same time, web designers share knowledge and expertise, and engage in ongoing dialogue and debate on blogs and microblogs, reading and commenting on each other’s sites and code, and so participating in the collective self-regulation of standards and accessibility. The Web Standards Project itself could be seen as a supreme example of effective, collective self-regulation, with its aim of moving closer to a standardized, accessible web. In this sense, then, ‘network sociality’ makes possible open, sharing, collective practices in relation to accessibility. Thus web work is not individualized, but based on dispersed collectivities of networked individuals. Web workers are not resigned to competitive individualism; many are committed to the original ideal of the web as a collective, shared, open and accessible space, however problematic or not-yet-realised that ideal might be.

What’s more, strategies of self-regulation amongst web designers have proven more successful than attempts at state-like regulation. The successes of the Web Standards Project can be seen in browsers’ increasing support for standards. Thus they are more measurable than the achievements of the Web Accessibility Initiative, which may have played some role in persuading web designers and developers to build accessible websites, but which is also criticized for its complex documentation, and rarely cited as a driver to accessibility. Comparing regulation and self-regulation in an interview, Eric Meyer claimed that the self-regulatory approach of WaSP ‘yielded way more than any set of legislation would have done’. If laws had been passed about standards, he claimed, they would have been ignored or circumvented. Instead, ‘the best driver would be just making the case for why it needs to happen, making the business case, making developers aware of what they can do’. For these reasons, and because of the limited success of attempts to legislate accessibility, Meyer claims that a Web Accessibility Project, along the lines of the WaSP, is now needed.

Voluntary self-regulation derives, in part, from the ethical dimensions of accessibility and standards, and their origins in those ideals of openness and access by everyone. The WAI states that when the principles of a perceivable, operable, understandable and robust web – in other words, an accessible web – are ignored, disabled users will quite simply ‘not be able to access the content’. The homepage of the WaSP states that ‘The Web Standards Project is a grassroots coalition fighting for standards which ensure simple, affordable access to web technologies for all.’ Implicit in these simple appeals to the ‘values that guide individuals’ (Rose, 1999b: 475) is an assumption that web designers and developers have ethics, and accessibility and standards initiatives subsequently act upon their ethical self-management. Thus accessibility and standards-adherence are forms of self-regulation that are not always-already corroded and depoliticized. In contrast, they are ethical practices embedded within a collective politics of inclusion. Some good comes of these self-regulatory practices – the inclusion
of otherwise excluded disabled citizens in the increasingly ubiquitous WWW; simpler and cheaper web production; and websites that will work well with future access devices. Accessibility and standards-adherence could therefore be seen as forms of commitment to what McRobbie calls ‘radical social democracy’ (1999). Politics, then, are not completely absent from work in the speeded up cultural industries. The possibility of doing good, of politicized and critical cultural work, exists in accessibility and standards-compliance. Arguably, the ethical inflections of such practices mean that critical self-blame (for not being accessible enough, for example) is also a form of radical social democracy, representing a desire for an inclusive web, and an inclusive society.

This article is not arguing that the web is accessible and standardised. There are too many examples of barriers and obstacles to such practices that provide evidence that this is not the case. But amongst all of the noise about the ‘Balkanised mess’ and inaccessibility of the web, it is important to think about where accessibility and standards-adherence do exist, as ethical practices, or as ideals, and to think about what an accessible, standards-compliant web means – for disabled web users, for people who build the web, and for cultural work. Neither is the article a celebration of the shift of control from state to self, or from employer to self, or from any other extra-bodily entity to self. But it does acknowledge that some good can sometimes come of this. Because sometimes, self-regulation can be collectively-managed, effective and ethical.


W3schools (undated) Browser Statistics: [http://www.w3schools.com/browsers/browsers_stats.asp]

Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) [http://www.w3.org/WAI/]

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) (2008) [http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/].


The Web Standards Project (WaSP). [http://www.webstandards.org/]


World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). [http://www.w3.org/]

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The labour of ICT4D: Whither the separation of carriage and content?

Sandra Smeltzer and Daniel J. Paré

Abstract

Contemporary mainstream narratives about the relationship between technology and development often rhetorically construct technology as a symbol of modernity and a catalyst for further development. The argument developed in the pages that follow posits that revisiting the distinction between carriage and content as analytical constructs offers a useful means of investigating the power struggles at play in efforts to define what constitutes knowledge labour vis-à-vis the ICT sector in countries with restricted media environments. By extension, these power struggles over what constitutes ‘productive’ labour represent contesting views about development in general. Drawing on Malaysia as a case study, we examine how this distinction plays out on the ground and assess its implications for local knowledge labour.

But nowhere – and now we get to the heart of the matter – can we find a master narrative so deeply entrenched in popular imagination and popular language as in the mythic idea of progress, particularly technological progress. (Staudenmaier, 1994: 262-263)

Technology has come to ‘form the basis of notions of modernity, the universal achievability and desirability of which underpin dominant development narratives. (Uimonen, 2001: 6)

Introduction

Contemporary mainstream narratives about the relationship between technology and development often rhetorically construct technology as both a symbol of modernity and a catalyst for development. This vision suggests that technology is a driving force of history and that its relationship with society is unidirectional in nature (i.e., technology appears and does something to society). Within this context, acquiring the latest technology is synonymous with being modern; penetration rates of various information and communication mediums serve as quantitative proxies for the measurement of progress. The underlying premise here suggests that information and communication technologies (ICTs) may be understood as a panacea for a host of economic, political, and social ills.

Echoing the tenets of modernization theory, this view implies that the principal question to be asked is not if, or under what conditions, ICTs can help foster development, but...
rather, how best to harness the power of these technologies to beget the economic, political, and socio-cultural betterment that will necessarily follow. Within much of the mainstream academic and policy discourse this perspective manifests itself in two ways. The first is reflected in the continued emphasis placed upon access and connectivity in many ICT for development (ICT4D) programs and policies. The resulting focus on providing the technical infrastructure required to connect people with the digital world ‘extricates information from communication processes’ (Pickard, 2007: 134; see also Garnham, 2000, 2002; May, 2002; Robins and Webster, 2001). Critics of this approach contend that it is erroneous to frame the physical presence of technology as the symbol of modernity and the primary cause of development given that such techno-fetishism fails to give sufficient consideration to a wide range of context-oriented variables that directly influence the extent to which digital opportunities may be realized (see, as examples, Garnham, 2000; Giddens, 1990; Heeks, 2002; Mansell, 2002; Marx, 1987, 1996; Sen, 1999; Weigel, 2004).

Second, it often is assumed that a technologically driven knowledge-based economy will necessarily guarantee the overall prosperity of developing and transitioning – also referred to as newly emerging or newly industrializing – economies in an increasingly competitive global networked system. A shortcoming with this line of reasoning is its grounding in the assumptions of modernization theory which suggest that, ‘following the trajectories of already established economic powers will produce similar results for less developed countries’ (Jarman and Chopra, 2008: 200-201). While ICTs certainly offer the potential to facilitate economic, political, and socio-cultural development, myriad labour issues (as well as a range of other concerns) need to be addressed in order to reap the opportunities afforded by these technologies (Humphrey, et al., 2003; Paré, 2003, 2005; Smeltzer, 2008).

Taken together, the above two critiques of the developmental potential of creating a knowledge-based economy highlight the extent to which actualizing its potential benefits is contingent upon the specific types of policies and programs that are implemented at local, national, and international levels. Put simply, realizing the opportunities afforded by digital technologies is directly influenced by a host of economic and non-economic factors. Indeed, the most effective ICT-oriented programs and policies are those for which technology is not taken as a means or end of development, but rather as both a means and end (Drèze and Sen, 2002; Sen 1999, 2009).

Given the technical, functional, and corporate re-convergence that has taken place in the media and communication sector over the last quarter century, it should come as no surprise that this phenomenon has been accompanied by the discursive conflation of carriage and content. Yet, as our discussion of Malaysia – a transitioning country seeking to establish itself as a high-tech Asian hub in the global knowledge-based economy – illustrates, the information and communication policies and programs

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1 Expounding on this notion, Jarman and Chopra (2008) argue that the World Bank has actively pushed periphery and semi-periphery countries to strive toward establishing Western-oriented knowledge-based economies, while downplaying socio-economic, historical, and socio-political considerations.
advanced by the government appear to maintain, and in some cases actually promote, a functional separation of carriage and content issues.\footnote{At an international level, perhaps the clearest example of how the rhetorical conflation of carriage and content influences efforts to define what constitutes progress and development may be seen in how the tenets of the information society ideology underpinned the events leading up to, and the outcome of, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). As a result, the WSIS deliberations ultimately focused largely on infrastructure-related issues, sideling discussions about public and community media systems, global media conglomeration, and meaningful access to, and usage of, ICTs. In the words of one observer, ‘information technology, convergence and connectivity… set the stage for the Summit, thus promoting the idea that technology and infrastructure would in themselves contribute to the realization of the UN Millennium Development Goals’ (Padovani and Nordenstreng, 2005: 267, emphasis added).}

As is the case in many other countries, Malaysia’s government extols carriage-oriented labour that is associated with knowledge-based economic activities. Hardware development and production, implementation of computers and internet access points are seen to create an IT-savvy citizenry. It also lauds content-oriented labour in the areas of software research and development, back-office work, and grey-collar activities\footnote{Within the context of service industries, of which software research and development is a part, the phrase ‘back-office work’ refers to administrative and other work-related functions that take place without direct customer contact. Grey-collar activities refers to occupations and tasks that incorporate aspects of blue- and white-collar work and/or occupations that differ significantly from the two latter categorizations. High-tech sectors, for example, often are referred to as grey-collar industries.} that contribute to the government’s vision of a productive and lucrative knowledge-based economy. The common link in both instances is an adherence to the ‘old’ regulatory distinction between carriage and content in which knowledge labour is associated foremost with work that is oriented toward market production.

An increasingly prominent facet of the global knowledge economy, however, is an acknowledgement that content-related work now combines the above type of labour plus a range of non-market information producers. In addition to its potential social implications, non-market information production is becoming an important economic phenomenon in its own right with information, knowledge and culture morphing into some of the most prominent high-value-added economic activities. As Benkler notes,

Social behavior that traditionally was relegated to the peripheries of the economy has become central to the most advanced economies. Nonmarket behavior is becoming central to producing our information and cultural environment. Sources of knowledge and cultural edification, through which we come to know and comprehend the world, to form our opinions about it, and to express ourselves in communication with others about what we see and believe have shifted from heavy reliance on commercial, concentrated media, to being produced on a much more widely distributed model, by many actors who are not driven by the imperatives of advertising or the sale of entertainment goods. (2006: 56)

Yet, content-oriented knowledge-based labour activities that extend beyond a narrow economic understanding of national development engender a very different reaction from many governments around the world. The federal authorities in Malaysia, for instance, typically depict the knowledge labour of political bloggers, critical non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and online alternative and independent media as detrimental to Malaysia’s bid to become a fully developed nation. The argument

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3 Within the context of service industries, of which software research and development is a part, the phrase ‘back-office work’ refers to administrative and other work-related functions that take place without direct customer contact. Grey-collar activities refers to occupations and tasks that incorporate aspects of blue- and white-collar work and/or occupations that differ significantly from the two latter categorizations. High-tech sectors, for example, often are referred to as grey-collar industries.
developed in the pages that follow posits that revisiting the distinction between carriage and content as an analytical construct offers a useful means of investigating power struggles between these various actors within the Malaysian context to define what constitutes valued labour and, by extension, what constitutes progress and development writ large.

**Blurring boundaries in ICT4D**

While ICT4D often is associated with the notion of implementing ICTs in the very poorest of countries, this narrow view is misleading. At its core, ICT4D is fundamentally an issue of defining the means by which citizens and states achieve economic, political and socio-cultural objectives in a global networked economy. As such, ICT4D has important implications for transitioning economies like Malaysia, as well as marginalized communities within industrialized and developing countries.

While the specific policy opportunities and constraints afforded by ICTs in these contexts may differ from those presented historically by broadcasting and telecommunication networks, the fundamental principles at stake with regard to development are not new. Defining and implementing governance mechanisms to realize societal objectives has always been the core issue within communication and media policy. These objectives may be divided into three broad categories that pertain to achieving some interpretation of the public interest: economic welfare, political welfare, and socio-cultural welfare (Melody, 1990; van Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2003; van Cuilenburg and Verhoest, 1998). Traditionally, the pursuit of these goals in the communication realm was premised on a distinction between regulating the carriage of communication signals and regulating the content of the signals. Issues of carriage tended to fall under the purview of telecommunication policy and centered on concerns relating to technical infrastructures and market conditions. Broadly speaking, this avenue of communication policy usually was grounded in an understanding of the public interest that privileged issues of economic welfare.

By contrast, issues of content were directly associated with media policy (i.e., broadcasting, newspapers, and other forms of information distribution to the public) and tended to be addressed through media-specific laws and regulations. While the underlying policy considerations vary across national contexts, areas of concern in this domain have usually focused on questions of accountability, diversity, freedom, and quality of content. In other words, the regulation of content has largely been oriented toward a notion of public interest that gives primacy to issues of political welfare and achieving socio-cultural objectives.

A key component of the technical/functional and corporate re-convergence that took place throughout the late 1980s and 1990s was the literal and rhetorical bundling of carriage and content. The distinction between carriage and content can still, however, be seen in the two dominant approaches toward implementing ICT4D initiatives. At one level ICT4D is fundamentally an issue of managing, implementing, and diffusing technological infrastructure. This includes implementing internet backbones and mobile telephony networks, providing computer and internet access, managing internet service
and mobile telephony providers, and overseeing spectrum allocations. The focus of this mainstream approach is on fostering market conditions to support the rollout of technologies that are expected to facilitate economic growth by reducing barriers to trade, enhancing access to information, and expanding social networks. Rooted in a mainstream information society ideology, the underlying assumption of this carriage-oriented approach is that the increased adoption and implementation of ICT infrastructures, combined with a sufficiently liberalized and privatized market environment, will lead to the free-flow of information and knowledge. It is hypothesized that this will, in turn, translate into citizens producing and consuming content that will ultimately foster broader development.

At another level, ICT4D is understood as being fundamentally an issue of addressing economic, political, and socio-cultural considerations (e.g., capability/skills, traditional and computer literacy, gender, geography, income, motivation, and commercial and regulatory environments) that may facilitate or constrain the realization of digital opportunities among different population segments, regions, and countries (see, as examples, Boyle, 2002; Sen, 1999; Warschauer, 2003). This content-oriented approach to ICT4D focuses attention foremost on contextual factors that influence the production and consumption of information and knowledge, and posits that achieving successful outcomes in the ICT4D domain is contingent on much more than simply facilitating physical access and connectivity to ICTs. Specifically, it requires recognition that development is intrinsically a communication phenomenon.

Hence, the conventional, mainstream approach to development-oriented ICT practices may be understood as operating within what Mansell calls an ahistorical exogenous framework that treats technologies ‘as if they are objects isolated from the social, political and economic environment in which they are produced and consumed’ (2008: 3). By comparison, the alternative view of the relationship between ICTs and development may be seen as operating under an endogenous framework that ‘accommodates analysis of the opportunities and constraints offered by innovative technologies’ and thus encourages an economic, historical, political, and socio-cultural contextualization of ICT4D initiatives (Mansell, 2008: 5). This dichotomy reflects a clash between the paradoxical ‘role of communications as both the raw resource for citizenship, governed by criteria of need, rights and communality, but also as commodities for consumers, governed only by market power’ (Golding, 2000: 180).

Certainly, significant overlaps do exist between carriage and content in today’s global networked environment. The type of content citizens can produce and consume, for instance, is limited by the infrastructure available to them and whether one has the capabilities and motivation to use it. Likewise, government authorities may elect to employ technological or other measures aimed at restricting or limiting the production and consumption of content they deem inappropriate (see, for example, Goldsmith and Wu, 2006), as is the case for Malaysia. Nevertheless, conflating content-related considerations under the auspices of carriage risks depoliticizing and decontextualizing the role(s) played by ICT production and consumption in different contexts. It also risks obscuring the complex dynamics and power relations at play in efforts to define what constitutes development and, concomitantly, the implications for so-called knowledge labour. Focusing on Malaysia, it is to this issue that our attention now turns.
Building a high-tech k-economy: Malaysia’s knowledge workers

Given its restricted media environment, Malaysia offers a fruitful state-level example of how knowledge labour is categorized by different actors on the ground in accordance with a traditional carriage/content dichotomy. Malaysia’s federal government has poured significant economic and political resources into building the infrastructure it considers necessary for producing a domestic knowledge-based economy and society. One of its primary goals in this regard is to ‘lessen its dependence on low-wage export manufacturing’ through the widespread implementation and diffusion of ICTs’ (Elias, 2009: 470). This focus on creating an ICT-oriented knowledge-based economy, or simply k-economy as it is often referred to in country, as a means for competing internationally is neither surprising, nor unique to Malaysia. As Ong writes, for emerging and transitioning countries around the globe ‘the World Bank has prescribed “political entrepreneurialism”, or a shift from a focus on the production of goods (already underway for decades) to the production of educated subjects’ (2007: 5). The MSC Malaysia project – formerly known as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) – is illustrative of this shift and demonstrates well how Malaysia’s government has rhetorically constructed ICTs as both a symbol of the country’s modernity and as a catalyst for further knowledge-based development.

In the mid-1990s, then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad embraced the knowledge economy paradigm as a means for promoting national development, launching the MSC in the hope of creating an international high-tech hub akin to California’s Silicon Valley. Mahathir expected that this initiative would enable Malaysia’s domestic high-tech sector to ‘leapfrog into leadership in the Information Age’, and thus engineer a new model of non-Western modernity (Wong, 2003: 296). Building a globally attractive domestic knowledge economy became a primary focus in Malaysia’s economic policy making after the 1997 economic slowdown and carried on as a prominent theme in the government’s 2001-2010 Third Outline Perspective Plan (Elias, 2009). According to the Plan, which charted the socio-economic future of the country, the government promised that:

> The knowledge-based economy will provide the platform to sustain a rapid rate of economic growth and enhance international competitiveness… the economy will be characterized by knowledge-based activities and high-technology industries accounting for a significant share of employment, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and exports. Besides being a factor of production, knowledge will become a commodity to be traded. (NITC, 2001: 5.03)

Despite the initial optimism surrounding this undertaking, it has been clear for some time now that the MSC Malaysia project failed to live up to expectations. Rather than being on the cutting edge of research and development for ICT carriage and content, firms have instead played more of an intermediary role, primarily performing economically oriented content-related undertakings such as back-office and technology-support functions (Jarman and Chopra, 2008). Nevertheless, the Malaysian government

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4 For an extensive overview of transformations in Malaysia’s labour market post-independence (1957), see Khong (2010).
continues to promote the importance of the knowledge worker to the country’s modern future. Correspondingly, the 2006-2010 Ninth Malaysia Plan (the government’s budget blueprint) outlines that ‘efforts will be intensified to develop knowledge workers who are competitive, flexible, dynamic and performance-oriented’ (Malaysia, 2005: 259). As current Prime Minister Najib Razak remarked in June 2009,  

we have become a successful middle income economy, but we cannot and will not be caught in the middle income country trap…. We need to make the shift to a high income economy or we risk losing growth momentum in our economics and vibrancy in our markets. (Quoted in Chance, 2009a)

Fear of slipping in the global economy ranks has recently been compounded by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) World Investment Report 2010, which indicates that foreign direct investment (FDI) in Malaysia dropped 81 percent between 2009 and 2010. According to Rajah Raisiah, the Khazanah Nasional chair of regulatory studies at the University of Malaya, Malaysia lacks enough highly skilled technologists and scientists to create the type of economy the government wants, and boasts only about one tenth of what China, India, Taiwan, Vietnam and Singapore have in terms of R&D talent (cited in Yap, 2010). As a result, although the government would like to see MSC Malaysia attract and incubate high-end white-collar enterprises, it also has promoted the stepping-stone job creation benefits of the grey-collar work of call centres, financial services, and human resources that have kept the initiative alive (Jarman and Chopra, 2008).

These forms of semi-skilled heterogeneous waged knowledge labour support an increasingly sophisticated international division of labour that is predicated upon the use of digital technologies to strategically (re)locate around the world various segments of production processes. This segmentation process places workers in a precarious position and arguably helps to keep Malaysia (and other similarly transitioning economies) in a position of dependence vis-à-vis more technologically advanced economies. Other labour concerns within the Malaysian context revolve around the government’s history of actively encouraging anti-unionism5, allowing the exploitation of foreign migrant labour, and the gendering of low- and increasingly semi-skilled labour specifically in the technology sector (Elias, 2009: 475-76; Khong, 2010; Turner, 2006). In 2010, the government raised the stakes, proposing controversial amendments

5 According to the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), which advocates for stronger trade union rights and enhanced collective bargaining, only 6.3 percent of Malaysia’s workforce is unionized. Moreover, this unionization is highly fragmented and segregated by industry, region, and occupation, making any sort of cohesive, broad-based bargaining practically impossible (Malaysian Trades Union Congress, 2010a).

6 As Elias describes, these latter concerns address ‘the types of work available to women in the knowledge economy – notably, the rise of call-centre employment as a new ‘hi-tech’ form of low-wage feminized employment’ (2009: 478). It also is important to note that Malaysia’s long-standing and contentious racial, ethnic, and religious politics have played a central role in domestic labour issues. The Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, led by the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party, has actively intervened in the market to support the allegedly disadvantaged Malay population. Interventionist actions in this multi-racial, -ethnic, and -religious country (composed primarily of Malay, Chinese, and Indian citizens) have included a racially based quota system for government education institutions, housing discounts, greater access to public service employment,
to three of the country’s key labour laws: the Employment Act (1955), Industrial Relations Act (1967), and the Trade Unions Act (1959). Among other things, the amendments would give employers additional powers to dismiss employees without cause, thereby placing labour – especially already marginalized workers – in an even more unstable position (Malaysian Trades Union Congress, 2010b).

Malaysia’s other knowledge workers: Alternative visions of development

Alongside its high-tech industry goals, the government of Malaysia promotes – with varying degrees of success – the competitive advantage of an IT-savvy citizenry through a range of ICT4D programs and policies, with the aim of achieving a country-wide 50 percent broadband household penetration rate by the end of 2010 (The Star, 2010b). At the same time, the government emphasizes Malaysia’s so-called Asian Values and the need for political stability as a precursor to economic growth. The latter serves as a principal rationale for maintaining strong control over broadcast and print media, and for curtailing the domestic use of ICTs for purposes that might be seen to challenge the status quo and/or run counter to the government’s socio-economic and political priorities. Put simply, Malaysia’s government actively seeks to control how, where, about what, and with whom citizens communicate.

The 2001–2010 Third Outline Perspective makes the government’s position clear in this regard. It states: ‘With the advent of the Global Information Age, a new code of ethics is needed to ensure that the knowledge which is freely and readily available is positively used to bring well-being and prosperity rather than create havoc and destruction’ (NITC, 2001: 5.57).

Given that labour appears to be understood purely in terms of market-oriented waged labour by the Malaysian government, it follows that it views knowledge workers as constituting labour that produces goods and services that are deemed to contribute directly to the advancement of economic growth, regardless of whether such labour falls on the carriage or content side of the equation. Such a perspective is par for the course

government loans, and business tenders for the majority Malay population (Khoo, 2001; Khong, 2010; Turner, 2006).

7 According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, some 59 percent of Malaysians are Internet users. However, significant disparities in access exist between urban and rural locales ( Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2008). By comparison, in the third quarter of 2008, mobile phone penetration had reached 93.9 percent in the country ( Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2008).

8 Among the key proponents of the Asian Values thesis are the former president of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, and the former president of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad. This perspective maintains that there exists a distinctively Asian set of core values that emphasize collectivism, and which manifest themselves through political and social practices that are anathema to Western-style liberal democracy. Critics of this thesis counter that it merely uses cultural difference as a pretext for promoting authoritarianism and/or semi-authoritarianism. See, for example, Sen (1999) and Jacobsen and Bruun (2000).

9 Reflecting these control mechanisms, in 2010 Malaysia ranked 141st of 178 countries by the Reporters without Borders’ Press Freedom Index.
in Asian milieus of development where ‘neo-liberal thinking is directed toward the promotion of educated and self-managing citizens who can compete in global knowledge markets’ (Ong, 2007: 6). Therefore, the Malaysian government’s approach to carriage-related issues continues to center foremost upon expanding and enhancing the country’s technical infrastructure (e.g., connecting citizens and providing high-speed access for MSC Malaysia status companies) and on market considerations (e.g., telecommunication interconnection rates, competition policy, anti-trust issues). By contrast, its approach to content-related matters is taken up by media-specific laws and regulations that target broadcasting, newspapers and, increasingly, the digital distribution of information to the public. When understood through the lens of liberal-democratic thought, the government’s actions in this regard indicate that it is less concerned with serving the public interest than with controlling what the public does with politically oriented information.

Myriad government bodies and laws are tasked with this managing and controlling of what citizens do with ICTs in Malaysia. The country’s telecommunication, broadcasting, and Internet sectors are regulated by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Act, 1998 (MCMA) and the Communications and Multimedia Commission Act, 1998 (CMCA). Pursuant to Section 211(1) of the MCMA, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission – the national regulator of information and communication industries – is authorized to oversee online speech to ensure that ‘No content applications service provider, or other person using a content applications service, shall provide content which is indecent, obscene, false, menacing, or offensive in character with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass any person’ (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2010). Control over speech also is manifest in a host of other ways, including annual license renewal requirements for broadcasting and print publications, the Malaysia Police Act of 1967 that requires citizens to obtain permits for public gatherings of four or more people, the constant threat of other laws regulating media content being extended to the online domain, and media ownership patterns that reveal direct links between media outlets and the Barisan Nasional coalition, which exercises significant direct and indirect control over the content of both public and private media. In sum, the Malaysian government actively seeks a high-tech economy and an IT-savvy society devoid of contentious politics that could challenge its authority (Anuar, 2005, 2008; Brown, 2005; George, 2006; Kenyon, 2010; Sani, 2005, 2008; Seneviratne, 2007).

Nevertheless, as part of its strategy for attracting domestic and international companies, in the mid-1990s the government pledged not to censor the Internet, giving a burgeoning online community room to grow. Over the past few years the domestic blogosphere and other Web 2.0 applications – especially Facebook, which became the number one website in Malaysia in 2009 (Alexa 2010) – have become quite vibrant, with political information, discussions, and debates that hitherto have been unavailable at any mass level within the country (George, 2006; Gong, 2009; Kenyon, 2010; Smeltzer, 2008; Smeltzer and Keddy, 2010; Tang, 2006). While certainly not everyone in Malaysia engages in such online activities, increasing numbers of citizens are using these ‘new’ spaces for political and apolitical activities alike. In response, the government regularly contravenes its no-censorship pledge, publicly censuring, threatening, and even arresting producers of politically oriented online information.
Successive prime ministers and various ministers have repeatedly warned citizens to be cautious in their online reporting and opinion pieces, or face serious repercussions (Smeltzer, 2008). In 2008, the government went so far as to shut down the Malaysia Today website, detaining its editor and operator, Raja Petra Kamarudin, under the Internal Security Act for ‘allegedly being a threat to security, peace and public order after he published a series of political commentaries on the site’ and subsequently charged him with defamation (Ong, 2008). More recently, in January 2010, Information, Communication and Culture Minister Rais Yatim publicly commended the Commission for nailing those who used Facebook, Twitter and SMS [Short Message Service] for the wrong reasons. As a former analyst of the law in the country, I wish to advise the people that they cannot escape from the law for their actions. (quoted in The Star, 2010a)

The citizens involved in these kinds of content-oriented online activities represent non-market information producers and consumers. They engage in a form of knowledge labour that is oriented foremost toward enhancing the public sphere through communicative action. However, their actions promote an understanding of socio-political development that runs counter to the Asian Values perspective advanced by the Malaysian government. Through their use of digital technologies, which are more producer-friendly than traditional forms of media, these citizens produce and consume politically oriented content, and engage in discussions about the country’s social, political, and economic future. Some bloggers, online newspaper personnel, and members of NGOs with a web presence labour part-time and may or may not receive financial remuneration for their work; others do it as their full time jobs. The key point here is that this type of knowledge labour need not, but may nonetheless be market-oriented, depending upon the motivations underpinning the production of information.

These types of digital activities, regardless of whether they are turned into something of tangible market value, clearly are not viewed as knowledge labour by most of Malaysia’s political and economic elite precisely because they do not appear to directly contribute to the country’s economic growth and prosperity. Instead, such activities are depicted as detrimental to the local economy insofar as they are presented as examples of efforts to encourage internal political divisiveness that reflect poorly on the country and, thus, undermine attempts to attract foreign investment (Smeltzer and Lepawsky, 2010). The government therefore views ICTs as tools that can be used for either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ knowledge-based political purposes depending on the content and user (Smeltzer and Keddy, 2010). Indeed, many politicians in the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition have their own blogs and Facebook profiles (including the prime minister), and the government has hired a contingency of pro-government ‘cybertroopers’ to counteract what it considers to be politically contentious information online.11

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10 At the time of writing, Raja Petra lives in self-imposed exile in the United Kingdom, concerned that he will not receive a fair trial in Malaysia.

11 Also of note, many of Malaysia’s foremost bloggers also have (or have had) ‘real’ waged jobs as white- and grey-collar knowledge workers in the country’s high-tech sector, which not only helps to explain why they represent some of the country’s earliest Web 2.0 adopters, but also blurs lines between what the government would describe as valuable and detrimental forms of knowledge work.
In sum, the tensions described above are emblematic of a larger political and rhetorical battle. The government has set up ‘ICTs for economic prosperity’ and ‘ICTs for political purposes’ as binary opposites wherein the former is promoted as guaranteeing progress and development while the latter is claimed to foster political instability and even possibly economic regression. As Reuters’ Bureau Chief for Malaysia comments,

Malaysia wants to be as economically advanced as Singapore and South Korea, wants foreign investment and to produce a high-skilled ‘knowledge economy.’ Can it do this and seemingly adopt political restrictions on a par with China and moral restrictions like those of Saudi Arabia? (Chance, 2009b)

At its core, this is a contest over who gets to decide what constitutes progress and development for Malaysia. The government’s narrow view of development, with its underlying emphasis on encouraging high-tech ICT-oriented apolitical labour, promotes false alternatives insofar as it positions the politicized use of ICTs in the pursuit of rights and liberties as a direct impediment to economic growth and development. As noted by Sen however, ‘economic needs depend crucially on open public debates and discussions, the guaranteeing of which requires insistence on basic political liberty and civil rights’ (1999: 148). These are precisely the types of freedoms and rights for which the vast majority of the politically oriented knowledge workers described above advocate. They represent a broader understanding of development (i.e., not just economic growth) and offer potential opportunities to pursue myriad forms of socio-cultural, political, and economic activities that may lead to development writ large. In Sen’s terms such opportunities are both ‘constitutive of development and instrumental to it’ (1999: 3).

Myths of technology and development

Vincent Mosco (2004) argues that powerful stories – or what he refers to as myths – about the progressive and emancipatory powers of technology work because, quite simply, people want them to work. It is not a matter of whether a myth is true or false, right or wrong. Rather, the determining factor of a myth’s worth is whether it can be kept alive. Myths about the powers of new forms of technology remain alive because, like every era before us, people today want to feel like they are on the precipice of a unique time in history and that the digital revolution and information society represent a radical break from the past (see also Standage, 1998; Marvin, 1990). These myths, therefore, do exactly what myths are supposed to do; they lift ‘people out of the banality of everyday life’ and bond them together in a common pursuit of overall progress, betterment, and development (Mosco, 2004: 3).

Within the Malaysian context, the information society myth advanced by the government, in conjunction with the high-tech sector and mainstream media, conveys the message that unless the country adheres to a technologically driven vision of the future, it risks slipping back into the status of a developing country. The same type of myth continues to drive other mainstream policy and academic work insofar as the dominant message conveyed to developing and transitioning countries is that their
foremost priority should be to embrace an ICT-based capitalist mode of production and to cultivate a technologically savvy citizenry if they hope to compete, or even survive, in the global networked economy. Of course the labour opportunities afforded by the technology sector at blue-, grey-, and white-collar levels have been beneficial to Malaysia’s local, regional, and national economies. As Jarman and Chopra note, it would be unfair ‘to say that the IT strategy has been a failure in Malaysia’, not least because the call centre industry, for example, employs ‘university graduates and provides training and human capital development in a number of areas…the business services industry is an integral part of the knowledge economy, albeit at the lower end’ (2008: 201). As we argue in this paper, there are, however, other types of development-oriented knowledge labour that need to be protected.

With the advent of the information society ideology throughout the 1990s, the distinction between carriage and content was claimed to no longer be suitable to the realities of the global networked economy. Accordingly, much of academic and policy discourse has veered away from viewing communication and information as public goods, toward the notion that communication is largely a technological phenomenon that falls predominantly under the auspices of private sector considerations that the state often facilitates. In the case of Malaysia, the government set up the MSC Malaysia project, created high-tech export processing zones with enticing incentives to attract local and international enterprises, and granted the private sector contracts to develop the country’s internet backbone and access points. Although the private sector is central to creating a knowledge-based economy, its role should not be seen as substituting for, or overriding the importance of, the state in servicing and protecting the communication and information needs and desires of citizens. Lest citizens be equated with consumers, the state must serve and protect the rights of citizens to engage in knowledge work that may not be directly geared toward economic growth and which may, in fact, challenge the political and economic status quo as it advances other aspects of a society’s overall development.

By analytically separating carriage and content, one can see how both are managed on the ground for different political and economic reasons. Moreover, this exercise demonstrates that market-oriented and non-market-oriented knowledge labour cannot and should not be viewed as exclusive categories. And this, in turn, helps to explicate the multifaceted relationship between ICTs and development by illustrating that ICT4D is not about either carriage or content, but rather both. While technologically mediated economic growth clearly is a means of advancing development goals, the realization of these goals is contingent upon an array of contextual variables not the least of which is the ability for citizens to access, consume, produce, and diffuse information and knowledge they consider to be of value to their personal and professional lives. In other words, for sustainable and equitable socio-economic and political development to take place, citizens must have access to technological devices, their related infrastructures, and the freedom to communicate in the pursuit of economic, political, and socio-cultural ends that they have reason to consider valuable within or outside a capitalist system.

Knowledge labour exists in manifold forms in Malaysia, as it does elsewhere around the world. While much of what often is thought of as knowledge labour entails carriage-
and content-related work that is oriented toward market production, there is a need to avoid the pitfalls associated with failing to acknowledge the developmental contributions arising from the knowledge labour of non-market information producers. Within the Malaysian context, the activities of the latter are largely aimed at advancing an important counter-balance to the narrow vision of national development advanced by the government.

references


With a background in Anthropology, International Development, and Political Economy of Communication, Dr. Smeltzer’s primary areas of research and publication include development communication (ICT4D), alternative media practices, civil society resistance, and digital divide issues, particularly within the Malaysian and broader Southeast Asian context. She has also published on environmental communication, gender and NGO work in East Africa, and critical media studies pedagogy. Recent research has delved into the political uses of social networking sites in restricted media environments; a SSHRC-funded project to examine Southeast Asian civil society resistance; and ‘knowledge workers’ in Southeast Asia. She is a member of the Digital Labour Group.

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Re-envisioning the ‘knowledge society’ in India: Resisting neoliberalism and the case for the ‘public’*

Ajit Pyati

**abstract**

The ‘knowledge society’ is a concept of importance in India’s current neoliberal path of development. This article argues for a critical conception of the ‘public’ as a means to combat the neoliberal excesses of the Indian knowledge society. A dialectic of the Indian knowledge society is proposed, which exposes the contradictions of India’s current development discourse, in order to give insights into more progressive and public-oriented alternatives. Examples of revitalized public information infrastructure and from India’s informal grassroots sector are explored as ways to enhance the public good in the knowledge society. This exploration highlights some of the challenges, contradictions, and areas of resistance in the ongoing struggle against neoliberal hegemony.

**Introduction – whose knowledge society?**

The concept of a ‘knowledge society’ permeates the development agendas of many countries in the Global South today. India, perhaps more than other so-called developing nations, has placed a great deal of emphasis on the knowledge society to promote widespread social and economic progress. Often conflated with the term ‘information society’, (UNESCO, 2005) the knowledge society is imbued with neoliberal politics. The neoliberal imprint in India is in evidence through increasing corporatization of the state and a growing reliance on market forces for the provision of social services.

The knowledge society paradigm, in addition to neoliberal influences, is bound up with the logic of information and communication technologies (ICTs). For example, India is now a major exporter of information technology-enabled services and software services, spurring hopes that India will become a major global economic power (Parayil, 2006).

* As part of the Digital Labour Group based at the University of Western Ontario’s Faculty of Information and Media Studies, I am grateful and proud to have such supportive and intellectually inspiring colleagues. My conference presentation entitled ‘A new vision for library workers in the Global South?: A view from India’ has evolved into this article, and I am thankful to the editors of this special issue for providing valuable insights and feedback.
However, the benefits of the information revolution in India are limited mainly to urban middle and upper classes in a select number of cities. A ‘revolution’ that has only affected a fraction of the country’s population is now used as the major paradigm of social change for the nation. A general euphoria about ICT-led development in India is more prevalent than in other developing countries, and is often accompanied by ICT fetishism and cyber-libertarian thinking (Parayil, 2006). In other words, the knowledge society in India is packaged along with logics of privatization, corporate-driven social change, and technological determinism. The responsibilities of the social welfare state in providing public services are increasingly being superseded by a neo-liberal political discourse that emphasizes market-based policies for social change (Parayil, 2006). In addition, there is a greater focus on poverty alleviation through the deployment of technology and market-based solutions at the community level.

Despite the neoliberal impetus behind the knowledge society, potential also exists for defining an Indian knowledge society in terms of enhanced public institutions and infrastructure, as well as a greater commitment to the public good. Thus, while the knowledge society of the Indian elite imagination is certainly molded from the basic dominant ideological framework that I have just described, openings do exist for more progressive visions of an Indian knowledge society. In other words, contradictory tendencies exist in the Indian knowledge society, with the potential for either capitalist intensification or genuine public sector and community-based alternatives. I term this contradictory nature of India’s current development discourse as the dialectic of the Indian knowledge society. By dialectics, I am referring to the Marxist conception of social change in which the social totality is taken as a given and oppositional tendencies within this totality are studied to gain insight into potentially more emancipating socialist futures (Ollman, 2008). In this framework, the contradictions of the Indian knowledge society can give insights into the possibilities for more progressive alternatives. At issue are the methods, strategies, and institutional mechanisms used to develop a knowledge society. Specifically, will a knowledge society rely on neoliberal imperatives, public-private partnerships, and market-based ‘bottom of the pyramid’ (Prahalad, 2006, p. 4) approaches? Or will a knowledge society be based on an expanded conception of the public sector and the public good that effectively encompasses marginalized populations?

Re-envisioning the ‘public’ in the knowledge society

An important dimension of this dialectic of the knowledge society, as I have just mentioned, is the issue of the ‘public’. This term, in fact, is fraught with many considerations and connotations. For instance, it is difficult to discuss the existence of a public in the general sense, as it is more accurate to speak of multiple ‘publics’ based on different formations such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, caste, etc. (Fraser, 1990). In addition, the concept of the public can conote a hegemonic relationship in which dominant classes and groups enforce their will upon subordinate groups (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). Despite these realities, however, a focus on the public in terms of the public/collective interest is sorely lacking in the modern Indian landscape (Varma, 2007; Raghunathan, 2006; Parekh, 2009). When the ‘public interest’ is invoked in Indian politics, it unfortunately has been used at times to justify land acquisition and the
displacement of marginalized populations in the name of economic growth and progress (Baviskar, 2008), as well as other inequitable modes of development. Therefore, it is important to frame issues of the public interest in terms of equity, fairness, and a sensitivity to the needs of the marginalized. In addition, it is crucial to understand how the poor themselves define the public good, as it can often differ in subtle, but important ways from elite viewpoints (Kaviraj, 1997).

In the Indian context, the public good has generally been the domain of the state. The Indian state in the immediate post-Independence era, under the leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, followed a path of state-sponsored industrialization and development. The twin discourses of poverty alleviation and development were central to Nehru’s program of democratic socialism (Ray and Katzenstein, 2005). This socialist path met with some moderate successes, but was unable to create a strong social welfare state model that significantly reduced levels of poverty. In addition, endemic corruption, which began throughout the country’s early years has continued and remains a formidable obstacle in the development of a strong public sector. The failure of the democratic socialist vision of Nehru has led to a decline in confidence in the state and the rise of market-oriented development philosophies (Ray and Katzenstein, 2005).

Despite the failures, inefficiencies, and increasing corporate capture of India’s state apparatus, however, the state still remains in the best position to serve the widest public interest. Even though the social welfare functions of the Indian state are eroding, many of India’s marginalized citizens still look to the state as a credible actor in the creation of a more just society (Baviskar, 2008). Marginalized groups in India often demand direct state action and intervention to redress inequalities and grievances (Baviskar, 2008). Given this reality, public and state institutions have an important role to play in creating more equitable and sustainable visions of a knowledge society. One can argue that the greatest failure of the Indian state since independence is the abysmal state of public infrastructure for social development, such as schools, hospitals, and libraries (Guha, 2007). Thus, a critical need exists for improving the public infrastructure of the knowledge society.

In tune with this theme of improved public infrastructure, I present a case study in this article of two similar, but philosophically distinct information institutions – public libraries and information kiosks/telecentres. Public libraries, in their ideal form, can play a role as a ‘people’s university’ and are important facets of the democratic public sphere and information infrastructure in a number of Western and non-Western countries; in the same vein, a number of Indian states have public library legislation and a history that speaks to these values. However, public libraries in general remain neglected, underfunded, and ineffective institutions in the Indian information infrastructure. The central government has recently emphasized the importance of improving and revitalizing public libraries in a knowledge society (National Knowledge Commission, 2007), but the pervasive neoliberal climate may stifle this noble aspiration.

In addition to the role of the state in providing for the public good, I discuss the existence of a ‘cyberproletariat’ and various ‘digital counterpublics’ that exist in India’s knowledge society. This cyberproletariat is based largely in the domain of India’s poor
populations, operating in the shadows of India’s informal economy and coalescing around practices such as media piracy and open source software (OSS). While I emphasize the role of the state in promoting the public good, the vast informal sector also plays an important role in redefining notions of the ‘public’ that resonate more with the needs of the poor. In short, we need to understand conceptions of the public not necessarily rooted in state-directed action. Therefore, it is important to formulate both state-driven and grassroots models for nurturing the public good. Resistance to the neoliberal knowledge society will require approaches that emphasize the public good from both statist and radical grassroots perspectives.

The next section discusses in more detail the history, roles, and current state of public libraries in Indian society. Following this section, I present the case of information kiosks and their neoliberal influences. The subsequent section focuses on alternative possibilities and resistances in the knowledge society from the perspective of India’s poor and marginalized. Finally, I discuss some of the challenges that lay ahead in confronting the Indian neoliberal consensus and emphasizing an equitable conception of the public good.

Public libraries and librarians in Indian society

The modern concept of the public library in India has its origins in the British colonial period, with the development of public libraries in cities such as Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta in the early to mid 19th century helping to pave the way for future library development (Bhattacharjee, 2002). While bearing the stamp of Western influences, however, libraries have existed in India since ancient times, serving as repositories of knowledge in the courts of rulers, temples, and universities (Patel and Kumar, 2001). The development of public libraries in the country gained momentum in the post-independence period, with the passage of the Madras Public Library Act in 1948, the first library legislation in newly independent India for providing public library service (Bhattacharjee, 2002).

Despite some of the aforementioned developments, however, the Indian public library system is generally in a state of disrepair and does not provide meaningful services to the masses (Bhattacharjee, 2002). Indian public library development remains uneven throughout the country, with varying levels of quality both within and across states. India is an extremely diverse country, with great linguistic, cultural, and social variation – to speak of India as an abstract whole is beset with difficulties and unhelpful generalizations. In the same vein, it is not possible to talk about a unified Indian public library system, since it varies so much within and between different parts of the country. However, a certain basic set of observations can be made. For instance, the rural public library sector remains an area that is highly underdeveloped. In contrast, certain urban public library systems, in cities such as Delhi, Chennai, and Bangalore, exhibit fairly well-developed infrastructures. States in south India generally have higher levels of public library development, particularly the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka (Seth, 2006). Within these different categories of libraries, great variations exist; however, city library systems in more affluent parts of the country with established state library legislation tend to be of better quality.
Over the last couple of decades, library leaders and politicians in the country have recognized the need for revitalizing public libraries and making them community and service-based institutions. For instance, they realize that the potential benefits of an improved public library system can include increases in print literacy, human capacity development, informal education gains, ICT literacy, and community information delivery. Most recently, this aspiration has coalesced around the idea of transforming public libraries into community-based information systems (National Knowledge Commission, 2007). This topic of community information services and community information centres (CICs) has been gaining in importance within library services and has been suggested as an important area for library service models in developing countries (Martin, 1984; Kempson, 1986; Alema, 1995).

Community information has been defined as survival information, a type of information necessary for participation as a full and equal member of society (Martin, 1984). Additionally, community information services aim to assist individuals and groups with participation in the democratic process and daily problem solving with issues such as housing, employment, education, welfare rights and civil rights (Library Association, 1980). Community information services have been linked with information and referral services for marginalized populations (Metoyer-Duran, 1994). Community information service models can be based on access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Pettigrew, Durrance, and Vakkari, 1999; Ghosh, 2005), but can also involve simply providing relevant information for communities (Alema, 1995). Successful community information projects often involve providing solutions derived from local populations themselves and not imposed from the outside (Alema, 1995).

Despite the promise of the community information model for Indian public libraries, much work needs to be done to achieve this goal. The troubles that have stymied the development of public sector services in India in general (e.g., low funding, maintenance, corruption, etc.) affect public libraries as well. Compounded with the neoliberal onslaught since the early 1990s, the public library is in danger of becoming an irrelevant institution in India’s corporate-driven vision of development.

In addition to the institution of the public library, the work of public librarians is also an area in need of resuscitation and revitalization. For public librarians in India, the need for an expanded conception of the social benefits of their profession is long overdue. Often associated with the work of clerical officials, the job of the librarian arguably needs to develop into that of a community worker and information access advocate. The low visibility and respect of the profession within wider society is a related concern. While the general perception of public librarians reflects some unavoidable realities, a wider advocacy effort needs to be undertaken in the library community to highlight and promote the achievements and potential of India’s public libraries to meet basic social development goals. Part of the solution with regard to advocacy may lie in a redevelopment of India’s library education system. In particular, a new, young, and enthusiastic leadership in the profession needs to be cultivated and a reinvestment in LIS education may be part of the solution.

However, the work of the public librarian lacks both the glamour and allure of the IT professions for many students. Consequently, LIS becomes an option of last resort for
students unable to secure admission to IT programs. For the rising middle classes, the ‘public’ is also a term that is not in fashion – access to private schools, colleges, hospitals and the like is the mark of upward mobility and social status. This gravitation towards privatization is not confined to the middle classes, as the poor are increasingly becoming part of the neoliberal agenda. The next section discusses the case of information kiosks and telecentres, institutions that are not identical to public libraries but can serve some similar functions in terms of information and technology access. Kiosks and telecentres are focused specifically on the poor, but in certain instances are facilitating the encroachment of neoliberalism at the grassroots level. The employees of these institutions are often entrepreneurs, emphasizing the importance of business goals at the expense of public sector employment and services.

**Information kiosks: Neoliberalism from the grassroots**

As discussed in the previous section, the community information service model can provide new directions in public library revitalization. Thus, the potential for libraries to become effective community-based information providers is not an inconceivable goal; however, the role of community information provision is being taken up instead by entities known as information kiosks and telecentres. Both kiosks and telecentres provide community-based access to ICTs and ICT-mediated information and services (Arunachalam, 2002; Bailur, 2006; Warschauer, 2003). A telecentre or kiosk could be as simple as a small room with ICTs or a more elaborate resource centre providing various ICT-mediated services and training. These projects have the potential to ‘reach the unreached’ by providing relevant information services such as crop price information, health care information, and weather information (Arunachalam, 2002: 513). Information kiosks sit squarely within the ICT for development (ICTD) paradigm, which advocates for the social and economic benefits of ICTs and information access for poor and marginalized communities. A number of these projects exist in India, with some projects experiencing moderate levels of success.

Despite the successes of some community technology projects, however, the sustainability of these projects remains an important concern. When the funding from outside sources and international granting agencies dries up, how will these projects survive? A new set of strategies for the maintenance of projects over the long-term is focused on entrepreneurial and market-driven strategies. In certain cases, internet kiosks and technology centres can be private enterprises, which may provide support to local businesses and generate income at the grassroots level.

This move towards entrepreneurial models of sustainability has been described as emblematic of a ‘cyber-libertarian’ (Sreekumar, 2006: 61) mode of grassroots development. In this cyber-libertarian model of development, the technological determinist discourses of the information society and discourses of economic development intersect (Sreekumar, 2006). With specific reference to national and international development policies, there has been a shift over the last several years from emphasizing the role of states in development to the power of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society in development projects. In certain respects, this shift towards community and grassroots development agendas has been a welcome
change, helping to focus on agency from the bottom-up; however, in combination with ICT-driven development policies, a neoliberal agenda is often advanced. For instance, in a neoliberal grassroots development agenda, notions such as the welfare state, social democracy, and the idea of progress through large-scale social transformation are marginalized (Parayil, 2006). The intersection of neoliberal policies with ICT-led models for development can overemphasize the role of ICTs in mobilizing rural resources for community development, social support, employment, poverty alleviation, economic growth, and increased democratic participation (Sreekumar, 2006). Ironically, with this focus on the grassroots level, the poverty and deprivation of the poor can be blamed on their own intransigence and failure to help themselves (Parayil, 2006). Based on this inverted logic, one way for marginalized communities to ‘help themselves’ is through the development of local markets and profit-making schemes at the grassroots level.

This focus on entrepreneurialism at the grassroots level can be described as a bottom of the pyramid (BOP) approach, a term popularized by the late C.K. Prahalad, a former professor of business at the University of Michigan. The major idea behind this approach is the stimulation of entrepreneurialism and markets at the lowest economic rungs of society – an effort described by Prahalad as ‘inclusive capitalism’ (2006: xiii). The BOP approach has gained traction in development circles, with the idea that developing markets among the poor can stimulate sustainable and long-lasting economic growth. International donor agencies such as the World Bank and other aid agencies have increasingly emphasized BOP approaches in their projects. As the new buzzword of development, we can see BOP as a fusion of neoliberal philosophy and community-based development efforts. In general, we can see the growth of micro-credit strategies (à la Grameen Bank in Bangladesh) as one prominent example of this shift in development strategy. We should acknowledge, however, that BOP and micro-credit approaches have had some successes and cannot wholesale be dismissed as disruptive neoliberal impositions. But the danger of the BOP approach is its overemphasis on the development of market strategies, often at the expense of social benefits and an understanding of the larger public good. In addition, the poor are framed largely as consumers and economic actors, with questions of their rights as citizens and as democratic actors marginalized.

Coming back to the issue of telecentres and BOP approaches, the role of the local entrepreneur is important to explore. With this goal in mind, I will briefly discuss the case of the Akshaya telecentre project in the southern Indian state of Kerala. The Akshaya project is part of the Kerala state government’s efforts to increase ICT access for populations throughout the state, while at the same time using a private-sector orientation to achieve financial sustainability (Kuriyan et al., 2008). As of 2006, the Akshaya project has so far developed 400 e-centres connected through a wireless Internet infrastructure and has trained nearly 600,000 people in basic computer skills (Akshaya Project, 2006). E-government services, online exams, agricultural information, and other various types of services are offered through these e-centres. The state has provided some subsidies for the development of these telecentres, and state authorities recruited locals from various districts in the state to be entrepreneurs in charge of centres. These local entrepreneurs often have to obtain loans and maintain the profitability of their centres after the initial phase of government support.
Kuriyan et al. (2008) have noted that a major source of tension for these entrepreneurs has been their inability to balance economic profitability and social service goals. Kiosk entrepreneurs in theory are supposed to provide both social services and various other services for economic gain, but recent research has shown that those entrepreneurs who focus solely on providing social services to the poor are often unable to sustain themselves and have to shut down (Kuriyan et al., 2008). A small proportion of the kiosk operators are able to balance the twin goals of social service and economic sustainability; however, most of the successful entrepreneurs focus solely on economic viability and ultimately wind up catering to a largely urban and semi-rural middle class population (Kuriyan et al., 2008). Thus, ironically, those in the ‘bottom of the pyramid’ do not appear to be the beneficiaries of this BOP-inspired project. On a related note, public-private partnership projects such as Akshaya are in some ways an attempt by state governments to rebrand themselves based on an association with business principles (Kuriyan and Ray, 2009). This rebranding effort is further evidence of neoliberal encroachment at the grassroots level.

The case of Akshaya is also important on a national scale, since the Indian government in part has used this state-level initiative as a model for a countrywide telecentre project. This project of the Indian central government is known as the Common Services Centre (CSC) model, with the goal of providing a range of government services to 600,000 villages in India. The current plan is to have 100,000 CSCs serve these villages, with a public-private partnership (PPP) model serving as the foundation for developing these centres and their associated services (Department of Information Technology, 2008). This project has been underway since 2004 and the issue of excessive private sector involvement in this project is an area of concern. This project employs village level entrepreneurs (VLEs), but in contrast to the Akshaya program, large private sector companies are involved in the development of kiosks and related services (India Development Gateway, 2010). The deep involvement of the corporate sector in service delivery points to the state’s prominent role in subsidizing private capital. One also can speculate how much the poor will benefit from these centres, as it appears likely that a focus on technology and financial services for the middle classes is more likely to occur (Kuriyan and Ray, 2009). The example of telecentres and kiosks, therefore, puts the issue of entrepreneurship at the grassroots level into question. A revamped public library system thus may provide more possibilities for effective and equitable social services than information kiosks.

**Alternative visions and possibilities**

Up to this point, this article has documented the challenges and neoliberal threats affecting state provision of information services. While these challenges are daunting, they are not insurmountable; in this respect, I have highlighted pathways of revitalizing public library infrastructure for achieving more equitable outcomes. However, we should also keep in mind sources of resistance and alternative visions in relation to the neoliberal agenda that are generated organically. A couple of such areas to begin theorizing about resistance are located in the grassroots activist tradition of India and in the vast, informal sections of Indian society. These areas of resistance are another aspect of the *dialectic of the Indian knowledge society* that I discussed earlier in this
article – spaces that can provide more progressive and public-oriented conceptions of the knowledge society.

India is host to a range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots social movements focusing on issues such as environmental and women’s rights and frequently emerging in response to state and corporate bodies that are unresponsive to the needs of the deprived masses (Kothari, 2005). These social movements are often mediated by NGOs, which can advocate for the needs of citizens to have a larger voice in democratic governance (Madon and Sahay, 2002). ‘New social movements’ (Kothari, 2005:153) taking place throughout India and arising in the last couple of decades with regard to a broad set of environmental, gender, and class-based issues may have the potential to alter the dynamics between the state and its citizens. Social movements have often put the needs of the country’s most marginalized citizens at the forefront, challenging at various times the state’s apathy, corruption, elitism, and violence. In many respects, NGO-mediated social movements are the main drivers of an anti-poverty agenda, especially in the face of the neoliberal transformation of the Indian state (Ray and Katzenstein, 2005).

NGOs can serve in information delivery capacities to marginalized citizens, partnering with government organizations to effectively advocate for the needs of urban poor communities and slum dwellers (Madon and Sahay, 2002). The NGO sector, while not without its own problems of governance and accountability, can thus at times serve as an effective intermediary between the state and citizens in the delivery of services. In relation to the issue of public libraries and community information provision, it might be possible to conceive of a deeper cooperation between progressive NGOs and the Indian library movement. In contrast to the public-private partnership model that has characterized some telecentre projects, an alternative model might see the state focusing on the needs of its poorest citizens through partnerships with NGOs in the creation of public and community libraries.

Another area of resistance is the large informal sector in India, particularly within the rapidly growing urban areas of the country. By ‘informal’, I am referring to sections of the population that do not fit within the formalized categories of urban governance, particularly those residing in the vast slums of major Indian cities. Mike Davis (2006) in his book Planet of Slums rightfully describes the worldwide phenomenon of urban slum growth as the inequitable and troubling situation that it is. However, Indian marginalized urban and slum communities are not always passive victims of India’s dominant classes; in many respects, they are capable of remarkable political, social, and economic agency.

The prominent postcolonial theorist, Partha Chatterjee, for instance, conceptualizes the agency of these communities through his use of the term ‘political society’ (2004: 41). In contrast to the classical notion of civil society, which according to Chatterjee (2004) corresponds to a small section of the middle classes and elites, political society is characterized by the masses interacting with government through the logic of welfare distribution and electoral mobilization. In other words, the urban poor do not fit neatly into categories that characterize bourgeois political participation, especially given their sheer numbers and existence as political subjects outside the Eurocentric framework of
citizenship in a modern nation-state. Rather, government has had to respond to their political actions and provide welfare to this population through informal and semi-legal means. Chatterjee illustrates this point in the following way:

Governmental administration of welfare for the urban poor necessarily had to follow a different logic from that of the normal relations of the state with citizens organized in civil society. The city poor frequently lived as squatters on public land, traveled on public transport without paying, stole water and electricity, encroached on streets and parks...Electricity companies negotiated collective rates with entire squatter settlements in order to cut down the losses from pilferage...Populations of the urban poor had to be pacified and cared for, partly because they provided the necessary labor and services to the city’s economy and partly because if they were not cared for at all, they could endanger the safety and well-being of all citizens. (2004: 135)

While this description of political society illustrates the dependency of the poor on state power, it also highlights the subtle power that the urban poor can have on larger political structures.

The concept of political society also highlights how the public/private distinctions that mark Western societies can differ in a place such as India. The public sphere, as defined in the strict Habermasian sense, consists of private individuals acting and coordinating in public on issues of common concern. However, one can argue that this European model of the public sphere was most attractive to the middle-class educated elites in India, and does not meaningfully apply to the lives of the poor (Kaviraj, 1997). Institutions of the middle-class public sphere can include public libraries and public parks, symbols of European modernity in the Indian context (Kaviraj, 1997). Thus, a challenge exists to re-envision public institutions such as libraries in the lives of the poor. In particular, the conception of the ‘public’ for the poor is often different from that of the middle class. For instance, the poor have been asserting their agency in public by ‘plebianizing’ spaces such as parks, public squares, and footpaths (Kaviraj, 1997). This claim on public space has negative connotations for the middle class, but has arguably a more inclusive basis. Thus, ironically, it may appear that the urban poor in India have a deeper understanding and appreciation for the concept of the ‘public’ than the upper and middle classes.

In addition, the informal sector encompassed within political society also is a source of great creativity with regard to the use and creation of information. Ravi Sundaram (2009), for example, discusses the agency of urban poor communities in Indian cities such as Delhi with regard to media creation. The revolution in digital technologies, with drastically reduced costs in creating media, has allowed urban poor communities in India to develop local media and information resources. In addition, the easy access to pirated media and information has allowed poor communities to have a gateway to cultural resources they otherwise would be economically barred from (Sundaram, 2009). The negative discourse surrounding piracy in the West does not have the same resonance in urban India (and in many other parts of the Global South for that matter) – remix and mash-up culture are a part of normal cultural survival (Sundaram, 2009). The informal sector’s ability to find solutions in challenging situations points to some potential intersections with public and community libraries. For example, public libraries could tap into the dynamic information and media environment of the urban poor and provide services that reflect this reality.
Thus, in contrast to the knowledge society defined by capital and its interests, an alternate knowledge society exists in India’s informal and marginalized sectors. An informal, parallel economy exists in which the urban poor partake in non-legal media practices including the creation, distribution, and use of pirated VCDs, DVDs, MP3s, software products, and books (Liang, 2005). Pirated materials are a regular feature of the Indian information landscape and are available in the markets, bazaars, and roadside/pavement stalls of many Indian cities. These street markets and illegal roadside vendors of pirated materials offer an affordable contrast to the glitzy, corporate shopping malls of the rich and upper middle classes. Thus, piracy in India and many parts of the Global South should not be viewed in terms of the strict legal and corporatist language of dominant interests (Liang, 2003). Piracy, in essence, becomes a form of democratic access to information for India’s masses. However, we should be careful about celebrating the piracy of the Global South as a rollicking escapade of anti-capitalist fervour, particularly from the privileged vantage point of the West. In many respects, piracy is so rampant in countries like India because of a lack of adequate public infrastructure for information access (Liang, 2007).

The informal and illegal economy has a long history in India, with slums and squatter settlements having developed their own modes of economic and cultural survival for generations. Starting with the audiocassette in the 1980s and continuing into today’s digital age, the urban poor in India have gained greater access to information and media products precisely because of piracy. The audiocassette, for instance, allowed widespread distribution of Indian film music in the 1980s through pirate media practices, when access to reproductions of film music was generally restricted to the masses (Athique, 2008). In subsequent years, however, this practice became absorbed into formal economic channels and mainstreamed (Athique, 2008). In a similar vein, the VCR revolution offered cheap and widespread access to both Indian and Western movies, with piracy playing a major role in the distribution chain. Video parlors and video rental stores offered group access to different media products; with the Internet revolution, many of these establishments have transformed into Internet/cyber cafes (Liang, 2005). Cyber cafes and Internet centers proliferate in many Indian cities, with private entrepreneurs running these businesses for a lower middle class and less economically well off clientele.

In addition to the creative culture of media piracy, the case of open source software (OSS) is worth mentioning. OSS, both as a movement and as a form of software development, offers a challenge to dominant proprietary models of software development. OSS development communities exist in India, with a number of grassroots advocates promoting OSS features such as flexible licensing schemes and an enhanced potential for technological democracy (Liang, 2007). The basic idea behind OSS rests in its inverted logic of property, in which value is derived in the distribution and freely available nature of software code (the building block of software), rather than in exclusive ownership over code (Weber, 2004). The success of open source can be seen in its penetration into various levels of society, through the Linux operating system, the popular Apache web server application, and the Mozilla/Firefox web browser, to name just a few prominent open source projects (Weber, 2004). Thus, while providing an alternative to commercial software development, OSS intersects comfortably with the proprietary software world and is also utilized by the for-profit
sector. OSS and ‘free software’, however, are also associated with a sustained grassroots technology movement with an international following and community, and are often linked to alternative, community-driven visions of an ‘information commons’ (Bollier, 2003). Open source seems to be implicitly linked to a wider democratic technology movement in the world, with the idea that enhanced participation in technological decisions challenges dominant societal logics of commodification (Benkler, 2003). In addition, OSS can be viewed as part of a worldwide activist ‘copyleft’ movement that challenges dominant conceptions of copyright (Stallman, 2001).

This anti-capitalist trajectory of OSS offers an alternative to the dominance of technocorporate giants such as Microsoft, which has a strong foothold in India. Great potential exists for India to be at the vanguard of an open source revolution, but OSS is not yet a widespread phenomenon in the country (India Knowledge@Wharton, 2008). Given the strong base of technological skills in India’s population, the development of OSS could promote a grassroots revolution and increase technological self-sufficiency. A number of state governments are utilizing OSS for e-government projects, but the central government is increasingly seeing OSS as an important tool for the promotion of corporate-driven technology initiatives (National Resource Centre for Free & Open Source Software, 2010). Thus, while OSS has a number of radical democratic tendencies, a neoliberal influence is also at work.

**Conclusion**

This article has covered a range of issues related to the neoliberal characteristics of India’s knowledge society, different types of institutional formations that are part of the knowledge society framework, and alternatives and forms of resistance from the margins. I have highlighted the need for a stronger conception of the ‘public’ in the knowledge society, as an inclusive notion of the public good is crucial for developing more equitable and socially just outcomes. This conception of the public needs to have a basis both in state developed public infrastructure, as well as in grassroots perspectives of the poor. While I have highlighted the shortcomings of and neoliberal threats facing state infrastructure such as public libraries, I have also pointed out their potential as revitalized institutions to shape a more equitable knowledge society. At the same time, the large informal ‘grey zones’ of India’s margins are also areas of great creativity and sources of alternatives to the neoliberal knowledge society. Counteracting and resisting neoliberal hegemony will thus need to draw upon both enhanced public infrastructure and the energy of the informal sector. Revitalized public infrastructure provides the stability that can balance the precarious and tenuous nature of the informal sector. Romanticizing the ‘resistance in the shadows’ without at the same time emphasizing improved public infrastructure would be a mistake.

On a final note and in consonance with the need for combining state and grassroots action, it is worth mentioning the case of the *Right to Information Act*, a recently enacted piece of legislation related to freedom of information. The Indian parliament passed this act in July 2005, after a decade-long struggle initiated by poor peasants and workers demanding the people’s right to government and public sector information.
(Roy, Dey, and Pande, 2008). The act has been used to demand information from various levels of Indian government, related to day-to-day governance issues, the delivery of basic services and entitlements, and human rights and corruption issues (Roy, Dey, and Pande, 2008). While time will tell how this act will ultimately fare in enacting equitable social change, it has offered hope to the masses in the idea of a more participatory democracy. In addition, this development shows the deep understanding of and hunger of India’s masses for a more inclusive and public information culture. The public institutions of the knowledge society, however, remain underdeveloped and unresponsive to this yearning. The dialectic of the Indian knowledge society is still waiting for its resolution.

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Structuring feeling: Web 2.0, online ranking and rating, and the digital ‘reputation’ economy

Alison Hearn

abstract

Blogging, twittering, facebooking, posting videos on youtube, providing feedback on newspaper articles online or rating restaurants or hotels on tripadvisor, are often seen to be positive elements in the development of the digital public sphere. Academics and human resources experts alike laud the ways in which these activities contribute to the increasing circulation of ‘social capital’ or ‘reputation’, which we can see as a new form of currency and, more generally, value. This paper will examine these claims about the emerging economy in reputation, focusing specifically on the ways reputation has historically been defined and understood and how it is currently being aggregated, measured, structured and represented by specific business interests online. It will consider the uses to which these ratings, lists, scores and other forms of overt reputation building are being put and discuss whether they constitute forms of free labour. In the end, it will conclude that these practices herald a form of market discipline and affective conditioning, which, much like other more traditional kinds of value generation such as branding, function to direct human meaning-making and self-identity in highly motivated and profitable ways.

‘For what we are defining is a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or a period.’
Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature

‘Venom can be a great leading indicator!’
Michelle Conlin, BusinessWeek, April 16 2007

In this age when more and more people have access to online feedback mechanisms and social networking sites that appear to link them directly to each other and to corporations, Internet gurus are increasingly fond of proclaiming that we are witnessing a return to the freedom and flow of the Greek agora. This is a fantastical historical projection to be sure, but one that sees the market as nothing more than a series of conversations expressing feelings and opinions between interested parties. The authors of a book entitled The Cluetrain Manifesto, for example, insist that the contemporary online economy is ‘based on intersecting interests. Open to many resolutions. Essentially unpredictable. Spoken from the centre of the self’ (Levine, Locke, Searles and Weinberger, 2009: 149). This perspective puts affective relations at the centre of the market’s operations; if markets are conversations, then value must be generated
through our visible, affective and quantifiable participation in these conversations and the tangible reputations we accrue as a result.

Human resources professionals also have come to recognize that an individual employee’s skills matter far less than the depth and intensity of their social relationships online, or, in more familiar terms, their social capital, which can be aggregated and expressed as their digital reputation. The number of times a name comes up in a Google search, an Ebay rating as a buyer or seller, the number of friends on Facebook, or followers on Twitter can all be seen as representations of digital reputation – the general public feeling or sentiment about a product, person or service. Organizations that have well-connected employees with high degrees of social capital and solid digital reputations report higher amounts of innovation and patent outputs, higher chances of survival, and higher earnings (Krebs, 2000). So, while previously internet activity might have been a knock against an employee, nowadays the goal is to ‘hire-and-wire’ – ‘to hire the best people with the best network and integrate them into the value chain so that their combined human and social capital provide excellent returns’ (Krebs, 2000: 89).

The overt expression of individual feelings and the concomitant creation of a notable (and possibly profitable) digital reputation via blogging, twittering, facebooking, ranking and providing feedback are generally seen to be positive developments; not only have consumers been freed from the top-down directives of a promotional culture, the argument goes, they are now able to draw on the collective intelligence and affective relations of all the Average-Joes around them. In addition, simply by expressing their opinions and feelings, individuals have become empowered participants in an emerging online economy; feelings and opinions expressed in the form of ranking and rating for example, build personal reputation, which functions, in turn, as a new form of currency and, more generally, value. Some critics argue that this new communicative and affective transparency online will produce a more ‘ethical’ economy (Arvidsson and Pietersen, 2009).

This paper will interrogate some of the assumptions and practices that underpin these claims about the emerging reputation economy online. It will explore the meanings of ‘reputation’ and its link to the rise of promotional self-production or self-branding. It will explore the prehistory of online rating and ranking, and will review the variety of web tools and analytics that have emerged recently to measure, manage, represent and structure our feelings, and that promise us a monetizable asset in the form of digital reputation. The paper argues that online reputation measurement and management systems are new sites of cultural production; they are places where the expression of feeling is ostensibly constituted as ‘reputation’ and then mined for value. But, where, and for whom, are profits actually made in these processes?

While we could argue that the activities of online rating, ranking and feeding back comprise a kind of immaterial labour insofar as they produce value in the form of digital reputation, to date, the only actual monetary value to have emerged from these practices is produced by the labour of what might be called ‘feeling-intermediaries’ – social media intelligence specialists or ‘listeners’, information measurers and aggregators, and statisticians. These feeling-intermediaries most often work for
corporations, brand managers, and marketers. They produce value insofar as they are able to mine, intervene in, and direct online feedback in ways beneficial to their employers. Their work represents an entirely new set of services that have arisen to find the profit in Web 2.0. Quite simply, they are sites where we might analyze the appropriation of value from feeling via specific kinds of structuring logics and measurement algorithms.

It might be more accurate to characterize the individual activities of ranking, rating or social networking, then, as moments of experiential re-structuring: points at which, as Raymond Williams would say, social experiences ‘in solution’ are precipitated (Williams, 1977: 133-134) and prepared for market as formalized utterances and profitable information by specific types of capitalist enterprise. In other contemporary contexts, such as reality television production, I have named this legislation and structuring of personal performance and affect by capitalist interests ‘self-branding’. To be sure, the practices of ranking, rating and feeding back are similar to these processes, and the promise of valuable reputation held out by both reality television production and online web participation are evidence of a contemporary structure of feeling where personal visibility and surveillance is chic (Andrejevic, 2004: 105), fame is money, and the manipulation of affect a required skill. But, again, it is crucial to note that what is extracted from the expression of this feeling is valuable only to those who develop, control and license the mechanisms of extraction, measurement and representation, not for the people doing the expressing. So, while some critics contend that the production and promise of digital reputation signals the rise of a new form of ethical politics linked to the expression of collective affect, I will argue that the digital reputation economy functions through forms of market discipline and affective conditioning, which, much like the practices of branding, work to direct human meaning-making and self-identity in highly motivated and profitable ways.

Reputation

Reputation is an extremely fluid, contingent, and precarious personal attribute generated entirely by the perception, attention and approval of others. As critic John Rodden argues, building a reputation involves an on-going process of ‘image-making’ and perception management, and, as such, is never given once and for all (Rodden, 2006: 75). Acquiring a reputation begs the question, ‘reputation for what?’ – the answer for which is predicated on a whole host of extremely variable contextual and institutional factors. While historically reputation has been assumed to be a direct reflection of the inherent quality of a person’s work or achievement, these days the acquisition of reputation bears very little relation to any specific skill or accomplishment, but appears to be derived solely from the performance of effective attention-getting itself, by any means necessary (Rodden, 2006: 80), including expressing feelings and opinions online.

Of course, any notion of the ‘inherent quality’ of a person’s achievement is an historical and cultural construction, as, indeed, is reputation itself. A ‘reputation’ is conditioned and, arguably, constituted by cultural and economic institutions that have the power to authorize and direct attention, and transmute that attention back into value. In other words, reputation is a cultural product, and, as such is conditioned by its mode of
production. This mode of production is generally marked by the perennially exploitative relations between labour and capital as well as by other relations of power based on forms of identity such as race, sexuality and gender. In the end, what is produced in the form of a reputation inevitably exceeds the control of those individuals who generate it or the individual who must ‘carry’ it; typically, we are ‘subjected to’ a reputation. As women well know, having born the burden of what Linda Williams has called a ‘surplus aestheticism’ for centuries (1999: 41), visibility and the reputation that follows from it is, most often, a trap (Foucault, 1977).

Many have argued that this power of authorizing and validating attention, nowadays primarily enacted by the media industries, which can lead to the growth of a profitable reputation, feeds the lack in all individuals, promising, simultaneously, to recognize our uniqueness and assuage our anomy. As Leo Braudy has famously written, reputation and fame are, at least discursively, marked by contradiction - between uniqueness and acceptence, distinction and commonality, and, most of all, the desire for transparency between what one truly is ‘inside’ and what others see and celebrate (Braudy, 1997). Insofar as we collectively make and break reputations through the processes of engaging in, or withholding, identification with others, the rise of the attention or ‘reputation’ economy online can be read as a social symptom - evidence of a significant shift in modalities of the ‘self’ in the West.

The contemporary flexible self

Cultural historian Warren Sussman asserts that procedures of self-production and self-presentation have always reflected the dominant economic and cultural interests of the time. Invariably ‘changes in culture do mean changes in modal types of character’ (Sussman, 1984: 285). In other words, our forms of self-production are deeply conditioned by our economic and social context; dominant modalities of ‘self’ are both summoned into being and illustrated in our cultural discourses and institutions. The ways we come to internalize or embody these versions of ‘selfhood’ are always contested and in flux, constituting examples of biopower in action (Foucault, 1990: 153).

Critics such as Philip Cushman and Anthony Giddens contend that the burgeoning consumer landscape post World War II brought us an ‘empty self’: a self who must perpetually consume in order to be effectively organized and identified, but who can never effectively be satiated. For Giddens, as for Cushman, perpetual attention to the construction of ‘self’ through the production of a coherent narrative of self is the only remaining continuity, or through-line, in our lives (Giddens, 1991; Cushman, 1990). Zygmunt Baumann (2001: 22) concurs: ‘(i)t is me, my living body or that living body which is me, which seems to be the sole constant ingredient of the admittedly unstable, always until further notice composition of the world around me’.

Eva Illouz, in her book Cold Intimacies, describes the ways in which Freudianism, as it was disseminated in both scientific discourses and popular culture in the early part of the twentieth century, resulted in new kinds of ‘identity symbols’ and new emotional styles of selfhood predicated on the outward struggle for personal authenticity and truth
These styles of selfhood, in turn, jibed nicely with the intensification of consumer culture throughout the twentieth century. To follow these lines of inquiry we might ask: How are our personal narratives predicated on more general culturally constructed ideas about our interiority, and the values we attach to the expression of some version of interiority, being generated, conditioned and deployed within post-Fordist capitalism and neo-liberal modes of governmentality?

As David Harvey has famously argued, processes of ‘flexible accumulation’ mark the current post-Fordist mode of production. These processes include strategies of permanent innovation, mobility and change, subcontracting, and just-in-time, decentralized production (Harvey, 1990). They are also heavily dependent on communication networks and emphasize the production of knowledge and symbolic products, including packaging, branding and marketing, over concrete material production (see Goldman and Papson, 2006; Harvey, 1990). Under these conditions, the construction, deployment, and embodiment of perpetually changing images come to play a larger and larger role in capital accumulation (Harvey, 1990: 288).

Neoliberalism, as the political ideology and mode of governmentality that accompanies these economic developments, posits that the role of the state is to advance and protect ‘strong property rights, free markets and free trade’ (Harvey, 2005: 2). Here, individual responsibility is stressed, while communitarian or state-run social or cultural initiatives are discouraged. And, most significantly, market exchange is seen as ‘an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs’ (Harvey, 2005: 3).

Work under the hyper-networked conditions of flexible accumulation and the market-driven ethos of neoliberalism has grown increasingly precarious and unstable. French sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello describe them as marked by flexibility, casualization, segmentation, intensity, and increased competition (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Autonomous Marxist critics, such as Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Paolo Virno argue that the increased production of immaterial commodities, such as design, knowledge and communication, necessitates new forms of labour, which involve creativity, innovation, and the manipulation of personal emotion and affect. This ‘immaterial labour’, defined by Maurizio Lazzarato as ‘the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’ (Lazzarato, 1996: 133), demands that the worker put his or her own life experience, communicative competency, and sense of self into the job. In other words, with immaterial labour, ‘the very stuff of human subjectivity’ is put to work for capital (Neilsen and Rossiter, 2005: unpaginated). But this subjectivity is not freely expressed or unfettered; it is most often subject to rigorous participative management programs, which remain authoritarian. As Lazzarato writes ‘one has to express oneself, one has to speak, communicate, cooperate…(t)he tone is that of the people who are in executive command’ (Lazzarato, 1996: 135).

The paradigmatic worker under post-Fordist capitalism may likewise be considered a virtuoso. Paolo Virno defines virtuosity as ‘an activity which finds its own fulfillment (that is, its own purpose) within itself’ (Virno, 2004: 52), and requires the presence of others. Insofar as we are language speakers, we are all virtuosos, and our ability to create, communicate and manipulate affect is increasingly central to job performance:
think of the call centre worker, the waitress, airline attendant or the Reality TV participant. Virno’s figure of the virtuoso signals the move of labour toward the never-ending immaterial production of affect, feeling, or emotional ‘experience’, and the transformation of the space of work into something resembling a highly socialized (yet privatized) public sphere.

A version of selfhood that arises from these conditions has been termed the ‘flexible personality’ (Holmes, 2002): perpetually active, willing to innovate and change personal affiliations on a dime. In order to hedge against our ‘stable instability’ (Virno, 1996: 17), we look to exploit every opportunity and grow increasingly cynical as we recognize that work is a game and that its rules do not require respect, but only adaptation. And, under the conditions of a perpetually transforming, unstable and increasingly image-based mode of production, we come to recognize that the ability to attract attention – to garner a reputation – might provide us with a modicum of personal and financial security.

If these conditions of work suggest a perpetually malleable, cynical and changeable style of selfhood, then the cultural industries are the places where the appropriate, profit-producing templates of the self are developed and propagated. Elsewhere I have argued that reality television programs are the paradigmatic example of how individuals’ affect, creativity, communicative capacity and the ability to forge social relationships become directly productive for capital (Hearn, 2006), at the same time as they provide the parameters within which a self can become culturally legible and potentially profitable for the culture at large. But, reality television is not the only place where this cynical outer-directed approach to self-production can be found; indeed as Emma Dowling, Elizabeth Wissinger, and Lynne Pettinger among others, have noted, most kinds of service work these days require it (Dowling, 2007; Wisinger 2007; Pettinger, 2004). In the post-Fordist era, then, we see a shift from a working self, to the self as work in the form of a self-brand with reputation as its currency.

**Promotional culture and self-branding**

As mentioned above, marketing and branding have become central activities of contemporary capitalism. No longer concerned with simply fixing a logo to a product, branding practices increasingly attempt to establish virtual contexts for consumption; experiences, spaces, relationships are all branded. In addition, branding activities are entirely dependent on the processes of meaning making and sociality of consumers as they not only buy but also live through the brand. So, branding practices produce sets of images and immaterial symbolic values in and through which individuals negotiate the world at the same time as they work to contain and direct the expressive, meaning-making capacities of social actors in definite self-advantaging ways, shaping markets and controlling competition. Here, consumers’ behavior, relationships, bodies, and selves become ‘both the object and the medium of brand activity’ (Moor, 2003: 42). Contemporary branding efforts exemplify Michel Foucault’s famous claim that:
emit signs. This investment of the body is bound up...with its economic use. (Foucault, 1977: 25 emphasis added)

Andrew Wernick outlines a specific example of the body forced to be economically useful and to emit signs of its own utility in his book Promotional Culture. He argues that the intensification and generalization of the processes of promotion and marketing produces a ‘promotional culture’, and era of ‘spin’, where what matters most is not ‘meaning’ per se, or ‘truth’ or ‘reason’, but ‘winning’ attention, emotional allegiance, or market share. Goods, services, corporations, and, most centrally, people are all implicated in a promotional culture. Wernick describes it this way: ‘a subject that promotes itself, constructs itself for others in line with the competitive imaging needs of the market. Just like any other artificially imaged commodity, then, the resultant construct is a persona produced for public consumption’ (Wernick, 1991:192).

This process of self-production might also be described as ‘self-branding’. Elsewhere I have defined the ‘branded self’ as an entity that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody the values of its working environment (Hearn, 2008). The self as commodity for sale on the labour market must also generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional skin, within the confines of the dominant corporate imaginary. Self-branding may be considered a form of affective, immaterial labour that is purposefully undertaken by individuals in order to garner attention, reputation and potentially, profit.

The view that self-promotion is a form of profit-producing work is now very common. Indeed, we most likely engage in a form of it ourselves as we craft our profiles on social network sites, such as Facebook, or attempt to compose compelling 140 character messages on Twitter. Self-branding is a function of an image economy, where attention is monetized and notoriety, or fame, is capital. And these days, as Barbra Ehrenreich reminds us in her recent book Bright-Sided, a smiley face and a positive attitude are the hallmarks of a successfully ‘branded person’; to borrow from Mauricio Lazzarato, smiley positivity is ‘the tone of the people who are in executive command’ (Lazzarato, 1996: 134). It is against this backdrop, then, that we might begin to explore the rise of the online reputation economy.

**Measuring brand value**

Like other brands, the success of the self-brand is evidenced by reputation, which must first be measured and represented. To better understand this process we need only look to the ways in which other branded goods and corporations are routinely subject to abstract systems of measurement through which their value is constituted.

Agencies such as Interbrand, for example, are dedicated to measuring a brand’s equity by the extent to which consumers recognize, use, and live through the brand. This process depends entirely on measuring what are patently immeasurable values: the ‘share of mind’ in each consumer, consumer loyalty, emotional associations, and sentimental attachment, or in other words, reputation. Brand equity measurement companies attempt to capture numerically, and by various tortured algorithms, the ineffable and intangible relationships and meanings humans are producing and
reproducing out in the world. Indeed, brand valuation systems arose in the 1980s as a way for corporations to avoid expensive ‘write-downs’ during mergers or acquisitions; they could simply point to the value of the brand acquired as an excuse for paying more than the tangible assets were worth. In this way, corporations came to add brands ‘as a type of intangible asset on their balance sheets’ (Lury and Moor, 2010: 33). Brand equity measurement systems, then, were developed in order to manage a perception problem experienced by corporations and, in this way, may be read as an early form of promotional reputation management.

Of course, the process of commensuration involved in brand valuation systems, which transforms qualitative distinctions into quantitative ones, actively works to depersonalize and de-particularize the very activities being measured. Quite simply, these measurement strategies work to render liquid and generic individual meanings and sentimental investments in the brand in order to make them exchangeable on the market; these systems mark the point at which human feelings are commodified. It is in this sense that Adam Arvidsson claims brands constitute the most general form of value under post-Fordist, informational capital (Arvidsson, 2006: 130; Lury and Moor, 2010: 31). But, by focusing on which types of relationships and which kinds of meanings are most advantageous to a brand’s ability to inspire consumer loyalty and thereby produce profit, these measurement systems arguably produce brand value rather than measure it. The epistemology of branding, then, involves determining what kinds of human experiences and behaviours ‘count’ as most valuable to capital accumulation now and in the future. In this way, brand value measurement systems are biopolitical and disciplinary. Brand equity measurement systems have much in common with systems of reputation measurement in the digital world. But, as we explore the rise of the reputation economy, the question remains: who or what constitutes a contemporary ‘reputation’ and who participates in its construction?

**A brief pre-history of ranking and rating**

Certainly, the most obvious precursor to the forms of reputation measurement systems arising now in the digital realm, at least in the sphere of cultural production, are best seller lists and popular music charts. While these lists and charts appear to simply count a song’s or book’s popularity measured in units sold, the mechanics, methodologies and interests behind their constitution generally remain clouded in mystery (Miller, 2000). Suffice it to say that, just as with the brand measurement systems, these lists serve the promotional interests of the book or music industries, work to discipline consumption, and function as forms of myth or self-fulfilling prophecy. The best-seller lists, for example, measure only the pace or intensity of sales, rather than the cumulative rate of sales over time and, therefore end up simply reflecting books that have been heavily promoted for a short period of time by publishers (Miller, 2000). The lists also have few, if any, protections from those business interests who would game the system by buying thousands of copies of books or albums, or, where rules tied to a professional association do exist, they are sufficiently opaque as to be easily thwarted. Nonetheless, these lists continue to serve as representations of popularity, as they appear to distill public sentiment into easily understood numbers and ratings, glossed as ‘science’, and work to build profitable reputation.
Indeed, lists and rankings of everything from bestselling novels, to universities, to Madonna’s boyfriends, could reasonably be classified as a contemporary cultural ‘craze’ in the West. The idiom of the list, Ernest Hakanen argues, allows us to locate ourselves within the social field. Their numeric shorthand not only helps us sort through the overwhelming world of commodities and services, speaking reassuringly in the language of science and statistics, but also helps us to position our tastes, beliefs, and level of success relative to other consumers; following Bourdieu, we could claim they work to generate cultural capital and new taste formations.1 The pursuit of cultural capital via a mastery of lists can easily be seen as a kind of affective and performative pre-history to the current pursuit of visibility, attention and personal reputation online. When we consume the list, rating or ranking, we simultaneously individuate and fit ourselves into the logic of the market; we find our ‘selves’ in the list (Hakanen, 2002).

But surely there is a meaningful difference between these industry-generated lists and the kinds of real-time interactive feedback mechanisms available to everyone online? Does the constitution of reputation change when mediated by digital technologies and social networks?

The rise of digital reputation via web 2.0

Many who celebrate the rise of social media see it as facilitating a wholesale change in social relations, and, indeed, in the nature of capitalism (for example Benkler, 2006 and Bauwens, 2005), confirming the centrality of socialized production, social capital, and immaterial labour. Add to this the rise of a culture of public intimacy, where the public display and mediation of personal emotion and affect is clearly linked to monetary value (in reality television, for example) and we see the emergence of something Adam Arvidsson and Nicolai Peitersen have termed ‘the General Sentiment’ (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009). Just as Marx argued that the General Intellect, the cumulative knowledge of all individual workers, would become a direct component of capitalist production, Arvidsson and Peitersen contend that alongside this, ‘some form of public affect, like reputation’ is emerging as a new ‘standard of value’. Value comes increasingly to depend on ‘the ability of an object to act as a catalyst for flows of public affect’ (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009: 8-9).

While prior to the digital age it was impossible to fully know the extent of our social relationships and connections or the impact of the social web we had woven, nowadays, social media like Twitter or Facebook provide a new ‘protocol’ for social relations; they allow individuals’ personal connections to become more durable, representable, ever-expandable, and, most importantly, they render public their affective qualities (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009: 17). Not only can we see the numbers of relationships a person has, but we can assess their quality and conduct as well; ‘(t)his means that what used to be private or “intimate” information is now becoming a public parameter that can, and is, deployed in evaluating the overall social worth of a person or organization’ (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009: 18). With the emergence of publicly available information about a person’s affective bonds, we get a sense of their total social impact.

1 My thanks to Liam Young for this insight.
an amalgam of their digital activity, which can then be measured, rationalized, and represented as their ‘digital reputation’.

Canadian marketing consultant, Tara Hunt, calls this total social impact ‘Whuffie’ – a term drawn from a currency imagined by sci-fi writer Cory Doctorow in his book *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*. Doctorow imagines a post-capitalist world of abundance, where individuals collect Whuffie by making positive affective investments in their communities. Hunt uses the term interchangeably with ‘social capital’ and declares that it is displacing money and becoming an indispensable new form of online currency. In this age of reputational transparency, companies must expand their social networks and cultivate meaningful quality relationships with the people in those networks. They can do this, according to Hunt, by going above and beyond their profit-driven mission and finding a ‘high end’, authentic, commitment to community (Hunt, 2009). Borrowing from Arvidsson and Peitersen, we might argue that corporations generate Whuffie, by ‘offering an ethical surplus to the polis’ (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009: 20), enriching the General Sentiment by making public affective investments in their communities.

Of course, corporate social responsibility offices around the globe have long recognized the value of making calculated investments of public affect in social causes and the link between these investments and concrete financial returns. The perpetual interactivity and transparency of social network sites seem to raise the stakes in these ventures however because, through them, interested parties can easily police corporate commitments. Does individual participation in online rankings and feedback systems simply reflect public sentiment, which can then collectively press toward generating ethical and socially responsible behaviour on the part of corporations and businesses? Is the dream of a true transparency between personal or corporate internal motivation and public self-presentation, named by Braudy, finally becoming possible?

**Online feeling measurement and management systems**

In order to begin to answer these questions, we must first examine who directs the flows of affective investment into concrete forms of social capital, or digital reputation, and what mechanisms are being deployed to solicit, aggregate, and represent these investments. Who determines what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘valuable’ reputation and whose contributions and interests are, both, appropriated and erased in the process?

As of 2008, over 32% of Internet issuers had provided a rating, and over 30% had posted an extended online comment about a product, service or person (Pang and Lee, 2008: 1). Clearly the drive to speak ‘from the centre of the self’ in the form of personal opinion is a strong one. This speech does not remain personally expressive for long, however; it only becomes valuable once it has been aggregated, represented and put to work. A plethora of different sites and services exist to fulfill these tasks.

To begin, feedback mechanisms shape individual sentiment even before it is expressed through the ‘proper engineering of the information systems that mediate online feedback communities’ (Dellarocas, 2003: 1410). These automated ratings mechanisms,
the first and most famous being eBay’s rating system for buyers and sellers, are what Chrysanthos Dellarocas has called ‘the digitization of word of mouth’ and have proliferated throughout the world of e-commerce, working as ‘a viable mechanism for fostering cooperation among strangers’ (Dellarocas, 2003: 1407). The assumed transparency enabled by these systems, Dellarocas argues, creates incentive for good behaviour on the part of businesses and a modicum of stability in what would otherwise by a very risky trading environment. Automated feedback mediators delimit who can participate, what kinds of information they can contribute, and in what format it is represented to others. They can also control for a number of feedback parameters that would be impossible to control in real world settings. Like the numeric best-seller list, or the brand equity algorithms, in these processes detail, nuance and context are reduced to simple summary statistics, transforming what ‘used to be a sociological or ethical problem, how to get a community to function, into an engineering problem’ (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2009: 25).

Once these feedback and ratings mechanisms are in place, sites such as ivillage, Buzzillions, Tripadvisor, or Urbanspoon deploy them to solicit consumer feedback for products and services. Generic consumer sites like epinion.com or yelp.com have also emerged exhorting consumers to express their feelings on a wide variety of services, goods and topics. But, often unbeknownst to the participant opinion-expressing consumers, these companies also partner with corporations and serve as ‘knowledge brokers’ or ‘innomediaries’ (Sawhney, Prandelli and Verona, 2003: 77). So, as these sites operate under the guise of serving consumers’ interests by providing a place for the free expression of consumer opinion and feeling, their corporate clients are able to access these suggestions, using them to grow brand equity and develop products. According to Scott Armstrong of the marketing firm BrainRider, this practice is a part of the increasingly sophisticated world of business marketing online, one that sees social networking as a tactic to attract consumers and consumer feedback as an easy route to free knowledge resources. These resources can be mined for value and social connections with consumers can be actively cultivated in order to ‘sell the invisible’. The invisible, according to marketing guru Harry Beckwith, is, first and foremost, constituted by the client’s feelings about the quality of their relationship with a business – in other words its reputation; manufacturing this intangible product is the marketer’s most important job (Beckwith, 1997: 51).

Other online services that actively track, broker, aggregate consumer feedback and transform this feedback into value for corporate clients have also emerged in recent years. Companies such as Sysomos, Radian6 or Bazaarvoice are ‘listening platforms’, trolling the web in order to offer ‘real time intelligence’ about the reputation of their clients’ product, brand or service. They also help clients identify key influencers and viral marketers and effectively ‘participate’ (read intervene) in consumer conversations, promising to help ‘your customers build your business’.

The intelligence collected by these companies is measured through the use of several ‘out of the box’ metrics, such as webcrawlers, key word searches, and brand mentions.

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3 This phrase is taken from the home page of Bazaarvoice.com.
As Radian6’s Vice President of Social Strategy, Amber Naslund, describes, these metrics provide both quantitative measures in the form of ‘share of voice’ or volume of mentions, such as the total number of twitters about a brand or service, and qualitative metrics or ‘share of the conversation’, which attempt to determine whether ‘they are the right conversations with the right people’.

The intelligence, once collected, is subjected to various forms of analysis, the most common being sentiment analysis.

Facebook, Twitter, and other ‘sentiment-aware applications’ (Pang and Lee, 2008: 1) have challenged opinion miners to move beyond the mere number of mentions as expressions of what people think to the analysis of the content of those mentions. Sentiment analysis is based in linguistic analysis and begins by parsing ‘mentions’ into polarities, or positive and negative values. It then subjects the mentions to several other filters, such as the degree of emotional intensity indicated by the use of adjectives and lexical cohesion, and subjectivity, which measures the partiality or impartiality of the source of the utterance by examining the semantic construction of the mention, other topics raised in it, and the extremity of the position expressed in relation to other mentions (Pang and Lee, 2008: 58-86). Sentiment analysis is just one mode of analysis offered by companies like Radian6, however. According to Naslund, many businesses perceive pervasive negative conversations about their brand that shift and move across the Internet as the greatest threat to business. Locating the sites where the important conversations are happening and intervening successfully in them, then, is also crucial to useful intelligence analysis.

As Naslund claims, ‘reputation management is one of the chief focus areas for most of the social media world, and will be for many years to come’. So, once the intelligence is gathered and analyzed, services like Radian6 offer guidance to clients about how best to intervene in, and manage, the conversations and opinions being expressed online. A client of Radian6, for example, is encouraged to enter broader fields of discussion and feedback online, participating in conversations that ‘matter to your customers and communities’ in order to shape and take charge of the conversations being had ‘in and around your brand’. The goal is to foster a community of loyal consumers that will endure ‘in between the points of sale’. Tactics may involve participating in chat room conversations, and identifying influencers, viral marketers, or brand fans. In this age of social media, then, the goal of online marketing involves far more than finding and targeting a specific consumer, but in ‘fostering a community’ of influencers and brand advocates from amongst already existing consumers and deploying them to do the work of brand enhancement for free.

Other online services are more involved in directly constructing and/or managing online reputation. Sites, such as reputationdefender.com, offer a monthly assessment of an individual or corporate online reputation and provide a service that will control and manipulate information that might appear about a client in order to create only a ‘positive’ reputational profile. Sites such as TrustPlus provide a reputation score for any person, product or service provider on the web for a fee. As Trent Cruz has noted,

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4 Personal interview with Amber Naslund, Vice President for Social Strategy, Radian6, November 9, 2010.

5 Interview with Amber Naslund. VP Social Strategy, Radian6, November 9, 2010
Canadian internet start-up Empire Avenue is a kind of reputational stock exchange, where companies and individuals can track their influence and invest in the potential influence of others. For example, I invest in you based on the degree to which you actively participate in online social media sites; your social capital could pay me dividends. Empire Avenue offers a mechanism whereby an individual can earn online currency for making the right investments in other people’s influence or by maximizing their own share price. This is accomplished by extending their social network, posting regularly on Twitter and offering comments, ratings, and feedback wherever possible – in other words, by actively developing a ‘self-brand’. But, as Cruz wryly notes, one’s own share price is also heavily conditioned by the degree to which one invests in others: ‘many users still seem to adhere to an Internet ethos of reciprocity rather than cold market logic. “If you buy me I’ll buy you” continues to be a common investment strategy’ (Cruz, 2010). The online currency offered on Empire Avenue, called ‘eaves’, is not yet translatable into real dollars, although plans are in the works to make this happen. The eventual goal for the site’s developers, however, is to sell the data about personal influence accumulated on the site to advertisers so that they might begin to determine and generate customizable advertising rates.

Numerous other forms of reputational meta-measurement services have arisen to provide corporations and advertisers with information about their ‘Whuffie’. Neilsen’s buzzmetrics promises to troll ‘nearly 100 million blogs, social networks, groups, boards and other CGM platforms’. Tweetbeep will email you as often as every 15 minutes every time someone tweets your search terms. Klout.com, owned by twitter, promises to identify top ‘influencers’ of different topics trending online and offers to provide you with your own ‘klout score’ based on your aggregated internet activity. Summize will let you know, at any given time, what topics or issues are trending on Twitter or other social media sites. Facebook’s Lexicon counts occurrences of phrases on people’s walls over time. Quantcast tracks the demographics of searchers for a specific key word, so that data about an online audience is available whenever you need it. And, of course, Google will soon provide a ranking of rankings: a master list of the most influential people with the best reputations on social network sites (Green, 2008).

**Structuring feeling and digital reputation**

As we have seen, affective investment online has given rise to a plethora of new services that, like brand equity measurement systems, promise to translate individuals’ lived ideas and feelings into quantifiable value for the market. This promise is predicated on lofty ideas about the power of authentic free expression from the ‘center of the self’ and the possibilities of a profitable self brand. But, as the variety of examples outlined above illustrate, the view of a market comprised of open and genuine affective investments that will eventually produce ethical behaviour breaks down almost immediately. Indeed, the rhetoric of an online reputation economy deploys several mystifying assumptions. First, it suggests that individual affect arrives on the scene in some kind of pure state, untouched by already existing class, gender, race and other social relations and is only ever motivated by an honest desire to do good. Second, it insists that the acquisition of a reputation by rating and feeding back is a simple and transparent process reflecting the ‘inherent value’ of honest expression. And finally, it
suggests that a digital reputation will eventually ‘pay off’ for its holder as a value in and for itself. But, can these various representations of reputation be read as ‘true’ measures of individual affect as some critics contend?

Arguments for the emergence of an ethical ‘public sentiment’ as a result of social media seem to suggest that opinion and word of mouth flow in an unfettered and transparent way from isolated individuals at their keyboards through the forms of aggregation and representation described above. But, if this is so, why does research repeatedly show that, when ranking and rating everything from youtube videos to hotels, individuals routinely give positive reviews? A study of ebay ratings provided by buyers from 2002 notes that over 99% of ratings of sellers were positive and only 0.6% were negative. Indeed, as of 2009, the average rating for anything online was 4.3 out of 5 (Fowler and De Avila, 2009). Given that reputation is an extremely contingent and changeable attribute, conditioned by its institutional and cultural setting and broad-based cultural assumptions about social value, the overwhelming positive reputation of everything digital might be read in any number of ways: as a function of the technological imperative – representing the thrill derived from the sheer novelty of the act of feeding back, or, as the result of the legislated, smiley-faced, outer-directed cultural ethos of the contemporary work world, or, perhaps, as with Empire Avenue, the result of a market-driven ethos of quid-pro-quo; if I rate you high and you might do the same for me. But, given the processes and services reviewed above, it is likely the combined result of reputation measurement and management systems working to bolster the interests of their corporate employers.

Arguably, reputation as the aggregation of attention has always mattered, even while the mechanisms for its generation have changed and intensified in recent years. It is the question of how it matters, of what the mechanisms are through which reputation is measured and rendered productive for capital that are the real issues here. As we have seen, the services outlined above are places where human sociality is subjected to measurement for the market, and, as such, they are ground zero for what David Harvie and Massimo de Angelis have termed ‘the war over measure’; ‘the daily struggle over the whats, hows, how muches, why’s and who’s of social production’. This struggle occurs wherever we see capital attempting to extract value from the self-vvalorizing practices of individuals (de Angelis and Harvie, 2006: 11).

Following from this, we could argue that the affective expressions and investments of individuals online constitute a kind of ‘free labour’. As Tiziana Terranova describes, free labour online involves an ‘immanent process of channeling collective labour into monetary flows and its structuration with capitalist business practices’ (Terranova, 2000: 38) and can include activities as diverse as designing software, posting youtube videos, creating Facebook profiles and of course, ranking and feeding back. It is voluntary activity whose affective qualities are colonized for value by capitalist interests. And, just as women’s work in the home contributes directly to capitalist accumulation but is also ‘not counted’ in formal economic analysis, the new online economy is entirely under-girded by free labour, even as dominant discourses work to cloak its existence under the rubric of ‘authentic expression’ and ‘personal empowerment’. Arguably, the promise attached to the achievement of a valuable personal digital reputation distracts individuals from the fact that businesses have
effectively outsourced the work of product innovation, promotion and marketing onto them while simultaneously disciplining self-presentation and affective relations in ways congruent with capital’s long-term interests. As Terranova (2000: 43) argues, ‘affective production on the Net… does not exist as a free-floating post-industrial utopia but in full, mutually constituting interaction with late capitalism’.

Under the ideology of neo-liberal entrepreneurial individualism, we are repeatedly told our opinions matter, but to whom and to what end? The ranking activities constantly being solicited from us contribute to value generation, although not for the person doing the ranking and feeding back in any direct way. For example, youtube stars are perpetually peppering their presentations with exhortations to viewers to rate, feedback or subscribe because more feedback and subscriptions equal more remuneration from youtube; here rating and providing feedback add value to a product entirely out of the rater’s control. Even when we track our own Whuffie or constitute ourselves as super-Facebookers, as illustrated in Empire Avenue, the reputation we generate is simply a reputation for building the reputation of others, resulting in a seemingly endless circuit of exchange without foundation.

The claim that the interactive feedback represented in measured forms of ‘reputation’ will inevitably produce socially ethical behaviour seems far-fetched in a world where market logics and values remain dominant and cynical forms of self-production prevail. Individuals generally craft reputation via the self-brand because they hope this work will eventually find its realization in the general equivalent – money; the celebrity industry works ideologically to valorize this hope. And, as the cursory look through the role of feeling-intermediaries above has shown, even where the motivation is the social good, the result remains monetary accumulation. As reputation seekers in the reputational economy, we may be nodes in the new distributed means of production as producer, product and consumer, but we do not even begin to control the means of our own distribution.

Insofar as measurement systems constitute that which they measure, when we rank, rate or feedback, we are not only finding ourselves in the list, we are giving ourselves up to it. And here, finally, we might find a link between these speculative comments about the ‘free labour’ of digital reputation building and the working conditions that prevail in the material world. The embrace of ranking, ratings and lists and the dream of a reputation economy serve an ideological and promotional function, re-inscribing ideas about the objectivity and freedom of markets and capitalism more generally; they reduce us to what Neil Postman calls a ‘calculable’ person, ‘one who knows his or her value as calculated by an external, refereed source’ (Postman cited in Hakanen, 2002: 247). If that source is the General Sentiment, as Arvidson and Pietersen would have us believe, it is a highly conditioned, over-determined ‘sentiment’ at that – one that bears the scars of the legislated affective displays that are required from all of us smiley virtuosos these days. Could it be that the pursuit of digital reputation serves a compensatory function for all of those ways in which we are disempowered as workers in the real world?

In reaction to material social conditions, we see the emergence of a structure of feeling (in Williams’ sense) characterized by an anxious need to talk back, weigh in and be
seen. These expressions are then distilled, aggregated, and monetized by the online measurement systems described above. Here, self-expression may not comprise ‘labour’, strictly speaking, but it does constitute a free source of large profits. And, as feeling-intermediaries structure feelings into profits for themselves and their clients, a valuable personal digital reputation will likely never materialize for most people; instead, there will be only an escalating, unrelenting barrage of promotional edicts and appeals. After all is said and done, then, it could well be that the online reputation economy is just a chimera, whose pursuit constitutes yet another instance of what Paolo Virno has called the ‘stubborn personalization of subjugation’ (Virno 1996, 195).

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Since the hybrid producer-consumer – the prosumer – was conceptualized three decades ago, prosumption has been embraced by both mainstream and progressive analysts. With digital technologies enabling more people to engage in an array of online prosumption activities, one shared claim is particularly striking: the empowering and humanizing implications of prosumption will mark the end of human alienation. In this paper, I assess this extraordinary prediction by, first, establishing that the core of Marx’s conceptualization of alienation is capital’s dominance over human relations, compelling people to become mere tools of the production process. Second, I assess both general and specific digital prosumption developments in light of this understanding of alienation. Third, my analysis concludes that people will participate in prosumption in at least three discernible ways: most will remain relatively powerless tools of capital; some will act as capital’s creative tools; and a minority (those possessing extraordinary capabilities) will have the potential to employ prosumption in ways that redress their alienation.

Introduction

In his 1980 book The Third Wave, Alvin Toffler prophesized that people soon would customize the goods and services they consume. Through their use of networked computers, he predicted that consumption would become increasingly integrated with production, distribution and exchange, so much so that power over the production process would shift into the hands of everyday people. Mass industrialization and consumption, Toffler argued, would be eclipsed by self-customization led by the hybrid producer-consumer: what he called the prosumer.

For Toffler, alienation was the outcome of Second Wave industrial society. Unlike the agrarian First Wave, Second Wave humanity was dominated by mechanized tasks and routines controlled by centralized, hierarchical interests. With the coming post-industrial Third Wave, Toffler anticipated the kinds of political, economic and sociological changes now lauded by prosumption’s progressive proponents. With the home transformed into an ‘electronic cottage’ – a place in which work and leisure co-exist and the increasingly empowered prosumer wins back her freedoms and sense of self – ‘the first truly humane civilization in recorded history’ is due to unfold (Toffler, 1980: 11).
Almost three decades later, Tapscott and Williams, in their best-seller Wikinomics (2006), further popularized prosumption as nothing less than the core activity of a new economy – one in which peer-to-peer networking and collaboration are facilitating the construction of an economic system that is innovative, creative and universally beneficial. This bold vision has been echoed by a legion of critical analysts, some using the term ‘co-creation’ instead of prosumption.\(^1\) Zwick et al., for example, write that prosumption’s exploitation of ‘the productive value of social cooperation, communication, and affect … represents a closing of the economic and ontological gap between consumption and production...’ (Zwick et al., 2009: 182). Once this is accomplished, the individual will be empowered to realize his or her potentials.\(^2\) Thus, for most proponents of prosumption, a new social order is seen to be ascendant – one characterized by a more cooperative and fulfilling life. In sum, for both mainstream and progressive analysts, the prosumer society will be a non-alienated society.

In what follows, I assess this remarkable prognostication by mapping out the theoretical parameters of prosumption (what, ideally, it does) alongside its real-world applications. In doing this, I answer the following: does the ascendancy of prosumption really mark the beginning of the end of human alienation? I begin to answer this question by detailing Marx’s conceptualization of alienation.\(^3\) I then explain how technology impacts alienation, arguing that contemporary alienation takes place when human beings act and relate to one another as tools of capital. Following this, my paper examines the impact of contemporary prosumption on alienation concluding, among other things, that digital prosumption will enable increasing numbers to become ‘creative tools’ of the production process.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) ‘Co-creation’ appears to have been developed by business interests as a means of framing prosumption as a consumer-corporate ‘partnership’ while, for academics, the term likely reflects the tendency of some postmodernists to celebrate creativity and choice through consumption (Zwick et al., 2009).

\(^2\) Toffler, thirty years earlier, made the same argument (Toffler, 1980: 11). Beyond this coming together of politically disparate interests, we also should recognize that both mainstream and progressive theorists have arrived at similar conclusions regarding the primary agent of this new order: the prosumer or co-creator herself. For mainstream observers, the perfect market system – one that produces what people want, when and where they want it – is idealized hand-in-hand with the ‘sovereign’ consumer (Gates, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2006). For progressives, prosumption’s/co-creation’s assumed pluralization of power and creativity enables the ‘autonomous’ worker to openly commune and realize Marx’s conceptualization of a ‘general intellect.’ As with Web 2.0 developments involving prosumption/co-creation, a growing global workforce is said to be involved in labor that develops, refines and intensifies both know-how and cooperation. For a critical analysis addressing these and related developments using concepts from both Foucault and Autonomist Marxists, see Coté and Pybus (2008). See also Lazzarato (2004). To avoid the awkwardness of gender-neutral prose, from this point onward I will use he/she, him/her, men/women interchangeably.


\(^4\) Elements of this paper draw on the contents of Comor (2011).
Alienation

Alienation is a condition long associated with capitalist modernity. Generally defined, it constitutes humanity’s denial of its essence. ‘Man’, writes Erich Fromm, ‘has created a world of man made things… He has constructed a complicated social machine to administer the technical machine [i.e. industrial capitalism] he built. Yet this whole creation of his stands over and above him…He is owned by his own creation, and has lost ownership of himself’ (Fromm, 1955: 115).

To assess whether or not prosumption can redress alienation, we first need to fully articulate what alienation is and how it is related to political, economic and technological developments. For Toffler and others, it is Marx’s early conceptualization of alienation – most clearly articulated in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (originally published in 1844) and The German Ideology (1846) – that is challenged by prosumption. According to Marx the essence of humanity is its engagement in the act of self-creation. The reason for this is that human beings are distinguished from other animals because people make their own ‘nature’ – they, in effect, produce the conditions of their own existence. People who do this are exercising their human essence; those who do not are alienated from it.

In capitalist society workers live in a state of alienation because their engagement with production is a matter of survival rather than self-creation. Most capitalists, because they fail to engage their creative powers, are even further removed from this essence. To reiterate, for Marx, the worker (or proletarian) does not produce to realize his creative powers – he produces for a wage. The capitalist (or bourgeois owner), on the other hand, does not even produce. Unlike the proletariat, the bourgeoisie have no hope of escaping their alienation as once they cease to own the means of production and employ others to produce they, literally, cease to be capitalists. One consequence of this is that, while the worker may aspire to end his alienation by overthrowing capitalism, the bourgeois owner is compelled to (unconsciously) embrace his alienated existence.

But why, we might ask, does the bourgeois owner fail to see her existential condition? For Marx the answer is rooted in the fact that the capitalist is not, in fact, powerless: her money and capital exert power for her.

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5 The concept of alienation precedes Marx. In the Old Testament alienation is equated with idolatry. For the prophets, man is criticized for spending his energy and creativity on idols; idols that man himself has built but now worships as if they are independent of his own creation. Indeed, the very monotheistic religion that the prophets promoted has itself become a form of idolatry in that human beings now project their power to love and create unto God who they, in turn, have come to depend upon for their source of love and creativity (Fromm, 1955: 113).

6 Of course this is not to say that human beings can divorce themselves from their dependency on the earth or the limitations of their biological circumstances. From an evolutionary perspective, the early humanoids that survived successfully engaged in socially productive activities – activities that were pre-conditions of humanity’s survival given the physical deficiencies of the species in relation to other species and ecological conditions.

7 It is important to note that some capitalists do, of course, ‘produce’ – especially those who are directly involved in the initial, often creative stages of their enterprise’s development. Innumerable examples of the creative-productive owner can be found in the early years of commerce involving digital technologies.
The bourgeoisie live inescapably alienated lives as their capital (including their technologies) constitutes an artificial kind of humanity. The owner himself thus is dependent on things to express an ersatz existence. While both the worker and the capitalist are alienated, according to Marx, ‘the worker suffers in his very existence, the capitalist suffers in the profit on his dead Mammon’ (Marx, 1844: 4). In effect, the capitalist is more than just dependent on his capital – he is insulated by it.

But what of the conceptualization of alienation as, more directly, the outcome of the capitalist-worker wage labour relationship? This, surely, is the form of alienation that Toffler and others forecast will be eliminated through prosumption. From this more familiar understanding of alienation, the fact that the products of the proletariat’s labour are not owned or controlled by the worker (but, instead, by his employer) generates what can be termed product-alienation. Moreover, through the systemic drive to generate surplus value involving the degradation of workers, yet another form of alienation emerges – process-alienation.

In both product- and process-alienation, work is not performed to satisfy direct needs. Instead, for workers, the aim is to gain the means (the wages) required to satisfy needs through subsequent purchases. Under these conditions people are compelled to sell their capacity to labour to capitalists as if it is just another commodity – in effect, a thing. As a result, human relations become structurally disjointed as working people, especially as they become appendages to ‘the machine’ of production, have little or no direct relationship with one another or, for that matter, their own humanity (Cohen, 1968: 218-19).

Toffler and subsequent prosumption theorists anticipate a remedy to product- and process-alienation. As people come to produce what they consume, and labour becomes engaged in direct forms of exchange with others (rather than for money), the prosumer is re-connected with both other people and to her own creative essence. Johan Söderberg, to give just one contemporary example, embraces open source prosumer software as ‘a showcase of the productive force of the general intellect… It underpins’, he says, ‘the claim by Autonomist Marxists that production is becoming intensively social, and supports their case of a rising mismatch between collective labour power and an economy based on private property’ (Söderberg, 2002).

Such optimistic conclusions are premature. One reason I say this is that arguments citing product- and/or process-alienation as core underpinnings of contemporary alienation are unsustainable – unsustainable both empirically and logically.

Recent research by Peter Archibald documents that worker alienation has not declined in relatively ‘developed’ political economies (nor has it been exported to the ‘developing’ world). Indeed, those who have escaped industrial society’s dehumanizing factories (those ‘progressing’ into service sector positions) usually live with less job

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8 Söderberg adds that ‘Initially, ideological confusion is caused by capital’s experimentations to exploit the labour power and idealism of collectives…, which makes the demarcation line between friend and foe harder to draw. But for every successful ‘management’ of social cooperation to boost profits, other parts of the community will be radicalised and pitched into the conflict. Inevitably, communities will turn into hotbeds of counter-hegemonic resistance’ (Söderberg, 2002).
security and more pervasive forms of surveillance, not to mention the daily stresses of handling, processing and acting on never-ending flows of information. Archibald also cites polling data in which overwhelming majorities say they either are not engaged or actively disengaged from their work. Thus, despite the much hyped rise of a new ‘creative’ economy (Florida, 2002) the empirical evidence for a decline of alienation stemming from fewer industrial occupations is, at best, uneven (Archibald, 2009).

However, and to repeat, neither product- nor process-alienation, although important, are adequate explanations for alienation’s persistence in the twenty-first century. The fact that many contemporary workers are paid enough (or the market price of the commodity they produce is low enough) to enable them to purchase their outputs makes product-alienation itself a questionable basis on which to explain the longevity of alienation. Moreover, it is hard to deny that at least some people do in fact exercise their creativity and intelligence in the contemporary workplace. In phases of capitalism’s development and in particular sectors, the knowledge and skills of workers have been encouraged (and even relied upon) – from the artisan-based factories of the eighteenth century to software companies in the twenty-first. Typically, however, this dependence on the creativity and intelligence of employees becomes, over time, a costly problem for capitalists precisely because of their need to generate evermore surplus value. It is this dynamic, and resistance to it, that compels owners to capture and codify these intellectual capabilities through the development and use of technologies.

Having noted these complex realities, at least some forms of alienation are more likely to be outcomes of something more fundamental. To uncover what this could be, let us dig deeper by returning to Marx’s assertion that capitalists are more profoundly alienated than their workers. Again, for Marx, the core of the matter lies in man’s removal from his self-creative essence. The fact that the capitalist owns property is what most directly distances him from others, nature and himself. Unlike the feudal lord who could not sell his property, the capitalist can. The structural conditions of feudalism compelled the lord to exist in what Marx called a ‘marriage of honour with the land’ (Marx, 1844: 26). The capitalist, on the other hand, owns things that are relatively obtuse. The lord possesses a place where he can live. The capitalist, more abstractly, owns wealth – something that, while often intangible, is always fungible. Quite unlike the feudal past, in bourgeois society personal relationships between people and property cease while ‘the domination dead matter over man’ becomes the norm (ibid.).

Of course the general decline of unions and the diminishing power of organized labour have facilitated these more tenuous and stressful conditions.

As Braverman (1974) and others have demonstrated (Huws, 2003), this is a core component of the history of management – the history of rationalizing the production process in ways that reduce labour costs and increase the power of capitalists to substitute expensive skills with ‘scientific’ techniques and controlling technologies. There is, indeed, an ongoing political tension that stems from it; one in which capitalism’s growth constantly fosters new creative occupations while also striving to divide mental from manual labour. To repeat, worker resistance to these forces constitutes a core dynamic in the history of labour-management relations specifically and class relations more generally.
Not only is capital the source of the bourgeoisie’s power, it also dominates the bourgeoisie. Because, under capitalism, money, rather than personal qualities or traditional customs, gives the individual his status and power, that individual is wholly dependent on it. In this sense, according to Marx, the capitalist is not primarily a human being who intentionally seeks to control and exploit workers using capital. Instead, capital (or ‘the machine’ as Fromm puts it) itself rules. To quote Marx hypothesizing the existential reality of the capitalist, ‘I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honored, and hence its possessor. … Does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their contrary?’ (Marx, 1844: 60).

Because capital takes on faux human qualities, the bourgeois individual is not compelled to confront his alienation. The worker, on the other hand, has no such ability. Thus, to repeat, proletarians experience their alienation directly. Without the power of capital to mask this state, the worker has no means of self-delusion. It is precisely this that furnishes the proletarian with the possibility of recognizing and prospectively overcoming her alienation.

**Alienation and technology**

In capitalist society people are dominated by a thing – capital. Not only does capital constitute the primary medium of social intercourse, it both empowers and disempowers. This is not to say that capital itself possesses this power. Instead, capital constitutes a form of exchange involving living, breathing human beings – it is, in fact, a process through which money and use values are converted, through labour, into surplus value. Machines and technologies are core components of this process as, typically, the capitalist puts his money to use by converting it to capital, and machines and technologies are used by workers to do this.

If, as discussed above, neither product- nor process-alienation are at the heart of the general condition of alienation, what is its fundamental basis? The answer, for Marx, is still to be found in the production process (a process involving four interrelated moments – production, distribution, exchange and consumption). This entails the need to exploit labour – the need to get more for less out of the people employed in one or more aspects of the process. For the proletarian, despite the rights and freedoms associated with the wage labour contract, resisting this exploitation has been the source of ongoing class conflict (indeed, this resistance has compelled capital’s generation and application of evermore sophisticated technologies).

It is precisely this ascent of ‘dead’ labour and its implications for the ‘living’ that Marx believed propelled capitalism’s tendency to dehumanize workers, making them into little more than appendages of the techniques and technologies applied in the production process. In effect, capitalism’s compulsion to generate surplus value is what compels capitalists to treat workers as if they are machines or things. People, as a result, become tools of capital. As G.A. Cohen explains,

The craftsman wields a tool. The individual worker cannot be said to wield a machine, for the machine of modern industry cannot be wielded… [T]he machine wields the worker, since he [Marx] conceives him as placed at its disposal, to be pushed and pulled. A machine in operation is
a system in motion and the man is what is moved. But this makes it impossible to characterize the worker as a machine ... The machine relates to the worker as the craftsman relates to his tool... (Cohen, 1968: 221, emphasis in original)

Cohen implicitly disavows the notion that alienation stems from the worker’s use of machinery and technology. In reality, the use of everything from knitting needles to computers to a pencil and paper in many instances may further the worker’s realization of her self-creative essence. Rather than humanity’s essence being denied as a result of using technology, a person’s essence is lost when she becomes merely a tool. To quote Marx directly: ‘Every kind of capitalist production, in so far as it is not only a labour-process, but also a process of creating surplus-value, has this in common, that it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labour, but the instruments of labour that employ the workman’ (Marx, 1887: 398-99).

Now that Marx’s theorization of alienation has been distilled, I return to prosumption to examine whether or not today’s digital technologies are being used to, in effect, liberate people from their dehumanized roles as tools in the production process.

**Prosumption, production and class**

To assess contemporary prosumption in light of its implications for alienation, we need to modify one aspect of Marx’s analysis. Unlike nineteenth century England, the populations of most twenty-first century capitalist societies are not always identifiable in straightforward bourgeois/proletarian terms. Significant numbers of people now are employed in so-called ‘non-productive’ occupations, innumerable workers own shares of corporations (even those they work for), and some aspire to self-employment using computers and other digital technologies as their individually-owned means of production. Given this contemporary labour force – characterized as it is by ambiguities and potential contradictions – to proceed with a Marxist analysis of alienation and prosumption we need to re-frame class itself in a way that reflects these developments.11 To do this, it is useful to reiterate Marx’s emphasis on the fact that production is a process involving four interrelated moments: production, distribution, exchange and consumption.

One of the most attractive traits of class (and certainly one of the reasons some find it troublesome) is its flexibility. As David McLellan observes, ‘Marx has many criteria for the application of the term ‘class’ and not all of them apply all the time. The two chief criteria are relationship to the prevailing mode of production and a group’s consciousness of itself as a class with its attendant political organization’ (McLellan, 1980: 182). Yet the concept of class reflects the essence of Marx’s analysis – it is the

11 On the other hand, despite these complexities, there is nothing terribly new in twenty-first capitalism that Marx did not anticipate. In the nineteenth century, of course, class relations entailed more than just the bourgeoisie and proletariat; small numbers of workers escaped their proletarian positions; technologies, techniques and machines of all kinds were used by independent workers or petit bourgeois businessmen; and numerous forms of ‘non-productive’ (yet, for the production process, nevertheless essential) forms of labour existed. What has substantively changed, however, is the scale, speed and complexity of capitalism’s underlying dynamics, locally, nationally and globally.
‘place’ in which the material conditions of historical development are linked to the thoughts and actions of human beings. With Marx, the motor of historical change lies specifically in the dynamic drive to increase surplus value and, more generally, in the ongoing contradiction between developing forces and the relations of production. In keeping with the necessarily holistic nature of this approach, and given the importance of all inter-related moments in the production process, I believe that a similarly holistic approach to class – identifying class positions in terms of both production in and the reproduction of capitalist relations – is consistent with Marx’s methodology.

The importance of this broader reading of class becomes apparent as workers, particularly in recent decades, have become more directly burdened with the costs and time pressures associated with both their own reproduction and the reproduction of the production process in toto. The constant drive to ‘re-skill’ workers now, for example, often involves individuals learning, upgrading and paying for these reproduction needs. In the home, what Ursula Huws refers to as ‘consumption work’ has steadily increased also, meaning that the techniques and technologies needed to run a household (and reproduce labour) have been domesticated. Furthermore, a growing number of workers are trying to eek out livings from labour based in their homes, mostly performing jobs that are tenuous and poorly paid. Among this ‘cybertariat’ information and communication technologies (ICTs) constitute, for neoliberal apologists at least, a means of realizing greater ‘career independence’ and perhaps a way forward becoming, potentially, entrepreneurs or commercially recognized programmers, writers or artists. Beyond the spin, the fact is that such pursuits require most to become more (not less) dependent on a network (i.e. ‘the machine’) and an economic system that operates beyond any individual’s control – a network and system that impels those seeking ‘success’ to constantly improve their skills and purchase the latest (often expensive) hardware and software commodities (Huws, 2003: 170).

A growing workforce now labouring online are engaged in prosumption activities that support various components of the production process. Recent evidence demonstrates that those most active – what a recent Forrester Research report calls the Internet’s ‘actual creators’ (defined as those who have posted a blog, updated a web page, or uploaded video within the past month) – constitute the minority (24 percent) (Bernoff, 2009). Among these individuals still fewer are involved in anything remotely progressive or transformative. Most, in fact, are contributing to an expanding range of promotional, entertainment and branding activities.

One widely embraced element of online prosumption is wikis – online sites with content that almost anyone can add to or modify. The largest of these is the online encyclopedia called Wikipedia. With approximately ten million registered English-language users, about 150,000 individuals modify content each month. Although the most commonly cited motivation for contributing is an interest in sharing information, routinely the site is used to promote commercial interests. And while wikis sometimes are portrayed as transcending the instrumental logic of accumulation (rekindling, for some, a pre-capitalist commons or gift economy), the historical dynamics outlined earlier suggest a different future. A profit-making company called Wikia, Inc. thus far has established (or has hosted the prosumption of) specialized wikis on more than 1,500 subjects. According to its CEO, Gil Penchina, the most popular of these concern movie
franchises and video games, all of which generate revenue by linking niche market consumers to corporations, enabling the latter to engage prospective customers, utilize their free labour, and exchange information with them in order to pursue more personalized (i.e. inter-personal and ‘viral’) marketing strategies (Parfeni, 2009).

A more tangible example – one involving the production of material commodities – is LEGO’s Digital Designer software program. It enables online participants to design and build with virtual LEGO bricks. Once submitted, the player/designer is offered their own version of what has been created for a price. Virtual models can also be shared and the advice of other LEGO enthusiasts solicited. On rare occasions LEGO executives adopt a design and manufacture the product for sale in toy stores. In return, the prosumer receives ‘design recognition’ but not financial compensation (Zwick et al., 2009: 181). In this and other instances, beyond exploiting the intelligence of others and selling LEGO products, the primary objective of the Digital Designer program is marketing – marketing LEGO directly to participants, using them to market LEGO by electronically sharing their designs with friends, and utilizing participant information for future promotions.

Some might argue that such contributions are empowering in that they constitute the engagement of people in creative, productive pursuits. Millions, indeed, take part voluntarily without financial incentives. Yet, for centuries, ideas, cultural representations and design images either have been shared for no compensation or co-opted (simply stolen in the absence of intellectual property rights) by capitalists seeking new products and useful information (Huws, 2003: 140-42). Such creative inputs, whether or not they are remunerated, have always been core components of a production process whose ultimate aim is the realization of surplus values. In this context, both the individual paid a wage and the person providing a corporation with the intellectual labour needed for new designs, marketing strategies and commodity sales share an important commonality: both are exploited. Having recognized this, however, the more salient issue for our analysis of alienation is whether or not these contributions entail the dehumanization of participants as mere tools of the production process.

The prosumer: Capitalist tool or creative worker?

For decades, proponents of prosumption specifically and ICTs more generally have, for the most part, forecast an empowered civil society. With more people engaged in ‘immaterial labour’ or ‘knowledge work’, they argue, corporations will lose control of their traditional levers of power. Indeed, the ‘smart’ firm will consciously empower its employees using ICTs to help them become more productive and creative (Drucker, 1992; Tapscott and Williams, 2006) while, for radical observers, market pressures will compel capitalists to furnish disparately located workers with the tools needed to organize themselves in prospectively revolutionary forms (Negri, 1989).
Little empirical evidence exists to substantiate either of these flattening-of-hierarchy assumptions. In fact numerous studies show quite the opposite: that the ‘information society’ and prosumer-enabling technologies serve powerful interests in their efforts to increase disparities (Rule and Besen, 2007). The main reason for this is that the core structures and media of status quo relations – private property, the wage labour contract, and the price system – remain intact and pervasive. In practice, ICTs have been developed and applied in ways that have widened and deepened the reach of these very institutions.

ICTs, no doubt, have enabled organizations to shed middle-management positions, yet new technologies have also been applied to extend control over production, distribution, exchange and consumption (arguably, neoliberal globalization would not have been possible without these capabilities). Moreover, ICTs are being used to increase the monitoring and surveillance of workers, and to extend corporate control over what and how employees communicate. Globalized companies – from the Gap to McDonald’s to WalMart – now, for example, use technologies to standardize worker performance and interactions. Independent thought is also neutered through software programs that dominate website and telephone communications. As one study of these developments concludes, ‘the net effect on the intellectual content of information economy activities ‘is surely negative’ (ibid.: 25).

From a Marxist perspective, these developments are perfectly rational – capital, after all, is compelled to seek profits (through the realization of surplus values) by using machines (including ICTs) to manage the division of labour in all facets of the production process. This, historically, has implied the elaboration of hierarchical tendencies, involving the development of all kinds of specializations. While this process is cyclical, in that the early stages of an industry may entail a period of relative autonomy and creativity for skilled and creative workers, the competitive and systemic dynamics driving market economies repeatedly compel corporations to systematize and codify these labour inputs (Huws and Dahlmann, 2009). Over the longue durée, 

12 Despite empirical evidence that capital historically encourages creativity but then systemizes and codifies it through technologies and management, Hardt and Negri’s recent book, Commonwealth (2009), repeats the argument that ‘social hierarchies is [sic] a fetter to productivity’ (p. 148). According to recent research conducted for the European Union, even in organizations where tacit forms of knowledge and creativity are deemed to be beneficial, the trend is ‘towards further rationalisation, standardisation and knowledge codification through the introduction of bureaucratic processes or knowledge codifying technologies’ (Ramioul and De Vroom, 2009: 85-6). The reason, others postulate (Huws and Dahlmann, 2009), is that the innovation and commodification process, under capitalism, is never ending. Corporations pursue and governments promote creative, knowledge-based developments followed by their rationalization, management and full exploitation. As knowledge advances alongside the technologies needed to commercialize it, activities once viewed to be fulfilling and even non-alienating are de-skilled, routinized or eliminated (Ibid.: 33-4).

13 Most employees today are not even permitted to enter prices into cash registers as scanners and touch screen buttons have been almost universally adopted.

14 Again, this is not to say that worker resistance has been insignificant. Critics of Braverman, among other points, emphasize that workers play an active role in this process – organizing (often successfully) in ways that have produced materially beneficial compromises (Bunawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1980). However, over the long-term, such efforts have been countered through the methods discussed herein, using direct coercion (involving state mechanisms), and through cultural co-
therefore, ICTs extend existing divisions between those who conceptualize and those who execute (Braverman, 1974; Huws, 2003; Ramioul, 2007).

This pattern is well underway in the computer software industry where Taylorist principles have been applied in the production of code as component tasks are divided among teams of programmers. Not only is this taking place in private companies such as Microsoft, but fragments of open-source software are being developed by disparately located individuals. One of the best known examples of the latter is Linux.

With Linux software, the transparency of its underlying code enables a vast pool of mostly unpaid workers to assess, improve and evolve it. Their suggested revisions are sent to an assembly node where control is exercised over what (if anything) is modified. For logistical and economic reasons, one individual and his colleagues monitor this complex division of labour – Linus Torvalds and the Linux Mark Institute. According to Chopra and Dexter, in the case of Linux,

…the disciplining of labour power is an intricate affair – a delicate mix of cooperation and cooptation. Open source shows such a mixture in its co-optation of the utopian spirit of a free software model, as workers have already bought into the ideology of open source or free software production…While the education and flexibility of open source programmers make it harder for capitalists to control the labour force, control does exist. (Chopra and Dexter, 2005: 10)

Yet the source code or ‘kernel’ of Linux is available to anyone with a copying device. There are no legal restrictions blocking individuals from selling it to others (although this is an unlikely event since it is freely available). Interests can, however, profit from Linux by building and selling services stemming from it (e.g. Redhat). However, because Torvalds formally owns the original code/kernel, new service vendors generally are compelled to cooperate with him in ways that retain and enhance his dominant position.16

Through such examples17 and, more importantly, in keeping with the historical dynamics outlined in this paper, we arrive at the following conclusion: prosumption, as an increasingly important component of the capitalist production process, employs workers/consumers as mostly unpaid but, in some cases, creative tools. This fact demonstrates why questions concerning prosuction’s implications for alienation are complex; clearly, both product- and process-alienation are commonplace but the precise nature of the prosumer’s labour varies to such a degree that prosumption, as an exploitative relationship, can also fulfill the essential drive to create.

15 For a representative example – specifically on how the ‘scientific management’ of professional journalists is being elaborated using Web 2.0 technologies – see Peters (2010).

16 First, Torvalds is free to provide or deny his Institute’s technical support. Second, if others initiate profitable Linux-based services, he is free to develop similar ones (probably at lower costs). And, third, rival service providers, if they utilize an independent programmer’s (usually non-remunerated) code, are legally compelled to enter into a licensing agreement with Linux directly (Chopra and Dexter, 2005). Barring a radical reform of U.S. and international law, what is known as the Linux open source business model (Rivlin, 2003) will likely continue into the foreseeable future.

17 See also Fitzgerald (2006) and Rusovan et al. (2005).
The implications of prosumption

Because, at first blush, the prosumer appears to be aware and in control of her productive and consumptive activities, she appears to be a prospectively transcendent figure. The seemingly free and autonomous prosumer has not, however, forsaken predominant structures and relations, for how could she if private property and contract relations remain entrenched institutions, both online and off? Moreover, the prosumer’s dependency on the corporations that own, design and run the essential infrastructures through which people work and consume leaves little room for genuinely autonomous development. For the overwhelming majority – even those who possess the knowledge to write code and create software – the layers of complex expertise required to restructure (let alone re-build) the means through which digital prosumption is practiced are (almost) beyond comprehension.18

Like the owner whose capital facilitates an ersatz humanity, we might speculate that the prosumer – often ambiguously located in terms of her class position – also may use technology to (paradoxically) distance herself from her essence. For others, probably the minority who have the financial and intellectual means to pursue their creative potentials, some forms of prosumption may be as liberating as Toffler anticipated. For these fortunate individuals digital technologies could help them transcend the status of most: rather than being tools of ‘the machine’, their exceptional capabilities might enable them to use ICTs as tools to redress alienation.19

But again, we should be cautious. The ongoing predominance of exchange relations (involving the commodification of both use values and human labour) ‘depends on actors repressing consciousness of the socialness of their act’ (Morris, 2001: 88. Emphasis in original). The universal institutionalization of commodified relations (i.e. the commodity form) itself mediates a repressed existence; one in which the mind sees socially constructed relations as ‘voluntary’ and ‘empowering’ (which at a lived, concrete level, they are) yet, in some fundamental respects, they are not.

Let me develop this point by elaborating what, precisely, the prosumer is producing. One way to do this is to assess the prosumer’s role in co-creating either use or exchange

18 Nevertheless, the prosumer’s value for vested interests pursuing all components of the production process will drive forward the ease through which prosumption will be practiced. Just as the keyboard, graphic user interface and pc are now being eclipsed by touchscreen, voice recognition and mobile computing, user-friendly prosumer interfaces will likely become increasingly systematized, making the kinds of creative contributions that are possible more delimited than open ended. Even the marketing aspects of prosumption will involve pre-defined, computer-mediated calculations as the labour inputs of both prosumers and marketers become increasingly automated and systematically processed.

19 More specifically, such privileged individuals have the wealth needed to circumvent the ‘unfreedom’ of the wage labour contract. They also possess the intellectual capacities needed to facilitate a reflexive understanding of ‘reality’ in the context of historical structures. Surely these individuals are relatively well positioned to engage in creative, non-alienating forms of prosumption, involving, among other pursuits, their participation in knowledge and/or artistic endeavours. Of course, because many or most of these individuals, by definition, are not working class, it is unlikely that their prosumption will focus on truly revolutionary anti-status quo activities.
values – asking if her labour serves the dead world of things (exchange values) or the living world of human needs (use values)?

While all commodities entail both exchange and use values, under capitalism exchange values dominate. For prosumption to constitute a truly new direction in socio-economic relations – to, in effect, prioritize use values – prosumers will need to work primarily for their individual and collective needs directly rather than for exchange. Whether or not what is prosumed benefits the individual or the group, if the purpose and result of prosumer labour is the advancement of exchange values, status quo relations are likely to remain unchanged. To put it more simply, beyond the prosumer’s economic exploitation vis-à-vis the production process, if prosumption is a tool to make money existing relations dominated by capital will be perpetuated. On the other hand, if the prosumer creates non-commodified products and services – things crafted primarily for their material, psychological or social usefulness – those who argue that prosumption is a potentially progressive development have an intriguing point.

The difficulty of achieving such potentials can be appreciated once we comprehend how extraordinarily hard it is for alienated individuals to recognize their state of alienation before pursuing activities and relations that enable them to recognize their state of alienation! This structural tendency for alienation to be self-perpetuating goes some way in helping us explain its historical longevity. Furthermore, if we accept Marx’s observations about capital’s role in forging an ersatz humanity among the bourgeoisie, still more clarity emerges when we recognize that most workers in ‘developed’ political economies now surround themselves with mediating technologies – TVs, computers, cellphones, automobiles, etc. – that are routinely fetishized as being ‘freeing’ and ‘empowering’. Arguably, such fetishes further obfuscate the individual’s recognition of his alienated condition.

According to Zygmunt Bauman, in our increasingly digital technology-mediated culture, where the alienated are seemingly empowered through their use of ICTs, unprecedented opportunities emerge for people to seek their sense of self-worth by marketing themselves to others as if they are genuinely autonomous, valued members of their communities. In other words, the online prosumer may be motivated to take part as a way of promoting and selling himself to others as yet another commodity (Bauman, 2007). The prosumer, in this sense, may be motivated to re-capture his humanity by being included in a cultural tapestry of exchangeable commodities, even if this only involves posting a blog, attracting Facebook ‘friends,’ or being credited with a LEGO design.

Directly or indirectly, most contemporary expressions of individualism and one’s pursuit of social connection are taking place in ways that elaborate exchange value interests or capital’s general reproduction. The individual therefore can be understood

20 To repeat, Archibald (2009) presents empirical evidence of the contemporary predominance of alienation. See also Erikson (1986).
to be prosuming in response to his alienation while, in so doing, deepening this very condition.  

Before concluding, it is revealing to note the nature of the ‘communities’ that most prosumers are participating in. According to Jose van Dijck, these overwhelmingly focus on celebrity culture, heavily marketed brands and other relatively apolitical or commodified activities (van Dijck, 2009: 45). Following her definition of a community as a group of people involved in a common cause or interest, surely the predominance of Internet pornography sites constitutes another pervasive hub in which tens of millions share a common interest. As George Ritzer (2007) points out, perhaps the largest segment of online porn is being created by ‘amateurs’ who produce, disseminate and consume much of their own video and photographs. What these and other such communities tell us about the priorities of the heralded prosumer is an area of research that has been (predictably) neglected by the concept’s enthusiasts.

Conclusions

Beyond product- and process-alienation, for Marx, the denial of humanity’s essence is linked primarily to our roles as tools of capital. It is in this context that I have assessed digital forms of prosumption as perpetuating this position or, prospectively, facilitating our liberation from it.

As Toffler theorized, the prosumer’s prospective freedom is the freedom of the individual – the individual as both producer and consumer exercising his capacities in terms of what C.B. Macpherson called ‘proprietary individualism’ (Macpherson, 1962: 3). In his high-tech Third Wave, these property owners produce their own goods and services, exchanging them for money and other commodities. It is in this sense that, for Toffler, prosumers will come to consider one another to be equally free as the creators or co-creators of exchangeable things. Clearly, this understanding of prosumption does not transcend capitalism. Instead, it might well be the market system’s apogee.

Marx also idealized individual freedom but in a much different way. Rather than being alienated from her essence as a result of her relation to capital, in a communist (post-capitalist) society ‘the material process of production is stripped of its miserable and antagonistic form’ (Marx, 1857-58: 705-706). As exchange values are supplanted by use values, a ‘free development of individualities’ for the first time becomes possible (ibid.: 706). This is not to say that individuals realize their full potentials because they live in an un-structured political economy. Instead, the social form of individualism

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21 Presumably, since capitalism and its mediating institutions remain in place, prosumer practices will not be divorced from considerations of efficiency and profitability. This is not to say that efforts to circumvent these conditions, whether pursued consciously or not, will dissipate. Instead, and in contrast to an idealistic and, indeed, voluntaristic understanding of resistance, how people respond to exploitation and alienation is contingent; it involves both the structural parameters of one’s political economic existence and, related to these, the intellectual orientations of those taking part.

22 This idealized individual is ‘the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual [is] seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself’ (MacPherson, 1962: 3).
itself is not pre-structured; people are free to structure their society as they please, not as it has been cast by capital and its exchange value priorities.

With Marx’s view of freedom in mind, I conclude that the prosumer’s ascent serves mostly status quo interests. Of course a small number of economically privileged and reflexive individuals potentially will engage in thoughtful, creative forms of prosumption – forms mostly taking place outside the direct parameters of the production process. In this respect, aspects of prosumption are potentially subversive, enabling a minority to relate not primarily as commodities/things but, instead, as creative contributors. Surely, however, barring more general revolutionary developments, digital prosumption is destined to remain part and parcel of capital’s production and reproduction priorities with alienated prosumers labouring to satisfy their own possessive individualist needs. To repeat, this dominant form of prosumption is contradictory, particularly when a core motivation for taking part is the quest to redress one’s own alienation.

Marx recognized that variously located individuals have a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the general conditions shaping their alienation, although predominant relations, if not overthrown, render alienation’s eradication impossible (Archibald, 2009). That being said, to repeat, a small number, no doubt, will be in the privileged position to apply prosumption to autonomously create. Many more, I anticipate, will be used through prosumption as mere tools of capital. Most, however, are likely to occupy a third and fundamentally contradictory position: prosumption will enable them to act as capital’s creative tools.

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Mobilizing the audience commodity: Digital labour in a wireless world

Vincent Manzerolle

abstract

This paper re-examines the work of Dallas Smythe in light of the popularization of Internet-enabled mobile devices (IMD). In an era of ubiquitous connectivity Smythe’s prescient analysis of audience ‘work’ offers a historical continuum in which to understand the proliferation of IMDs in everyday life. Following Smythe’s line of analysis, this paper argues that the expansion of waged and unwaged digital labour facilitated by these devices contributes to the overall mobilization of communicative, cognitive and co-operative capacities – capacities central to the accumulation strategies of ‘informational capitalism’. As such, the rapid uptake of these devices globally is an integral component in this mobilization and subsumption. In the case of Smythe’s provocative (and somewhat controversial) concept of the audience commodity the work of the audience is materially embedded in the capitalist application of communication technologies. Consonant with Smythe’s emphasis on the centrality of communication and related technologies in the critical analysis of contemporary political economies, this paper elaborates upon the concept of digital labour by rethinking Smythe’s theory of the audience commodity as a central principle organizing the technical and social evolution of IMDs.

Introduction

Work under contemporary capitalism is profoundly bound up with the development, deployment, and colonization of everyday life by digital information and communication technologies (ICTs). The growing ubiquity of mobile web-enabled devices (IMDs), particularly those that exist at the convergence of computing and mobile telephony, are paradigmatic technologies illustrating this point.¹ This paper will focus on one example of these devices – the smartphone², which will soon constitute the

¹ According to Gartner Research Inc. (2009), mobile phone sales in 2009 reached 1.2 billion units, of which 172 million were smartphones. Although the overall market for mobile phones declined year over year, the smartphone market grew an astonishing 24 percent year over year (http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=1306513). Strong growth in this sector continued in Q1 of 2010 with a 48.7 percent increase in smartphone sales over the same period in 2009 (http://www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=1372013).

² The term smartphone (a common industry term) is somewhat misleading since it privileges voice transmission as a defining feature. Instead, these devices – whose emblematic brands include Apple’s iPhone and Research in Motion’s Blackberry – are more fundamentally defined by the integration of telecommunication and mobile computing, including web browsing capabilities, GPS, email and, increasingly, social networking media as core competencies.
global mainstream of mobile communication (Lohr, 2009). The implications drawn from the following analysis can also be applied to a wide variety of yet to be designed mobile and wireless devices.

This paper engages with the critical work of Dallas Smythe to frame an analysis of digital labour in an era of ubiquitous connectivity. Smythe’s concepts have, arguably, gained a renewed saliency amidst the emerging practices and celebratory rhetoric of web 2.0. Following his line of analysis, the expansion of waged and unwaged labour facilitated by devices such as the smartphone, involves the mobilization of communicative, cognitive and co-operative capacities – capacities central to the accumulation strategies of ‘informational capitalism’ (Fuchs, 2010). I argue that the rapid uptake of these devices globally is an integral component in this mobilization and subsumption of human capacity. In the case of Smythe’s provocative (and somewhat controversial) concept of the audience commodity, the ‘work’ of the audience is materially embedded in, and articulated through, the capitalist application of communication technologies. Consonant with Smythe’s emphasis on the centrality of communication and related technologies in the critical analysis of contemporary political economies, this paper elaborates the concept of digital labour by rethinking Smythe’s concept of the audience commodity as a central principle in the technical and social evolution of IMDs.

This argument, therefore, has two central components: first, it examines Smythe’s contribution to Marxist thought, highlighting the place of communication and communication technologies in the organization of waged and unwaged work. The paper will then develop this framework as it applies to ubiquitous connectivity generally and IMDs specifically. Finally, it will briefly outline how these considerations shed light on the rapid evolution of IMDs as they become dominant media across a variety of everyday settings.

**From Marx to Smythe: Communication and labour**

Before detailing Smythe’s contribution to the analysis of contemporary forms of digital labour it is instructive to highlight his connection to key components of Marx’s critique of capitalism, specifically the centrality of co-operative and communicative capacities to the reproduction of industrial capitalism. Throughout the section entitled ‘Co-operation’ in *Capital Volume 1*, Marx outlines how a necessary precondition for the creation of surplus value involves enclosing the social and communicative relations between workers. As a result of this ongoing process, ‘The socially productive power of labour develops as a free gift to capital whenever the workers are placed under certain conditions, and it is capital which places them under these conditions’ (Marx, 1976:)

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3 Communicative capacity refers to an index of human potential involving the encoding and decoding of meaning. Moreover, capacity of this sort enables the individuation and articulation of the self as a socially constituted agent within certain definite social relations. As a function of capitalist innovation, these capacities are increasingly the object of technical mediation leading to their reconstitution, amplification and prospective exploitation by the capitalist application of ICTs.
As a result of the gains in productivity engendered through the organization and coordination of workers, and guided by various bourgeois fetishistic myths, technology (capital) is seen as the bearer and creator of value rather than co-operative labour power. In reality it is the co-operation of workers, and the synergy created from their co-operation, that generates surplus value. For this reason, ‘co-operation remains the fundamental form of the capitalist mode of production…’ (Marx, 1976: 454).

Following Marx’s understanding of the communicative and co-operative basis of labour and as a result surplus value, Smythe demonstrates via a materialist analysis of ICTs under capitalism that the co-operative and creative basis of human labour is a regular object of capitalist mediation and technological innovation. Indeed, technological innovation increasingly mediates the articulation of human communicative capacities in general. For Smythe, one of the key abstractions emerging from this process of mediation is the audience as commodity. In the commercial broadcast model, viewers’ attention to commercial messages is exchanged for television programmes (the ‘free lunch’). The audience participates in the necessary work of consuming, and responding to, commercial messages. By performing this service gratis, the audience works for media capital by marketing goods and services to themselves and others (Smythe, 1981: 9). In so doing, ‘(a)udiences thus labour for advertisers to assure the distribution and consumption of commodities in general’ (Jhally, 1987: 67, emphasis added). The necessary expansion of consumption required by declining production costs calls into being the ‘[m]ass media of communications’ as a systemic creation of industrial capitalism ‘whose purpose is to set a daily agenda of issues, problems, values, and policies for the guidance of other institutions and the whole population. They [media capital] mass produce audiences and sell them to advertisers’ (Smythe, 1981: xii). Thus the increasing productive capacity of industrial capitalism is mirrored by a concurrent production of audiences as ‘a new major institution which now holds a central place in the interwoven complex of institutions – the family, workplace, school, church, and state’ (1981: xiii).

Smythe therefore places mass communication, consciousness and communicative capacities within the productive framework of industrial mass production and consumption by highlighting their necessary role in realizing, as well as conserving, surplus value within the sphere of circulation. It is in this process that the audience commodity becomes central. As Sut Jhally explains,

Industrial capital seeks a means of reducing its circulation costs. Media capitalists offer access to audiences to accomplish this, thus sharing in the surplus value of industrial capital. Consumers participate in the process of buying...It appears that broadcasters sell consumers to industrial capitalists rather than seeing their activities as part of the process of selling commodities of industrial capitalists to consumers. (Jhally, 1987: 117)

Seen from the perspective of the total circuit of capital, the media and cultural industries are important components in expanding and speeding up this circulation of commodities through the incorporation of pre-existing communicative and co-operative capacities mediated by evermore sophisticated and ubiquitous ICTs. The broadcasting model that

4 For an insightful and contemporary overview along these lines see Mosco, 2004.
defined the rise of the audience commodity, and the more contemporary forms of fragmentation that mark Internet users, are successive evolutionary steps in the ever-expanding circuit of capital comprising the integration of both production and circulation.

Through Smythe’s emphasis on the capitalist application of ICTs, the sphere of circulation can be seen as productive in two senses: 1) it literally facilitates the expanded circulation of commodities and thus the realization and accumulation of surplus value; and 2) it facilitates the subjective reproduction of the wage-labourers themselves. To this end, the capitalist application of ICTs creates what Smythe calls the ‘the consciousness industry’ – a consortium of institutions emphasizing the productive articulation of communicative capacities and the overall management of consciousness itself. In so doing it enables the reproduction of the wage-relation in general by compelling consumers back to work so as to consume an expanding bundle of goods through the willing, and sometimes involuntary, acceptance of new and novel needs.

**Real subsumption, mobilization and the consciousness industry**

The operation of the consciousness industry, however, has an evolving technical and material basis. As Smythe has detailed, the development of spectrum-based wireless technologies able to overcome the temporal and spatial barriers that divided the places of work from the places of leisure has been central to the production of audiences by the consciousness industry. This has involved the exploitation of a commonly held resource: the electromagnetic spectrum. The integration of the radio spectrum and wireless technologies into the management of consumer consciousness is part of a more general mobilization of productive capacities across entire populations. Citing the work of John Paul de Gaudemar, Frank Webster and Kevin Robins argue that the language of mobilization offers a compelling frame within which to understand ‘the ways in which capital uses labour power and how populations are “mobilized”’ (Robins and Webster, 1999: 111). De Gaudemar outlines two major forms of mobilization: absolute mobilization, in which ‘the traditional way of life of rural populations (is) systematically undermined in order to create a factory workforce. This process involve(s) disciplinary efforts, both within the factory and across the fabric of everyday life’ (1999: 111); and relative mobilization in which earlier ways of policing workers are ‘replaced by an internal factory discipline in which technology [comes] to play a core role and in which control coincide[s] with the goal of productivity and surplus value extraction: the machine as dual instrument of control and of increased

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6 Smythe elaborates on the consciousness industry: ‘Although the mass media began the mass production of information, they are linked through interlocking business organization and a complex of largely managed, i.e., oligopolistic, markets with a much broader base of information production and exchange. The whole complex is [the] Consciousness Industry. Advertising, market research, photography, the commercial application of art to product and container design, the fine arts, teaching machines and related software and educational testing, as well as the formal educational system, are all part of it’ (Smythe, 1981: 5).
productivity’ (1999: 112); this process coincides with the rise of Fordism and Taylorism.

While the application of ICTs in the realm of waged labour makes work more intensive, it also contributes to the direct integration and blurring boundaries between ‘waged’ and ‘unwaged’ time. The colonization of everyday life by ICTs catalyzes a transformation whereby ‘[f]ree time becomes increasingly subordinated to the “labour” of consumption’ (Robins and Webster, 1999: 116).

Absolute and relative mobilization, however, map onto Marx’s distinction between the processes of formal and real subsumption under capitalism. The former depends on clear divisions between work and leisure time, whereas the latter attempts to erase all such distinctions. In this case, the condition of relative surplus-labour – that is, the intensification of work within a given working day – is the precondition, and material expression, of real subsumption (Marx, 1976: 1025). Real subsumption is intimately tied to cycles of rapid technological change, particularly when labour practices have, through technological innovation, become subject to relative surplus value (intensification) (Marx, 1976: 1035). As real subsumption comes to define ever-greater parts of the collective labour process through ICTs, ‘capital puts to work…the lifestyles, desires, and knowledge that are formed outside it’ (Read, 2003: 18). Real subsumption therefore becomes an active force outside of the factory once the circulation of capital has become completely inseparable from the social and subjective reproduction of the individual worker.

The history of ICTs explored by Robins and Webster via de Gaudemar’s concept of mobilization is, in fact, a history in which the synchronization of the factory and home is facilitated by the capitalist application of ICTs. The growth of demographic, psychographic, and other lifestyle data about consumers through the expansion of commercial broadcast media made possible the appearance of the audience commodity, a process which would, through the growing ubiquity and interactivity of communication media, result in ‘the integration of advertising, market research, point-of-sale devices, and just-in-time inventory…single, integrated constellation’ (Dyer-Witheford, 1999: 81), which extends across spaces of work, sociality and domesticity.

Smythe’s view of who and what is alienated under the conditions of real subsumption not only includes workers dispossessed of the means of production, but also includes processes of self-production. Self-commodification occurs when one’s self-reflexive and social capacities are increasingly inseparable from the machinations of capital accumulation and capital intensive ICT infrastructure, which are increasingly central to the articulation and deployment of one’s personal capacities. As Smythe writes, ‘Today and for some time past, the principal aspect of capitalist production has been the

7 What arises from the completion of this process is what some contemporary Marxists call the ‘social factory’. The constitution of a social factory as the metaphor to understand the effects of real subsumption has been explored at length by autonomist Marxists like Tronti (1966), Negri (1989), Dyer-Witheford (1999) and Virno (2004) and constitutes an important stream in communication research that parallels and often complements many of the research interests expressed in Smythe’s work.
alienation of workers from the means of producing and reproducing themselves’ (Smythe, 1981: 48).

For Smythe, the concept of real subsumption characterizes a process that brings social and communicative capacities within the gravitational pull (i.e. enclosure) of capitalist social relations; it is this particular process described in Smythe’s approach to the capitalist application of communication technologies. Taken to its logical end, the process of communicative enclosure, which begins in the factory, evolves into a seamless integration of work and non-work time through the intervention of capitalist technologies and social relations (like the commodity form) into the social lives of workers. Smythe’s analytic starting point – the capitalist application of information and communication technologies – offers an important contribution to the concept of real subsumption as it takes up ‘the place of communications in the wider system of social reproduction and the reproduction of capital’ (Jhally, 1987: 67). Communicative capacities under the guidance of the consciousness industry contribute to increased synchronization between the production of subjectivity and the speeding up of circulation.

Smythe’s concept of the audience commodity and audience work has been criticized for its phantasmal and seemingly un-Marxian characteristics (Lebowitz, 2009: 217). The claim that audience work actually creates surplus value has been a specifically disputed one. Although the creation of surplus value in a classical Marxist sense does not neatly map on to the ‘work’ of the audience (particularly in the case of commercial mass broadcasting), arguably, it is the appearance of the audience as a saleable commodity that provides the means of harnessing communicative capacities for the purposes of circulation as if they were producing surplus value. Under traditional mass broadcasting, the appearance of surplus value is really, in the first instance, an abstraction – a necessary abstraction – but an abstraction nonetheless.

The audience commodity and audience work do not actually produce surplus value directly. Rather, the conservation and realization of surplus value in the sphere of circulation occurs through the intervention of capital in the materialization of social communicative, co-operative and cognitive capacities of audiences; it is in this sense that the audience can be said to actually ‘work’. That is, the audience is active in the ‘production of circulation’ as a necessary, though ‘unproductive’ (Marx, 1976: 1038) function required by post-Fordist capitalism. The work of the audience is an abstract category that, at first glance, merely reflects the conservation of surplus value in the speeding up of circulation through the communicative mobilization of consumers. The net savings incurred through this mobilization, however, produces the audience as a commodity, which then guides the development and deployment of commercial media systems, and in particular, the commercial application of spectrum-based technologies. This function gains a greater material reality with the spread of interactive digital media. In this way the abstraction of the audience commodity and its work becomes a real force in the world – a real abstraction (Toscano, 2008).

The contemporary IMD industry, its rapid evolution and colonization of everyday life, is, therefore, a material expression of shifts in the nature of waged and unwaged digital labour in a political economic milieu defined by ubiquitous and personalized digital
ICTs. In terms of the necessary and unwaged labour involved in the sphere of circulation, the colonization of these devices in ‘free’ time has spurred on the valorisation of user generated content and other potentially valuable personal data – data used both to commodify personal information and to enhance, rationalize and personalize marketing and advertising in exchange for user’s attention, functioning as Smythe’s ‘free lunch’ inducement. IMDs are key components in the valorisation of co-operative and communicative capacities as these capacities pass through the converged nexus of digital ubiquitous networked media. The resulting configuration creates the conditions for what Christian Fuchs (2010), following Smythe, suggestively calls the ‘prosumer commodity’ as a structuring principle in the development of the mobile web and digital labour generally.

**Mobile 2.0: Rise of the prosumer commodity?**

The increasing forms of self-commodification that mark a variety of digital labour practices (Hearn, 2008) are reflected in the technical, functional and social capacities of the mobile media. Indeed, the sinews of digital labour writ large, comprising both waged and unwaged labour, increasingly demand the maintenance of digital identities and social networks as a function of the highly competitive categories of so-called ‘creative’, ‘intellectual’ and ‘affective’ labour (see Fuchs, 2009b; 2010; Cohen, 2008). These digital labour practices are made materially possible in part by increasingly ubiquitous media like Blackberries and iPhones and are systemically performed by an increasingly precarious, alienated and exploited worker.\(^8\)

The personalization of consumer ICTs endemic to the web 2.0 era, including IMDs, creates the basis for scalable audiences with varying degrees of heterogeneity and segmentation for the purposes of direct marketing and advertising. As highly personalized consumer devices, IMDs are increasingly employed to further the constant presence and cultural status of polling and marketing surveillance under the guise of democratizing culture (for example through integration of these devices in the flow of broadcasting content like American Idol, CNN or Much Music) by creating an instant feedback mechanism. The intensifying rhythms of capitalist cultural production and its ubiquitous flows of information are now increasingly inseparable from the human body.

As opposed to traditional mass media audiences, in the web 2.0 era ‘users are also content producers: there is user-generated content, the users engage in permanent creative activity, communication, community building and content production’ (Fuchs, 2009a: 82). In this case, the more apt term is the ‘prosumer commodity’; but, rather

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8 In waged labour, as technologies to maximize the communicative and co-operative capacities of paid labourers, these highly complex devices reflect an increasingly precarious working arrangement. Not only are contracts shorter, requiring workers to be more flexible in terms of their scheduling and skills set in order to keep up with industry changes, but the integration of these ubiquitous media have made work both more intensive and extensive for waged workers (see the Pew Internet & American Life Project study by Madden and Jones, 2008). *Intensive* because workers are now expected to accomplish more ‘within the traditional time and space confines of their job’; and *extensive* because it has become ‘much easier for individuals to work longer hours’ (Middleton, 2006: 169-170).
than signifying a democratization of media content, Fuchs contends the term signifies ‘the total commodification of human creativity’ (2009: 82). Coined by Alvin Toffler (1980), the term ‘prosumer’ reflects the convergence of the cultural roles of producer and consumer. Crucial to this convergence is the role of ICTs in amplifying the communicative capacities of individuals in everyday settings. This convergence is also marked by the rapid expansion of a flexible, precarious and contract-based workforce (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Gill and Pratt, 2008). It must be reiterated that the relative alienation and precarity of this category of workers is masked by the triumphalism of the prosumer. As Edward Comor argues, ‘surely what the prosumer reflects and develops – including social norms and attitudes – is itself little more than an alien force: the abstract power of private property and social relations mediated by contracts and the price system’ (Comor, 2011).

It is worth remembering, however, that web 2.0 is not a specific object, technology or application. Rather, it is more fruitfully understood as a set of marketing discourses promoting the interactive and personally empowering nature of the Internet, which ostensibly stems from the valorisation of user-generated content. ‘Web 2.0’ reflects a concerted effort to re-brand the commercial opportunities of the web, advocating its incorporation into professional and social settings via an assemblage of interactive, networked and digital media. In addition to the perception of empowered users across a variety of technologically mediated settings, ‘web 2.0’ reflects a new web-based marketing approach that strategically employs user-generated content in the production and targeting of commercial messages. As Fuchs concisely summarizes, ‘[i]n the case of the Internet, the commodification of audience participation is easier to achieve than on other mass media’ (Fuchs, 2009: 84).

The drive to democratize culture said to inhere in web 2.0 (Jenkins, 2006; Tapscott and Williams, 2008) is outweighed by a much more powerful interest in monetizing online behaviour. The Internet-based operations of media conglomerates – even relative newcomers like Google and Yahoo – do not break from, but, instead, build upon principles developed by traditional mass media (for example, Google’s Ad Sense updates the audience commodity for the web 2.0 era). AdMob, acquired by Google in 2009 for $750 million USD, is highly valued because of its prospective ability to ‘monetize’ data traffic to and from personal devices. In so doing, it produces and sells mobile audience commodities through the generation of detailed user information across a number of different metrics and includes the collection of data about application and website use. As AdMob proclaims:

AdMob offers brand advertisers the ability to reach the addressable mobile audiences. Our innovative ad units will carry your brand messaging onto the top mobile sites. As one of the leading brand mobile advertising marketplaces, we have the products and the people to help you meet your campaign needs. (AdMob, 2010)

It goes on to note, ‘(m)obile advertising provides you with targeted access to mobile users, and is easy to buy and measure’ (AdMob, 2010).

The logic of monetization hinges on audience attention as the primary commodity produced and delivered to advertisers. As a result of this logic, content is tailored to highly targeted audiences (Dahlberg, 2005). Not only is the audience more fragmented
online, it can now be spatially mobile and mobilized by, for example, the empowering rhetoric of ‘web 2.0’. IMDs are more than innovative communication technologies; they now represent a potentially lucrative venue (or platform) for consuming billable data and reconstituting the audience commodity as one composed of many discrete identities.

Given the propensity to incorporate the unpaid labour of the prosumer, it is not surprising that IMDs are heralding the rise of 1:1 marketing (Mitra, 2008) or so-called ‘participatory marketing’ that relies on social media to incorporate user-generated content (UGC) directly into the marketing process. The following examples demonstrate how IMDs might act as platforms for the direct solicitation of users to reflexively participate in their self-commodification. Once they have done this, users are rewarded with a ‘free lunch’ consumed on their mobiles.

Both MyScreen and Sidebar offer users targeted and personalized content delivered to their mobile devices in exchange for personal data. These examples reflect the way in which the mobile prosumer commodity is being constructed in application-based services – services offering new revenue streams enabling the collection of personalized data through the willing participation, or unpaid ‘work’, of the device user. These encapsulate some of the dominant evolutionary paths that mobile devices will take; paths in which a particular user – the prosumer – is the object of potential commodification. But in this case IMDs provide a personalized platform to close the loop between informational production and consumption (prosumption).
As a platform for the mobilization of the prosumer commodity, applications or ‘apps’ are a defining characteristic of IMDs, shaping the contours of the mobile industry. Online application stores now exist for all major handset manufacturers and also include content producers and network operators (of these, the iTunes store is the most popular). Many of these stores offer software development kits for the production of applications, which can then be sold by third party developers, with the companies taking a share of the profits. These apps perform a variety of services, including tourist information, games, news, maps and other branded content. Indeed, most applications are now a means for targeted ads, marketing data or branding strategies and function as tools for collecting valuable personal data (Furchgott, 2009). In an effort to compete with AdMob’s application based advertising and metrics, Apple has thrown its hat in the ring by releasing iAd as a feature of its new operating system, iOS4. Moving away from search-based advertising popularized by Google, Steve Jobs notes that, ‘(p)eople are not searching on a mobile device like they are on the desktop’; rather, they access their information increasingly through applications (Stone, 2010). In this way applications are a central area of expansion in the use of smartphones, representing an expanding revenue stream for a variety of mobile industry players including handset manufacturers, software developers and telecommunication companies (Middleton, 2009).

The production of the mobile audience commodity by offering some sort of free lunch is juxtaposed by the limited willingness of big media to provide net neutrality on mobile broadband (demonstrated recently by partnership talks between Verizon and Google). This prospectively two tiered system comprising prosumer commodities and pay-per-byte users will, if trends continue, become the central revenue model for telecom providers, software designers, entertainment content providers, and handset manufacturers seeking to profit from accelerating IMD use (Parker, 2009).

In coming years, location-based services (LBS) are expected to become an important driver in the micro-billing system, particularly as IMDs become fully integrated into the
user’s environment. Simply put, LBS are applications used ‘to locate the customer in space’ and thus to ‘better map and understand what they are doing in a particular place and at a particular time, and so articulate and enmesh product and service offerings into this context…’ (Goggin, 2006: 197). These types of applications use the GPS function now standard in most smartphones to offer information about the individual’s surroundings. In exchange for highly detailed locational data, users are given potentially valuable and context specific information about their surroundings. LBS are predicted to account for roughly 14 billion USD in 2014 compared to 2.3 billion in 2009 (Zeledon, 2009). Features might include finding car dealerships, bars and restaurants nearby, locating friends or searching for maps and directions. Industry trends suggest that such features will become largely subsidized by advertising and marketing in which campaigns can be narrowly targeted focusing on place. Combined with detailed profiles of user tastes, habits and interests, LBS will provide valuable channels for monetizing the work of the prosumer commodity. One way in which this may happen is by targeting digital coupons to smartphone users based on their location and profile (Reedy, 2009). Additionally, location-based services are giving way to what is called augmented reality, ‘a class of technologies that place data from the web on top of a camera view of the physical world’ (Kirkpatrick, 2009), further blurring the distinction between the real and virtual world in the hope of monetizing user behaviour channelled through IMDs.

Although the conversion of mobiles into platforms for the articulation of the prosumer commodity actually fulfils a certain narrative of capitalist media identified by Smythe, it is the radio spectrum itself that is the least understood, yet most important component. Policies governing this limited and increasingly scarce resource will set certain material limitations on how the paid and unpaid labour of mobile users will come to define the evolution of these technologies. The spectrum infrastructure is typically associated with terms like 3G, 4G, WiMAX or Long-term evolution (LTE), but the growth of the prosumer commodity and the smartphone (among other IMDs) has engendered huge demand for mobile bandwidth with which many telecom providers are currently ill equipped to deal. In pursuit of long-term profitability amidst the popularity of web 2.0, telecommunications providers and handset manufacturers have pushed mobile devices from simple transmitters of voice to multi-media data receivers/transmitters. And, as a result, the general trend of increasing data use at the mobile level has begun to outpace voice transmissions (Middleton, 2010). With smartphone sales predicted to outsell normal phones by 2011, estimates of the cost to upgrade the US broadband infrastructure are as high as $350 billion USD. Such demands have placed increasing pressure on government regulators to offer more spectrum for commercial applications and to subsidize upgrades with tax-payer money (Reuters, 2009).

Both mobile broadband and web 2.0 have risen from the ashes of the first dot-com bubble. Like the euphoria surrounding web 2.0, high-speed mobile Internet has been called the ‘great white hope of the telecommunications industry’ (Brody and Dunstan, 2003). These two technological moments – web 2.0 and 3G/4G – represent what Fransman (2002) would call ‘consensual views’ within the telecom industry regarding the path of ICTs in the private (and public) sector. This view provides a collective promotional narrative that is able to draw investment from public and private sectors alike. These narratives are significant because the choice to pursue 3G and 4G
technologies is a risky (and expensive) one, premised on a belief that consumer demand for broadband will steadily increase and pay off the huge investments needed to replace the infrastructure. The next generation of mobile media, 4G, is being envisioned as seamless mobile broadband access far surpassing the patchwork of 3G standards that currently exist; it will no doubt be subsidized by tax payers due to its apparent necessity.

In these ways, the mobilization of the prosumer commodity has pushed the existing limits of mobile broadband networks. The most salient example is the case of the iPhone and its preferential relationship with AT&T in the U.S. – a relationship that has been a double-edged sword. While average revenue per user (ARPU) is up 3.8 percent and, as of October 2009, wireless data revenue is up 33.6 percent year over year, this increase has caused a ‘data traffic jam’ that has angered users and slowed down the network overall (Malik, 2009). This problem has led to increased research in to 4G technologies like LTE and WiMAX, which, once implemented, may increase average uplink and downlink rates, but will require costly upgrades and more sophisticated handsets. Such upgrades are also associated with broader economic stimulus plans and form a central plank in national broadband plans in the United States (see www.broadband.gov). The rising demand for mobile bandwidth precipitated by the popularity of the iPhone has made the question of spectrum policy and allocation all the more pressing. As noted by FCC chairman Julius Genachowski (Schatz and Sheth, 2009), there is a ‘looming [spectrum] crisis’ (Reuters, 2009); this claim is also echoed by industry leaders. This real or manufactured potential for crisis has reinforced an industry view that net neutrality should not be applied to the next generation of broadband standards.

Conclusion: Spectrum as commons

As ever more bandwidth is required to keep up with demand, choices made regarding spectrum allocation policies and technologies will become all the more important. Addressing the changing demands of waged and unwaged digital labour calls for rethinking the possibility of a spectrum commons (Lehr and Crowcroft, 2005). This may include a shift away from the private property model that has dominated spectrum management thus far and the implementation of more flexible spectrum management policies (Bauer, 2002). As it stands, the monopoly control of much of the spectrum by telecommunications and other commercial interests acts as a kind of rent placed upon an existing natural phenomenon that belongs to all of humanity.

Since all current trends point towards a society of ubiquitous connectivity premised on the organization and allocation of the spectrum and since it is through personal technologies that most people will increasingly come to experience communicative and co-operative relationships – a world where each person becomes, more and more, an island technologically linked to others – Smythe’s prescient comments on the spectrum as commons gain a renewed importance:

The radio spectrum is to communications today as is land to crops and water to fish. It is a peculiar natural resource, one whose politico-economic and social aspects have been largely ignored by social scientists. Like all other features of the human environment, it must be looked at
in its relationships with people...Like no other resource, the radio spectrum is the first form of world property. (Smythe, 1981: 300)

Smythe’s analysis of the specifically capitalist application of communication technologies offers an analytic entry point into the ways digital technologies are deployed in an effort to more fully subsume communicative capacities as forms of ‘digital labour’. Smythe has described technology as ‘a mystifying term, which describes the ongoing capitalist system’ as well as comprising ‘capitalism’s most potent propaganda weapons in the struggle between the rich and the poor nations and the rich and the poor within nations’ (Smythe, 1981: 20). Considering how spectrum-based technologies now constitute a ‘normal’, perhaps necessary (Livingston, 2004), bundle of goods demanded by individuals, both in their capacity as wage labourers and social agents, Smythe’s warnings become even more salient and vital for contemporary media criticism.

references


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The subterranean stream: Communicative capitalism and call centre labour

Enda Brophy

abstract

This paper introduces an international inquiry into collective organization in call centres. Arguing that it offers an important test for labour recomposition in the twenty-first century, the article begins by situating the global explosion of call centre employment over the last two decades by adopting and extending political theorist Jodi Dean’s concept of ‘communicative capitalism’. Second, it surveys the dominant perspectives on the labour performed by call centre workers and introduces the autonomist concept of immaterial labour, one which encourages us to approach emergent forms of employment from the perspective of the struggles and the collective organization they produce. The paper continues with an overview of the forms of labour resistance emerging from call centres globally and concludes by offering a sketch of three of the the research project’s case studies in Italy, Ireland and Canada.

Introduction

‘Workers should not be expected to be the eyes and ears of corporate capitalism while working on poverty wages with no job security in a call centre that often has its carpet infested by fleas’, thus labour organiser Omar Hamed explained some of the conditions that triggered a 24-hour hunger strike by employees at the New Zealand market research firm Synovate in 2009. Their action was a part of the Calling for Change campaign, organized through the 11,000-member UNITE! Union and aimed at achieving better wages and working conditions at seven research companies in Auckland. Tele-researchers at these firms, many of them teenagers, have organized strikes and community pickets outside company headquarters in recent years as a response to inadequate breaks, job insecurity, and low pay compared to employees at their Australian parent companies, and they have won collective agreements and raises (New Zealand Press Association, 2009). As Hamed’s words underscore, their daily production of information about the public is of profound importance in a digital market, but their labour is systematically devalued and exploited. The situation of employees at one of the targeted companies, SurveyTalk, illustrates the tech-saturated power relations unfolding within global call centres today: as the New Zealander employees carry out market research on behalf of Australian corporations such as the telecommunications firm Telstra, management demands they lie and tell Australian survey participants they are calling from Australia. Incidentally, this is where they are monitored via a video camera affixed to the call centre’s wall.
This paper introduces an international research project into emergent forms of labour resistance and collective organization in call centres. While call centre work has been one of the fastest-growing sources of employment in the twenty-first century, it has not exactly lived up to the rosy portraits of rewarding ‘knowledge work’ that have been served up for almost fifty years now by economists, sociologists, futurists and management gurus. To begin with, working in a call centre tends to include a well-established mix of low wages, high stress, precarious employment, rigid management, draining emotional labour and pervasive electronic surveillance. They have been called digital sweatshops and compared to battery farms and Roman slave galleons. But the intent of the inquiries tying together this research project, however, is not to dwell on the ways in which employment in call centres tends toward exploitative and disciplinary relations. Rather, its goal is to offer a portrait of this emblematic form of informational labour in which language, culture and communication are put to work that begins with the resistance and collective organization produced within its ranks. Such an approach has implications that resonate well beyond the world of call centres. Call centres are a quintessential product of processes that have characterized the broader transformation of work in the information society, including the restructuring of large companies, a shift toward the provision of services, the growth of outsourcing, the intensification of communicative forms of work, and the imposition of flexible employment practices. As such, call centres are a vital testing ground for labour’s ability to adapt and reorganize in a digital economy (Guard, Steedman and Garcia Orgales, 2007).

This paper situates the global explosion of call centres over the last two decades by adopting and extending political theorist Jodi Dean’s concept of ‘communicative capitalism’ (2009). Second, it surveys the dominant research perspectives on the labour performed by call centre workers and proposes the autonomist Marxist concept of immaterial labour, one which encourages us to approach emergent forms of employment from the perspective of the struggles and the collective organization they produce. Third, it offers an overview of the forms of labour resistance emerging out of call centres globally, and concludes by offering a sketch of the research project’s primary case studies in Italy, Ireland and Canada.

**Communicative capitalism and the call centre**

Academic research on call centres has tended to neglect the broader political and economic processes that have shaped these new workspaces and propelled their remarkable growth (Ellis and Taylor, 2006). In a bid to limit such a tendency, this article adopts and extends Jodi Dean’s concept of communicative capitalism in order to frame the call centre within the contemporary political-economic landscape. Dean’s term names the way our economy has, over recent decades, incorporated and become increasingly dependent upon the ‘proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity’ (2009: 17). The tremendous investments in telecommunications infrastructure made throughout much of the world in recent decades have brought about a situation in which, as political economist Dan Schiller suggests, communicative scarcity has begun to recede (2007: 81). Fears during the 1990s over a growing digital divide between information ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ now appear to have been slightly off-track, as IT costs have dropped dramatically over
the last decade and the differential inclusion of populations as IT consumers - rather than their outright exclusion from the market - has become the norm in an economy that derives increasing value from communication, information and knowledge. Examples of such differential inclusion abound. In China, migrant workers keep in touch with their extended social networks by texting. Disposable cell phones are offered for sale at corner stores in otherwise devastated American cities. Cyber-cafes around the world offer refuge to gamers with insufficient download speeds at home. Connecting with others at a distance has never been quite as easy as it is today.

But Jodi Dean’s concept is polemical, not celebratory. The profusion of communication in daily life has not eroded social inequalities as some media theorists hoped it would, as Hamed’s words underscore, it has merely fuelled an informational economy that is the scene of new power asymmetries. Different sectors of industry reap major profits from our newfound communicative possibilities, from telecommunications to high-tech, from new media companies to electronics manufacturers to e-waste ‘recyclers’. But communicative capitalism, Dean maintains, is especially formidable in the ideological domain. Offering us expanded possibility to express ourselves has become a central plank of neoliberalism’s alluring communicative promise, one that both reinforces its legitimacy and buffers it from democratic social change. We can all have our say on whether Iraq should be invaded, but then it happens anyway. Never mind whether or not our messages ever reach their target, register, or provoke a response from those in power - what counts is the ability to send them. For Dean this emerging relationship between networked digital media and the global market has only led to the strengthening of neoliberalism, a reduction of meaningful political discourse, and a creeping marginalization of progressive social movements, who may know how to twitter in the infosphere but have forgotten how to organize in the real world. More communication has led to more inequality, not less.

Our political-economic system has become ‘communicative’ in other domains as well. Most strikingly, recent decades have witnessed the extension of ‘communicative access and opportunity’ (Dean, 2009: 17) to billions of consumers who are now engaged in regular and ongoing interactions with the corporations in their lives. Once famously characterized by rigidity and a lack of responsiveness in the post-War, Fordist economy, from the 1980s on firms increasingly encouraged the development of a permanent, intense and vital flow of informational exchange between themselves and their lifeblood, consumers. At the centre of this informational flow lies the call centre, a vital product of communicative capitalism that both reflects the political-economic formation and plays a key role in its daily reproduction. In everything from providing tech support for web hosting to gauging the effectiveness of advertising campaigns, call centres have become a vital means for mediating the relationship between the institutions and the subjects of communicative capitalism in what has been described as a ‘paradigmatic shift in the reordering of the customer inter-face across the entire economy’ (Bain et al., 2002: 184). If for some companies communicating with their customers remotely now delivers the lion’s share of sales, for most there is an increasingly widespread expectation that consumers will be offered the opportunity to get or keep in touch, customize their deal, get help using the product, check the status of their account, report failures, offer feedback, threaten to break their contract, and so on. If this accommodation of the ‘diversity, multiplicity, and the agency of consumers’
(Dean, 2009: 9) sounds utopian, it is worth remembering that this vortex of informational exchange, the ceaselessly-circulating ‘data stream’ (2009: 26) between communicative capitalism and its subjects must be organized and compressed so as to ensure it costs capital as little as possible. The birth of the call centre during the last decades of the twentieth century represents the dominant corporate response to this necessity, its rationalization of these functions, and its hidden abode of communicative production.

As part of what Ursula Huws (2009) calls the new ‘interface’ that has been installed between communicative capitalism and the rest of us, call centres therefore stand in for the promises of accessibility, responsiveness, and personalized attention that it would otherwise be much more expensive for institutions to make. The interface itself is of course renowned for being alienating and impersonal, frequently exasperating, and often designed to extract something from us while offering little or nothing in return – a first-rate example of how in the digital economy, as Dean puts it, communication ‘produces its own negation’ (2009: 26). But it is when one begins to examine the labour relations within the call centre that our era’s real digital divide, the one separating employers and workers, becomes apparent. Indeed, the discussion of the relationship between the call centre and the broader political economy of communicative capitalism, like Dean’s concept itself, risks losing sight of the fact that these customer relations factories are fuelled not by savvy entrepreneurs or Wall Street liquidity, but by a diverse, global and communicative workforce. Communicative capitalism could not exist were it not for communicative labour.

**Working in the call factory**

For millions around the world the experience of the call centre is much more immediate than fielding the infamous consumer research calls around dinnertime or being routed to another country in order to figure out what might be wrong with the printer. It is their way of making a living as frontline workers in the digital economy. As a result of the steady meshing of call centres into the quotidian circuits of communicative capital, the growth of these workspaces over the last twenty years has been staggering, producing notable shifts in the composition of labour forces across many regions. If the factory once was symbolic of work within developed countries, call centres have taken their place alongside other occupations such as service sector work, retail employment and care giving as one of the most likely fields of employment for new generations of workers. By 1998 it was estimated that employment within them was expanding by 20 percent a year globally and that 100,000 jobs were being added every twelve months (Datamonitor, cited in Deery and Kinnie, 2004). Since then some 15,000 call centres have opened in Europe alone, fuelling the continent’s fastest-growing form of employment (Burgess and Connell, 2006; Paul and Huws, 2002: 19). In Ireland and the Netherlands during the first decade of the twenty-first century one out of every three new jobs was a call centre position (Datamonitor, cited in Cugusi, 2005) and in America, the country that gave us the call centre, over 3.5 million people, almost 3 percent of the working population, are said to toil in one (Head, 2003). Nor is such employment growth restricted to the developed world, as the call centre workforce has grown rapidly in India, the Philippines, Barbados, China, Malaysia, South Africa and
other countries. Afghanistan, one of the most war-ravaged places on earth, has an emergent call centre sector supporting the growing market for mobile phones in that country: ‘Taliban call in and the women talk to them’, says Zermina, a manager at one of Kabul’s call centres, illustrating how the industry has been translated into stunningly diverse settings, producing novel workforce compositions everywhere it goes (cited in Doucet, 2007).

Two main intellectual traditions have competed to explain the condition and experience of call centre work. The first emerges from business, management and occupational psychology, and drawing on Daniel Bell’s (1999) post-industrial narrative of declining class conflict has presented a rather hopeful portrait of call centre employment as a form of what management guru Peter Drucker (1999) called ‘knowledge work’. These researchers have stressed how call centre work can be a rewarding job, marked by autonomy, relatively high levels of employee satisfaction, and a workforce that identifies with management’s objectives (Frenkel et al., 1999). Marxist labour process theorists have begged to differ with such cheery portraits. The intellectual roots of these researchers are to be found in the work of Harry Braverman, who in Labour and Monopoly Capital (1999) examined how new forms of control and exploitation were being devised for those performing what he called ‘mental labour’. Written as a response to the industrial sociology of his day and the ‘apologetic purposes’ it pursued in its celebratory discussion of labour (1999: 241), Braverman took aim at Bell and others by cataloguing the ways management was routinizing, deskilling and dehumanizing the clerical worker’s labour process. Almost forty years after his landmark text, the labour process perspective Braverman gave life to has produced a broad set of studies into the ways that force and consent are combined in the exploitation of call centre workers’ communicative abilities (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; Taylor and Bain, 1999). Labour process scholars have seen call centre work not as a humane departure from, but instead as the latest update of the Taylorist separation of conception and execution – for these workers, post-industrial society has become not Daniel Bell’s dream, but Harry Braverman’s nightmare.

By the early twenty-first century, however, it began to be acknowledged that critical approaches to the call centre labour process, in their eagerness to rebut fables of knowledge work in the call centre, had paid much more attention to how workers are organized by management rather than looking for the moments when they organize for themselves. If knowledge worker theories were disingenuous in their portraits of happy call-centre workers in friction-free informational workplaces, labour process critiques had largely served up the dispiriting image of a subjugated workforce in return. Seeking to remedy this problem, this research project draws from a tradition of inquiry forged over the last half century by successive generations of theorists and militants from Italy. Autonomist Marxist analysis is a heterogeneous tradition which has become prominent in the Anglophone world since the publication of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire in 2000, but has since its earliest days in post-War Italy mingled with a variety of radical currents, including American labour sociology, French post-structuralism and Regulation School political economy, radical feminism, and critical communication scholarship, becoming an increasingly transnational perspective with an associated and evolving set of political tendencies. Like labour process theorists, autonomists see relations between labour and capital as ineluctably conflictual, but they begin their
analysis of this relation with labour’s resistance and search for autonomy, a force which
their hypothesis suggests anticipates and provokes capitalist restructuring. Within this
broader outlook, since the mid-1990s many autonomists have proposed the term
‘immaterial labour’ to name what Hardt and Negri define as ‘labour that produces an
immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication’
(2000: 290). Immaterial labour describes a growing variety of forms of work in the
media and communication industries and beyond: it is performed by freelancers at
Viacom, by sessional lecturers at your local university, and ‘permatemp’ software
designers at Microsoft. Not only does such labour put language, culture and
communication to work with unprecedented intensity, it is usually affective and
expressed through now-ubiquitous information technology. So autonomists agree with
knowledge worker theorists that work has changed as capitalism has gone digital, but
they also point out that the extraction of value from these professions, much like that
which occurred in the car factories of Detroit during the heyday of Fordism, is by no
means a friction-free matter. If videogame workers sabotage, film workers agitate and
call center workers organize, the concept of immaterial labour asks us to look for these
moments of conflict, to launch our inquiries into those instances when the
communicative worker becomes resistant and unmanageable, to explore what Negri
(2005) and others refer to as the ‘self-valourization’ of labour.

Inspired by this tradition, the research project introduced in these pages seeks to
examine call centre work from the perspective of the resistance and collective
organization it produces. And while this ultimately requires moving beyond Braverman,
the spirit of such a project is captured by a striking passage from his work, which gives
its title to this paper. Labour and Monopoly Capital is commonly accused of offering a
sobering portrait of capital’s subjugation of labour, but no analysis of how and when the
latter responds. In an uncharacteristic moment, however, Braverman likens labour
resistance to a ‘subterranean stream’, which he says will emerge ‘when the conditions
permit, or when the capitalist drive for a greater intensity of labour oversteps the bounds
of physical or mental capacity’ (1999: 104). Organized resistance, Braverman warns, is
d endemic to workers under capitalism. Their insubordination, he says, ‘renews itself in
new generations, expresses itself in the unbounded cynicism and revulsion which large
numbers of workers feel about their work, and comes to the fore repeatedly as a social
issue demanding a solution’ (1999: 104). If management is constantly compelled to
reorganize and intensify the labour process so as to better exploit the communicative
powers of its workforce, Braverman warned, the latter would generate its own varieties
of organization.

With these words in mind, this research project accompanies Braverman’s prediction
into the call centre through the worker inquiry, an autonomist method that traces its
roots back to Karl Marx (Panzieri, 1965). And there is much to research, for along with
the spectacular growth of call centres, an inevitable efflorescence of labour resistance in
both traditional and unfamiliar forms has followed. The last section of this paper offers
an overview of such resistance, moving from widespread individual acts of refusal to
highly organized collective behaviours. Within them, it argues, lie the seeds of a
twenty-first century unionism for the digital economy.
A very different picture emerges of call centre labour when it is seen through the prism of conflict. Consider one of its defining features, the unusually high rates of employee turnover, or ‘churn’ as it is sometimes called. According to a recent global study (Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe, 2007: 40), call centres tend to lose a fifth of their employees on average every year, but in some countries, and particularly in the outsourced sector where labour conditions are harsher, the figure is much higher. In Irish outsourced call centres the turnover rate is 35 percent per year, and in the United States it is 36 percent. In India official figures are of 30-40 percent, but the real rate has been estimated at 65 to 75 percent, and exceeding 100 percent at some companies (Bain and Taylor, 2008: 39). This feature of call centre employment could perhaps be seen as a sign of the freedom customer service agents enjoy as mobile knowledge-economy players, perpetually moving on to even better professional opportunities in the sector. Yet as Kiran Mirchandani found in her research with call centre workers in India, despite having gone through a very long series of tests to gain such employment, they were ‘unanimously unconvinced by the arguments about the quality of call centre jobs’ (2004: 368). In other words, the spectacular turnover is not due to the fact that there is always an even better job down the street, but to the insufferable labour conditions marking the customer relations factories. If it is not a freelancer’s paradise, the prevalence of churn might then be taken as a sign of the utter subordination of call centre labour, of which the disposability of the workforce is seen as a symptom. Yet this conclusion overlooks the fact that the flight from a job is one of the most basic and common forms of resistance to exploitative labour conditions.

‘Undercurrents of distrust’, Kate Mulholland’s (2004: 720) exploration of informal resistance by employees at an Irish call centre, offers a very different view of the 8 percent monthly turnover she found there. Quitting one’s job at the call centre, she explains, was only one part of a ‘widespread pattern of work rejection’ among workers. One employee Mulholland cites probably summed up the sentiments of countless thousands passing through the revolving doors of call centres around the world: ‘it was a struggle for me to get to the end of the week, I got very stressed and would crash out. Just being away from the place was great, then you walk in on Monday and it starts all over again. I couldn’t cope with this see-saw life and left’ (Ibid.). This ongoing exit from the digital assembly lines does not point to some paradoxical love of its difficult labour conditions therefore, but rather to what Taylor and Bain have described as ‘a deep undercurrent of distrust of management’s motives’ (2003: 1497) flowing beneath its organizational surface. This undercurrent carries a range of informal strategies along with it through which employees ‘collude, collaborate and cooperate’ (Mulholland, 2004: 710) in order to resist the worst parts of their profession. One widely reported example of this behaviour are the ingenious techniques developed in order to slow down the pace of work, ranging from elementary forms of hacking call centre technology to twenty-first century strains of industrial sabotage. In a classic example of such hacking from Australia, van den Broek, Barnes and Townsend (2008) describe team members pressing the ‘transfer’ button a split second before customers hung up the phone at the end of the call, a trick which gave them two or three extra minutes before the next call while it appeared to supervisors that they were still in conversation. Customer service representatives can also learn to recognize the signs of when
management is spying on them in order to elude its panoptic ambitions. At the call centre Mulholland (2004: 719) examined, things had gotten so bad that a culture had developed among workers where activities such as cheating, work avoidance, and phoning in sick were all seen as reasonable responses to a bad job. Such informal acts, aimed as they are at reclaiming stretches of time from the punishing rhythms of the call centre, certainly have ‘an adverse and immediate impact on profitability’ (2004: 713) as Mulholland and others have pointed out, but they can also become the basis for more organized forms of resistance.

Teaming up. Academic research has only begun to skim the surface of the ways in which call centre workers are creating informal, horizontal bonds in order to resist management’s ceaseless productivity push from above, but the research thus far has offered some compelling glimpses of this process. Taylor and Bain’s inquiry at Excell describes how collective humour, including the public ridiculing of authoritarian team leaders and managers, fed a ‘vigorous counterculture’ that eventually forced the reversal of a colleague’s dismissal and a 99.4 percent yes-vote for union recognition across the company’s three call centres (2003: 1502). Their research provides an example of how management’s quest for technological control and work intensification begets precisely the worker cynicism and revulsion evoked by Braverman. Within this general malaise there are some signs that workers are repurposing the ‘teams’ they are frequently organized into toward wholly different ends: van den Broek, Barnes, and Townsend found that Australian workers ‘teamed up’ not to increase productivity, but to challenge managerial directives and improve their labour conditions (2008: 257). In one memorable example, the researchers recount how a team of 13 customer service reps signed a petition registering their opposition to excessive monitoring and ‘relentless conditions of work’, transforming the ‘team’ structure conceived of to intensify their workload into an informal vehicle through which to strike back against work intensification. Management’s facile adoption of the discourse of workplace democracy clearly carries the risk workers might begin to take it seriously. In this instance the manager urged them to recast their complaints individually, and (in an irony not missed by the researchers) despite the impressive degree of cooperation they had displayed, the workers received low marks in the ‘teamwork’ category of their performance appraisal (2008: 264).

Embryonic unionism. If telling the boss exactly what you think, or quitting, or finding small ways to mitigate the relentless pace of work can all be rewarding in the short run, these activities do little to challenge management’s structural power in the call centre. Beyond leaving or loafing, call centre workers are also engaged in a range of relationships with established trade union structures, whether through already-existing unions or organizing drives to form new ones. Scholars have often suggested that unionism is ‘embryonic’ (Russell, 2008: 206) in the call centre, but they have just as frequently pointed to the dearth of academic study of union organizing. A very rough picture of trade unionism in the call centre is nonetheless beginning to emerge, and it presents features that might surprise those who imagine it to be a union-free zone. Holman, Batt and Holtgrew’s (2007) study found that close to half of the workplaces they examined were already covered by some form of collective representation (collective bargaining, works councils, or both), generally as the legacy of collective agreements characterizing the industries the call centres operated on behalf of. This is
the case at Canada Post for example, where call centre workers belong to (and took part in the recent strike organized by) the Public Service Alliance of Canada (Rynor, 2008). In North America, as one of this research project’s case studies has examined, call centre workers employed by continental oligopolies such as Sprint, Verizon, Telus and others are part of ‘convergent’ unions such as the Communication Workers of America, the Telecommunication Workers Union, and the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) (Mosco and McKercher 2006; Brophy, 2009). In some countries (particularly ones with higher levels of collective representation), established unions have managed to incorporate outsourced call centres into industry-wide collective agreements as the Gewerkschaft der Privatangestellten union has done in Austria (Holst, 2008). The prevailing image of call centres as union-free environments may thus owe more to ideology than it does to reality, proposing management’s fantasy as if it were an actually existing state of affairs.

When a union does not already protect workers they can always form one, and academic research has recently begun to examine the labour organizing taking place along the fault line between workers and management in the call centre. Not surprisingly, some of the best research produced in the area is a product of the growing overlap between labour activism and academic inquiry. Al Rainnie and Gail Drummond (2006) describe a labour organizer’s experience leading a successful unionizing campaign at an Australian call centre in the Latrobe Valley, east of Melbourne. In Canada, Julie Guard, Mercedes Steedman and Jorge Garcia Orgales (2007) have documented the United Steelworker’s successful campaign in the mining town of Sudbury, Ontario. Andrew Stevens and David Lavin (2007) depict the bitter (although ultimately unsuccessful) struggle to organize a call centre in southern Ontario, and writer and journalist Andrew Bibby (2000) has catalogued some of the many organizing efforts at financial call centres in Australia, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The formation of unions also appears to be pursuing employers to the locations where they had relocated precisely in order to escape collective organization and higher wages, be it to the outsourced sector domestically, or internationally. A promising example of the latter that has received some attention is the UNITES Professionals organization in India, formed under aegis of the international umbrella labour organization Union Network International (UNI) in 2005 and now acting as an organized presence in six cities with 6000 to 7000 members (Taylor and Bain, 2006). However ‘embryonic’ the unionism driving these examples, it can make real differences for workers as far as labour conditions and job security are concerned.

Strike. When conditions become intolerable, call centre workers across the world have taken part in work stoppages and other forms of direct action to address their working conditions. In Mexico 1700 call centre workers at Tecmarketing, which provides support for the telecommunications giant Telmex, struck in February of 2008 in order to achieve a 4.4 percent pay raise (Reuters News, 2008a). The following month in Finland some 1,200 Union of Salaried Employees call centre workers at telecom operator Elisa’s subcontractor Teleperformance voted to strike over the fact that they were barred from the sectoral agreement for telecommunications workers (Reuters News, 2008b). In Durban, South Africa, Communication Workers Union (CWU) call centre workers at Telkom struck in August of 2009, achieving a 7.5 percent salary increase (Moodley, 2009). In 2008 city council call centre workers in Ipswich City, Australia
rallied and struck against a proposed ‘shared services’ model, which aimed to bring a privately listed Australian outsourcing company, UCMS, into the provision of public services (Gardiner, 2008). Privatization frequently carries the risk of outsourcing and for Australian companies looking to pay lower wages sending work across the Tasman Sea to New Zealand has been a tempting move. As we saw in the introduction, however, that country has turned out to be a hotspot for call centre unrest. In September of 2008 employees of the transnational company Teletech took to the streets of Palmerston North to protest the outsourcing of their Yellow Pages inquiry assistance jobs to the Philippines (Duff, 2008). The job action has occasionally also been spontaneous in its flare-ups, such as in 2009 when United Services Union call centre workers at New South Wales electricity retailers wildcatted after the state government failed to guarantee their jobs in its decision to privatize the utility (Daily Telegraph, 2009). Customer service reps employed at the Italian call centre Omnia have been engaged in an ongoing series of actions against the company in recent years, including strikes, demonstrations outside its Turin headquarters, and (in one of the more recent tactics to emerge from European labour struggles) the kidnapping of the company’s managing director in Milan, who was forced to reply to workers’ questions regarding late wages and the use of temporary contracts (ANSA, 2009). It is impossible to offer an exhaustive overview of call centre labour resistance here, but it would be remiss not to finish with a more specific mention of the organizing that has occurred around the outsourcing of work, a permanent source of managerial discipline and thus a central labour issue in call centres around the world. A perfect example of how strife arises comes from Thames Water in the United Kingdom, a privatized utility providing water to people in London that is owned by the Australian corporate banking and investment company Macquarie. In the fall of 2008 Thames announced it was raising water rates for 13.5 million customers by 3 percent above inflation for five years, allowing it to reap half-year profits of £23.2 million UK (Morning Star Online, 2009). But management at Thames told 282 unionized workers their jobs would be outsourced to India if they did not agree to ‘family unfriendly’ changes in working hours, provoking employees to ballot for a strike through the GMB union (Daily Mail, 2009). Situations like this are now commonplace. Workers at South African Airlines in the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu) pursued similar action in 2008, threatening to strike over the airline’s plan to outsource 250 call centre jobs to Dimension Data, an action that ultimately caused the company to back off (Modimoeng, 2008). Bain and Taylor (2008) have described the battles arising around outsourcing at five companies in the United Kingdom, concluding that strike action was the most likely to get companies to make concessions (including offering no compulsory redundancies) and that there was promise in the UNI’s internationalist approach to call centre employment. Aiming to promote international cooperation and exchange between workers at risk of being outsourced and those in areas to which jobs are being shipped, UNI developed its Offshoring Charter in 2006 as one of the opening acts of a set of labour struggles that have clearly become transnational in scope. Against this context, the research project introduced in this paper has followed three cases of collective organization by call centre workers in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In Ireland, an inquiry is being carried out with the O2 workers in Limerick, documenting their efforts to unionize through the Communication Workers
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Union (CWU). The outsourcing of the company’s technical department in 2006 inaugurated an ongoing low-level struggle between workers and management that has evolved against the backdrop of the Irish financial crisis. O2 offers a classic example of the transnationalization of the telecommunications industry, bought as it was from British Telecom by Spanish multinational Telefonica and now part of a wireless brand reaching from Eastern Europe to Latin America. Disciplinary management and the threat of outsourcing led workers to contact the CWU, which now has a permanent presence there and represents members in disciplinary hearings, but is still not officially recognized by the employer. Ireland is a hostile environment for union organizing and its thoroughly liberalized labour laws mean that even if the majority of workers at a company sign union cards the employer can refuse to bargain. At a July 2009 event in Dublin featuring an encounter between trade unionists and call centre workers, CWU organizer Ian McArdle (2009) spoke of a tipping point that had to be reached in any workplace in order to force the employer to bargain. At O2 progress has been slow as far as building the union, and members frequently operate covertly for fear of retaliation, but that tipping point appears to be getting closer. The most important achievement has been an end to the arbitrary punishments and firings that marked the call centre, something that occurred soon after workers balloted for industrial action as the first step toward a strike. As one union member summed up, ‘they don’t try and bully us into things now, because they know they can’t…They know the union is in the door. They know the union is staying. They would be as well accepting it’ (CWU member, 2009).

Across the Atlantic in the province of New Brunswick, Canada, where almost 5 percent of the labour force works in call centres, the research project has tracked the story of the Aliant call-centre workers who joined the CEP in 2001. Moncton employees of the telecommunications company (formed out of a merger of four privatized monopolists in 2000) described the restructuring of its customer contact division toward the rhythms of a call centre, a process that was soon followed by outsourcing to non-union contact centres down the road. Aiming to protect their employment and quality of work, call centre workers animated a four-month strike in 2004 for their first collective agreement. In a tactic that would feature prominently in the subsequent Telus strike on the west coast of Canada, Aliant employed private security guards to monitor and intimidate the striking workers. As one worker describes ‘[w]e did get harassed quite a bit by the security guards. Several tactics, fear tactics, were used and stuff like that. So it was kind of rough, you know, they showed us our home address on a piece of paper, just to rub it in that we know where you live. They delivered letters at my home about conduct and stuff, they were saying I was harassing people and all that which, you know, is kind of scary’ (CEP Union member, 2006). Yet in the process workers won moderate pay raises and, more importantly, a protocol limiting the company’s ability to outsource its in-house call centre work. Like the O2 workers, however, their status remains uncertain given the wider basin of non-unionized call centre labour in the region.

In Italy, an inquiry was carried out with the Collettivo PrecariAtesia, a self-organized collective of workers in Rome working at the largest call centre in Europe. Atesia represents the most extreme case of post-Fordist employment: over 4000 operators at the company were employed for years on a series of freelance, or what are called parasubordinate, contracts. For new Atesia workers answering calls outsourced from
Telecom Italia Mobile, employment meant having one’s contract renewed once a month, then once every three months, and then every 12 months. As freelancers they technically rented their workstations and were paid by the call, but management set their shifts at six hours a day, six days a week. In essence it was masked permanent employment, only without benefits, the right to unionize or to strike, paid holidays, sick days, or maternity leave. Collettivo member Federica Ballarò recounted seeing women forced to work during their eighth month of pregnancy lest they lose their position, as well as new mothers leaving the workplace on breaks to breastfeed their babies (Ballarò, 2007). The Collettivo was formed in 2004 and began to organize with assistance from Cobas, the rank and file union. In a form of digital sabotage, operators began to hang up on customers at the two-minute and forty-second mark when they received the greatest compensation for their calls, and over the next two years the Collettivo organized ten strikes, deftly harnessing the flexibility imposed on them. As parasubordinate workers going on strike was illegal, yet as freelancers they technically had the right to come to work whenever they liked during their scheduled shift, or not at all. The Collettivo organised a coordinated claiming of this right, crippling the call centre for 24 hours. By 2007 an agreement was hammered out between the then centre-left government, the confederal unions, and Atesia in order to quell the unrest that was by that point sweeping the Italian call centre industry. The plan decreed the permanent hiring of parasubordinate workers, who were to be compensated for years of benefits and back pay due to their misclassification. But their organising cost them dearly, as at the moment every original member of the Collettivo at Atesia has been fired.

Call centres have not obliterated worker resistance, but their reputation as the digital sweatshops of an informational economy is clearly well deserved. Communicative capitalism is the scene of new forms of inequality, and the call centre is a privileged space for the exploration of how the former reproduces the latter. Yet Braverman’s warning against assuming the ‘acclimatization’ of the worker to ‘new modes of production’ (Braverman, 1999) points toward the importance of exploring communicative capitalism from the perspective of the labour that fuels it, and exploring that labour by beginning with the conflict, resistance and collective organization it produces. As Michel Foucault once mused, ‘in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts to dissociate those relations’ (2000: 329). Following the twists and turns of contemporary labour resistance and collective organization allows us to focus upon a very different digital divide, the one separating employers and the increasingly affective, communicative and linguistic workforce they have come to depend on.

references


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This paper places digital labour in the context of recently revived interest in the young Marx’s concept of ‘species-being’ (Gattungswesen). Cryptically and fragmentarily announced in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, but largely abandoned in Marx’s later work, the idea has passed in and then, apparently decisively, out, of fashion amongst his interpreters. But the first decade of the twenty-first century has seen a renewed interest surely due in part to the manifest capacities of electronic networks and biotechnologies to alter the cognitive and corporeal attributes of the human. After proposing an historical, rather than essentialist, understanding of Gattungswesen the paper goes on to suggest some categories that might be adequate to a situation where the stakes in class conflict are nothing less than the trajectory of a contemporary ‘species-becoming’: planet factory, futuristic accumulation, global worker, techno-finance, singularity capitalism, biocommunism.

Introduction: Firewood

The current persecutions of information leakers and savage repression of youthful dissidents around the world means the following story will come as no surprise. A student radical in a peripheral zone of global capital attracts the attention of state censors for indie-media activities exposing the enclosure of a local bio-commons. Threatened by the state security apparatus, he flees to a foreign metropolis, where, while engaged in political organizing, he keeps up a blog, re-mixing the ideas of other theorists in occasional, associative reflections. From this process emerges a concept crucial to understanding digital labour – a concept no sooner posted than promptly forgotten.

These events occurred a mere one hundred and sixty seven years ago, in 1844; the young academic activist is Karl Marx; the peripheral zone of capital is Prussia; the indie-media platform the short-lived liberal paper Das Rheinische Zeitung; the bio-commons story concerns peasants prosecuted by landlords for collecting firewood from the local forest; the foreign metropolis is Paris, the blog the Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts, episodic, broken-off, heavily hyper-linked to Hegel and Feuerbach (see Tedman, 2004), brilliant shards, with, in their time, zero-comments; and the idea that passes from its pages into oblivion at net-speed is that of ‘species-being’ (Gattungswesen). Long-eclipsed, species-being is now, however, timely again. This
paper discusses why this revival is relevant to the topic of digital labour, and then, building on a revisited version of Gattungswesen, proposes some further analytic categories with which to situate such labour: the planet factory, futuristic accumulation, global worker, techno-finance, singularity capitalism, biocommunism.

**Species-becoming in the planet factory**

In the Manuscripts Marx says that private ownership of the means of production imposes on humans a four-fold alienation: from the process of production, from its products, from other producers, and from their species-being (see Ollman, 1971: 138). While the first three stages of this process have been subject to extensive exegesis, the last, the fourth alienation, is neglected. In the Manuscripts, its discussion is cryptic, fugitive, tantalizing. It is, however, clear that Marx did not mean simply human existence as a biologically reproductive group. Species-being is rather the capacity to collectively transform this natural basis, making ‘life activity itself an object of will and consciousness’ (Marx, 1964: 67). Witnessing the titanic processes of nascent factory capitalism Marx describes species-being as manifested in the cooperative organization of labour, the increasing power of humans to affect their natural environment, the emancipation of women, the formation of metropolii, and the application of science and technology not only to industry but to the very ‘forming of the five senses’ (1964: 112, 129, 134, 141).

Having introduced Gattungswesen in the Manuscripts, Marx shortly thereafter abandoned it, except for fleeting mentions in Grundrisse and Capital. Because the Manuscripts were not published until 1932, species-being never entered the Leninist lexicon. It was, however, enthusiastically embraced by Marcuse (1972) and Lukacs (1978). No sooner had species-being been resurrected by the Frankfort School, however, than it was repudiated by Althusser (1969), for whom the idea lay on the wrong side of the epistemological chasm between early, immature, and late, scientific Marxism. It reeked of essentialism and teleology. Question of species-being, of the relations of the human to the ‘hedgehog, dragonfly, rhododendron’ were a philosophic trap, belonging to separate theoretical universe than the proper Marxist concepts of ‘the mode of production, productive forces…the relations of production…determination in the last instance by the economy…and so on and so forth’ (Althusser, 2003: 279, 264) This verdict, resonating so strongly with the post-structural critique of ‘man,’ held sway for some time.

In the last decade, however, the concept has drawn renewed comment from Gayatri Spivak (1999), David Harvey (2000), Jason Read (2003), Paolo Virno (2004), Eugene Thacker (2005), and, more obliquely, Melinda Cooper (2008) and others. Ideas do not fall from the sky; this sudden burst of Gattungswesen chatter is not coincidental, but conjunctural – a Mayday signal, perhaps. If in 1844 we had the factory, and in the mid 20th century the social factory of Fordism, now we have the factory planet – or the planet factory, a regime that subsumes not just production, consumption, and social reproduction (as in Fordism), but life’s genetic and ecological dimensions.
This is most immediately apparent in the ecological register. In an essay on climate change, ‘Humanity’s Meltdown’, Marxist urbanist Mike Davis (2008), reports a unanimous decision by the twenty-one member Stratigraphy Commission of the Geological Society of London, to affirm that humanity is now in the era of the ‘Anthropocene’, an epoch defined by the emergence of urban-industrial society as a geological force. The Commission tracks ‘mass extinctions, speciation events, and abrupt changes in atmospheric chemistry’ recorded in the earth’s sedimentary strata. On the basis of this evidence, it determined that the Holocene, the interglacial span of stable climate that saw the emergence of agriculture and urban civilization, was over, and Earth had entered ‘a stratigraphic interval without close parallel in the last several million years.’ In addition to the buildup of greenhouse gases, they cited human landscape transformations, agricultural monocultures, acidification of the oceans, global species migrations and the destruction of biota, factors resulting in ‘a distinctive contemporary biostratigraphic signal’. These human-induced effects are, the Commission observed, permanent, as future evolution will take place from surviving (and frequently anthropogenically relocated) stocks. Davis spells out the conclusion: ‘Evolution itself has been forced into a new trajectory.’

Information technologies, the product of digital labour, should, I suggest, also be understood as part of this radical change, both as contributors to the overall, earth-altering scale of industrial activity, but also in more specific ways. In production, capital’s long march to automate has proceeded from the assembly line to super-computers and robots that scuttle awkwardly towards the contested status of ‘artificial intelligence’. In circulation, digital communications create both virtual territories for ‘second lives’ and pop-up perceptual guides and filters for this one. In social reproduction, biotechnologies – inextricably dependent on computerization for gene-sequencing and bioinformatics – already offer screening and selection processes, and, in conjunction with a booming neuro-pharmaceuticals industry, promises cognitive, affective and physical augmentation. And this accelerated genetic manipulation is part of a managed reproduction of nature in which, for example, drought resistant plants, Enviro-pigs, and Franken-salmon are all part of comprehensive geo-engineering strategies by which we, or some of us, may ride out climate change.

Digital labour now includes the creation by biotechnologist Craig Venter and his research team of ‘Synthia’, a bacterium with a genome designed and created from chemicals, with distinctive strings of DNA implanted to prove that is not a natural object, spelling out, in code, a website address, the names of the researchers at the company Synthetic Genomics, and apt quotations such as ‘What I cannot build, I cannot understand’ (Singer, 2010: 21). This is the moment Marx intersects with Foucault (1984) and capital becomes a regime of ‘biopower’ (Hardt & Negri, 2000). Rhododendrons are spliced with frog genes to increase the harvest of flower plantations, hedgehogs are prized inhabitants of bioprospected megadiversity zones, and the Pentagon designs dragonfly-like insectoid bomb-sniffer robots. In Capital, Marx (1973: 104) notes that the concept of ‘labour’ only became thinkable once capitalist mechanization and marketization homogenized or abstracted a range of work or trades -smith, cooper, weaver – so that they could be theorized as sharing an identity, being made of the same ‘stuff’. Today, ‘life itself’, abstracted as information, becomes a
productive force: species-being becomes theorize-able not as some human essence or destiny, but because capital has made it a real abstraction.

In this context we return to the Manuscripts, where as Donna Haraway (2008: 323) remarks Marx is ‘both at his most humanist and at the edge of something else’. Gattungswesen might really better termed ‘species-becoming’, the activity of a species whose only ‘essence’ is its historical plasticity. ‘Labour’ is humanity’s paradoxical anti-essential essence, its natural ability to change its nature. Gattungswesen can be thought of as the emergent capacity of a human collectivity to identify, assemble and alter itself – to be a species not only in itself, but for itself and also transforming itself, directing its own evolution. Marx’s account warns against apocalyptic or euphoric views of this; it reminds us that humans have always made themselves by a series of grafts, symbioses and prostheses with tools, nutrients, and altered landscapes, so that, as Katherine Hayles put it, ‘we have always been post human’ (1999: 278-9). But it is also a critique of this process. For Marx understands the unfolding of species-being as determined by class and conflict. Alienation, the central problematic of the Manuscripts, is not an issue of estrangement from a normative, natural condition, but rather of who, or what, controls collective self-transformation. It is the concentration of this control in a sub-section of the species, a clade or class of the species–who then acts as gods (albeit possibly incompetent gods) – to direct the trajectory of the rest.

**Futuristic accumulation**

In the Manuscripts Marx observes that scientific activity, even when apparently pursued in isolation, is a manifestation of ‘communal activity, and communal mind’ (1964: 137). The collective character of science and technological innovation are repeated themes in his later work, from the ‘fragment on machines’ in Grundrisse (1973: 690-712), with its famous allusion to ‘general intellect’, to Capital’s account of ‘all scientific work, all discovery and invention’ as ‘universal labour’ brought about ‘partly by the cooperation of men now living, but partly also by building on earlier work’ (1981: 199). Today the expropriation of general intellect and universal labour are the basis for the alienation of species-being in a process I call ‘futuristic accumulation’.

Futuristic accumulation is the commodification of publicly created scientific knowledge, which via copyright and patent, is privatized as intellectual property for the extraction of monopolistic technological rents. Its central site is the research university, whose entrainment to business gradually evolved over the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in both Europe and North America but reached a watershed in the United States’ mobilization of university knowledge for atomic weapons, cryptography, ballistics and military projects by the United States during the Second World War. This process, intensified in the Cold War, directly linked academy and industry.

In his study of contemporary ‘technocapitalism’ Luis Suarez-Villa (2009) describes the emergence this new modality of accumulation. The ‘massification of higher education’ created a reservoir of publicly funded knowledge, and an infrastructure of laboratory facilities supported by communication systems, into which corporations could tap. A growing emphasis on applied technological research was matched by increasingly overt
forms of corporate university partnership, and a steep rise in patenting by US corporations (which multiplied four fold in US in second half of twentieth century). This process began in the 1940s, but would only come to fruition several decades later when ‘a critical mass of highly talented technologists with corporate experience had formed, based on numerous waves of university graduates in the sciences and engineering’ (2009: 23).

Futuristic accumulation was, however, only fully activated as a capitalist strategy in the 1970s in response to the crisis of Fordism, when, in answer to competitive threats to its traditional areas of industrial supremacy, and to the Vietnam war-era cycle of domestic and international struggles, North American capital increasingly turned to the development of high-technologies. The most important moment, foundational for digital labour, was the development of the US commercial computing industry from the 1970s on. This was generated by the three way partnership between the Pentagon, top rank research universities such as Stanford and MIT, and defense industries. From this ‘iron triangle’ (Edwards, 1997: 44) computing knowledge flowed – mediated, ironically, by hacking and homebrew computing cultures that believed ‘information wants to be free’ – to entrepreneurial ventures in office software (e.g. Microsoft) and video-gaming (e.g. Atari), and the creation of Silicon Valley culture.

This crucial instance of academic-capital collaboration was followed by other moments ringing changes on the same theme. ‘Biocapital’ (Rajan, 2005) was incubated in the 1980s in the couplings of academic molecular biologists, biotechnology entrepreneurs and venture capital that bred gene-decoding companies, mining ‘sequences that could be sold or licensed to pharmaceutical, chemical or agro-industrial companies’ or adopting research regimes targeted to exploit the most lucrative medical markets (Suarez-Villa, 2009: 26). A decade later, in the 1990s, the explosion of Internet dot.coms was ignited by Netscape’s commercialization of an academically developed technology, the web browser, and sustained by spin-offs from computing science departments. In all these moments, sectors of US capital acquired the rights to exploit innovations arising from publicly funded research.

This subordination of public science to private capital does not always go smoothly. The most famous apparent breakdown was the race to decode the human genome between the publicly funded Human Genome Project and Craig Ventner’s company, Celera. This conflict has been variously narrated as triumph of agile private capital over stodgy state science (Shreeve, 2004) or as staunch defense of the public interest by academic researchers (Spufford, 2004). As Ronald Loeppky (2005) argues, however, such reportage overplays the conflict; despite the real hostility between the two projects, the public program was, he argues, ultimately as dedicated to placing genetic knowledge at the disposal of industry as the private one. The distinction was between research assisting capital in general, and the proprietorial claim of one specific capital.

Even such limited friction is rare. Far more representative are harmonious arrangements such as the $500 million research consortium formed between British Petroleum and the University of California, for the Energy Biosciences Institute (EBI), which embeds corporate research on biotechnologically produced biofuels at the heart of Berkley campus despite manifest conflicts of interest (Herper, 2007) – a single example
nevertheless paradigmatic of a normalized range of research partnerships, campus research parks, academic-commercial knowledge transfers and spin-offs.

According to Suarez-Villa commercial ‘experimentalism’ now directs the emergence of ‘critical masses of knowledge and…infrastructure’ in ‘fields that become emblematic of the twenty-first century’, including ‘every area of biotechnology, proteomics, genomics, biopharmaceuticals, and biomedicine, the nascent field of nanotechnology and all its innumerable future medical and mechanical applications, molecular computing, bioinformatics, and…biorobotics’ (2009: 10). It brings with it a systematized orientation of research to the extraction of value, deploying analytic templates, incentives, and a ‘permanent state of urgency’. It involves an acceptance of planned obsolescence; a blurring of boundaries between basic science and technological application; networks of ‘contact, diffusion and transaction’, social institutions of legitimation and individual subject formation (2009: 28). The scale of these processes is, he suggests, ‘mega’ – that is ‘all encompassing’; they ‘increasingly set the agenda for entire societies’, with an ‘intrusive reach’ and ‘scope and range’ greater than, say, the nineteenth century factory or twentieth century mass production (2009: 16), but, ‘like its predecessor, dynamizing the accumulation of capital by concocting means to seize it in ever faster and larger quantities’ (2009: 19).

‘Futuristic accumulation’ suggests an analogy and contrast between this process and primitive accumulations, the process by which agrarian populations were, by enclosure, dispossessed from common lands to become a proletarian workforce. This laid the basis for capital’s normal process of expanded reproduction in which the extraction of surplus value from workers proceeds through the buying and selling of labour power. Primitive accumulation and expanded reproduction are today ongoing processes: around the planet people continue to be displaced from the land by agribusiness and extractive industries into shanty towns, to work in industrial factories pouring out commodities of all sorts. But futuristic accumulation adds something new. It does not dispossess people from existing territories, but expropriates from them the emergent domains of life produced by advanced technoscientific innovations. These innovations deal with the basic building blocks of human existence, cognition, and biology, thought and the body: in exposing their deep structures digital labour create new territories—the genome and cyberspace. By imposing property rights on these scientific commons, capital commodifies and commands the evolution of life itself. This is the enclosure of the future, the alienation of species-becoming.

Global worker

The young Marx witnessed the industrial transformation of species-being in the factory workplace, in whose infernal labour process men, women and children alike were reduced to ‘beasts’ and ‘machines’ (1964: 70), as mechanization annihilated the craft skills of the artisanal worker and began to the formation of the ‘mass worker’. To understand the informational metamorphoses of species-being, and the place of digital labour, we need another concept, that of the ‘global worker’.
Capitalism has always drawn on world-wide labours: the slave trade, super-exploited colonial workers, and peasantry of the periphery all attest to this usually brutal truth. What differs today however is the direct subsumption of global labour force under the wage form, in production systems that are increasingly integrated, flexible and mobile. The process begins historically in the late 1960s and 70s as part of the same crisis of profitability that spurred the futuristic accumulation of high technologies. To circumvent mass worker militancy and welfare state demands, North American and European corporations embarked large-scale off-shoring and out-sourcing, using innovations in communication and transportation to move production to Latin America, Eastern Europe and, most of all, Asia—where it can buy cheaper and unregulated labour power. The idea of a ‘global working class’, which a decade ago would have been dismissed as leftist phantasm, is attracting increasing attention (Baranov, 2003; Linden, 2008; Mason, 2007; Struna, 2009; Breathnach, 2010).

‘Global worker’ designates collective labour that is: i) internationalized by the world-scale expansion of capital, a process in whose long historical arc a turning point is the doubling of the available global labour-power occasioned by the 1989 fall of the socialist states; ii) variegated by an increasingly complex division of labour, conventionally termed ‘the growth of the service sector’ (Soubbotina, 2000), describable in Marxist terms as an expansion of employment in the spheres of circulation and social reproduction; iii) universalized by the inclusion of women—aka ‘the feminization of work’ (Morini, 2007), the growth of production centers outside the global north-west, and flows of migrant labour, all shattering the notion of a white, male working class; iv) connected, albeit to very differing degrees and with many stratifications, to digitalized communications systems – crude but telling indicators are the global count of two billion Internet users and five billion cell phones; v) precarious in its conditions, with a chronic insecurity underpinned by capital’s access to a transcontinental reserve army of the unemployed, a surplus population whose task it is to survive in a state of readiness for work; iv) planet-changing in the effects of its labours, effects that, while historically cumulative, are only now becoming visible in global bio-crisis.

The global worker is not just an aggregate, the sum of all labours directly and indirectly mobilized by capital, a reckoning that could have been made at any time in the last three hundred years. What gives this abstraction a contemporary concreteness is its organizational form: the ‘value chain’. Subject since the 1980s of a burgeoning managerial study, value chains (Porter, 1985) – also variously termed ‘supply chains’ (Tsing, 2009), ‘commodity chains’ (Gereffi & Korzeniewicz, 1994) and ‘global production networks’ (Henderson et al., 2002; Levy, 2008) – are institutionally and technologically linked sequences of labour-processes that ‘add value’ at every stage, from research and development to assembly and marketing, dispersed to locations around the planet calculated, in terms of production costs, resource availability, and proximity to markets, to maximize profits. Some sensitive analysts prefer to avoid the ‘linear connotations’ of ‘chains’ (Levy, 2008: 2), highlighting the ‘intricate links – horizontal, diagonal as well as vertical – forming multi-dimensional, multi-layered lattices of economic activity’ (Henderson et al., 2002: 442). The construction of value chains require organizational power and geographic reach of the sort generally only commanded by multinational corporations, often entails foreign direct investment
Digital technologies are a sine qua non for value chains, which depend on a telecommunications infrastructure to reduce the transaction costs of ‘coordinating dispersed operations’ and on software systems for ‘modular production processes that rely on standards and routinized interfaces with suppliers and customers’ (Levy, 2008:8). Equally important is the use of electronic communication to integrate transportation with systems of retail or business-to-business distribution: the icon of this ‘the elevated significance of logistics’ is the digitized Universal Product Code (Sealey, 2010: 28).

Conversely, however, value chains are necessary for digital technologies, which are produced in world-wide division of labour that links very different kinds of labour. The computer industry can be schematically divided into two main sectors: software and hardware. In the software sector, key areas such as business applications and digital games display a characteristic pattern where key creative design and engineering functions are located in high-end studio or campus ambiances in North America, Western European and Japan. Routinized programming is increasingly outsourced and off-shored to subcontracted enterprises, whether in Bangalore, Ho-Chi Minh City, Dublin or Budapest, where wages and working conditions are an order of magnitude lower. This value-adding logic also extends to the incorporation of ‘free labour’ (Terranova, 2000) through selective use of open-source programming initiatives or user-generated content, such as game mods. If one ignores the role of janitorial, cleaning and service staff, characteristically migrant, often female, who maintain the environments of programmers and designers working through the ‘death marches’ and ‘crunch times’ routinely demanded by the industry, much of this software work falls within the scope of ‘immaterial labour’ (Hardt & Negri, 2000: 290-294), even if with a very high degree of stratification.

Where the full scope of the labours necessary to a Microsoft, an Apple or Sony becomes apparent is, however, on the hardware side (Smith et al, 2006). Here again, the key design and prototyping for an Xbox, an iPad or iPod or a Playstation3 is likely to be done by high level engineers and architects. The semiconductors required, which a decade or so ago might have come from toxic chip fabrication lines, will today more likely be produced in highly automated Taiwanese plants. When one comes to the actually assembly of the devices, however, this will performed by in Central America, Eastern Europe, or – most probably – in Southern China, with its manufactories of silent, serried work, obligatory unofficial overtime and incessant industrial accidents: reports suggest as many as 40,000 fingers a year are lost in Pearl River factory lines, giving ‘digital labour’ a grim signification (Barboza, 2008). Beyond this, the role of manual labour in the making of computing devices plunges off into yet more abyssal directions–on one hand into the mining of columbine tantalite and other minerals indispensable to consumer electronics amidst the carnage of the Eastern Congo, and on
the other to the toxic e-waste disposal sites of Asia and Africa where computers and game consoles go to die, in their expiration poisoning the workers who excavate their remains (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). The point here is not just that manual work continues to exist in a so-called digital age as some residual hold over; it is rather that the profitability of digital products depends on the incessant re-positing of cheap, degraded labour, so that new technoscience and human exhaustion accompany one another hand in hand.

Anna Tsing’s (2009: 48) apparently portentous claim that analysis of supply chain capitalism is ‘necessary to understand the dilemmas of the human condition today’ is thus correct. Global capital unites humanity, then divides it again. Class is defined by who appropriates surplus value from whom. In the planet factory, command flows down the value chain, but value flows upward in an inverse cascade, from the one billion absolutely immiserated people living at the edge of malnutrition (the involuntary regulators of the price of labour power for the system as a whole), stopping at a series of intermediate plateau or shallow pools—the old and new industrial proletariat class—bathes ‘immaterial labour’, and passes though a range of intermediate and contradictory positions (managers and technocrats) before ascending to condense in the bodies of a global ruling class. The process by which the rich live longer, in better health, with more beautiful bodies, sensory extensions and mobility now, in the age nanobots and immortality enzymes, promises to become a veritable plutocratic mutation.

Techno-finance

In the Manuscripts, Marx’s reflects on the supremacy of money in capitalist society: ‘If money is the bond binding me to human life, binding society to me, binding me and nature and man, is not money the bond of all bonds?’ Reflecting on the ‘overturning and confounding of all human and natural qualities, the fraternization of impossibilities’ made possible by finance, Marx writes that its ‘divine power’ lies in its character as humanity’s ‘estranged, alienating and self-disposing species nature’; money is ‘the alienated ability of mankind’. Marx also metaphorically links money to the new technologies unleashed by industry, calling it ‘the universal galvano-chemical power of society’ (1964: 167-168). Today, the crisis of financialization shows not only that money has attained an ascendancy Marx could not dream of, but that its link to technological power has become literal.

In her study of the relation of technology to financial bubbles Carlotta Perez (2003) shows how, historically, successive waves of technological innovation have ignited frenzies of speculative activity, followed by spectacular crashes. Finance capital both buys shares in new technologies, and itself adopts them, using enhanced communication, from roads and canals to telegraph, to enlarge the scope, speed and complexity of its operations. These two processes were on display in the run up to the crash of 2008, with the technology in question being the computer network. The commercial exploitation of the Internet depended on speculative investment by technoscientifically oriented venture capital – the process that underlie the dot.com boom and bust of 2001. The subsequent, larger speculative financial bubble that burst in 2008 depended not only on the easy-money policies by which the US Federal Reserve sought
to escape the consequences of that earlier crisis, but also on the cybernetic instruments finance capital had adopted. Though the crashes of 2001 and 2008 had different epicenters – one in stratospheric cyber-space, the other in all-too down to earth evictions and foreclosures – according to Perez they should be seen as two moments of a single episode (Perez, 2009).

The first electronic trading floor conversion was NASDAQ, the centre of the dot.com bust. But finances flows metamorphosis into digital form, from ‘pits to bits’, trading floors to networks, outcry to cyberspace, from frenzied hand signals to streams and screens of data, only really got under way in the 1990s, led by derivative markets trading in the complex financial instruments that would bring down the system a decade later (Gorham & Singh, 2009). What accelerated the process were both the diminishing cost of computers, and the availability of excess bandwidth created by the mile-upon-mile of unused fiber optics left by the telecommunications crash that had followed the dot.com collapse. ‘Dark fiber’ provided the material infrastructure for the expansion of ‘dark pools’ of secret finance and shadow banking (Leinweber, 2009).

Marx went on from the Manuscripts to write in Volumes II and III of Capital about financial capital and the role credit in the crises of business cycle, but he could not have conceived the scale this enterprise would attain in the early 21st century. In 2008 the derivatives market, valued at $596 trillion, was reportedly worth three times more than all stock, bonds, and bank deposits in the world (Leibenluft, 2008). Behind this technofinancialization lay a deeper dynamic. The globalization capital embarked on the 1970s to escape the rigidities of trades union and welfare state claims at its core was largely successful: digitally-linked global value-chains ensured wage rates at the centre were held in check by the low wages in the new production zones. But this very success pushed down purchasing power to buy commodities, threatening a realization crisis. Financialization was a means of resolving these problems using two main instruments, credit and derivatives. Credit both created consumption, and, through interest, generated a new stream of revenue for financialized capital. Derivatives and other speculative instruments created a new market out of risk, enabling gambling on whether or not, and under what conditions, commodities, including money itself, would trade. Credit and speculation met in the sub-prime mortgage bonds that eventually brought the whole system down.

Financialization is an attempt by capital to jump out of its own skin, short its own circuit, and make money without having to go through the messy process of procuring labour and resources, combine them in production, make commodities and get them to market, but instead going directly from M (Money) to M’ (more money). Several authors describe the derivatives market as ‘meta-capital’, capital commodifying its own operations, curving round recursively on itself, spiraling up to a higher level, a financial overworld (Bryan & Rafferty, 2006: 13). If this spiral of meta-capital originated in the realization crisis of low-wage globalization, digital communications provided its conditions of possibility. Financial markets now depend on dedicated, ultra-fast global networks, fully or semi-automated trading programs, and risk modeling programmed by the best and brightest of graduates in mathematics, physics, and computing science – the ‘quants’. Algorithmic, high-frequency trading is necessary because of the speed at which risk-based transactions must be identified and executed, taking advantage of
arbitrage possibilities that exist for fractions of a second; stock exchanges build aircraft-carrier sized computing facilities adjacent to their main trading sites because the time lags of satellite uplinks is too long. Financial networks are second in sophistication only to the Pentagon’s, and indeed borrow largely from military research. They are a prime site of experimentation for innovations in self-training artificial intelligences. The ‘universal galvano-chemical power of society’ has become the ‘money grid’ (Patterson, 2010: 119).

In the ultimate failure of this techno-financial grid we can see what the young Marx meant when he termed money ‘the alienated ability of mankind’. The estimated cost of the global bail-out of financial capital tops seven trillion dollars. Alternative purposes to which this expenditure could have been directed include global poverty alleviation, health care, education, and environmental cleaning. Within the logic of capital, however, such projects are of less importance than saving banks. This, concretely, is what it means to say that, as money, humanity’s ‘species nature’ becomes ‘estranged, alienating and self-disposing’.

**Singularity capitalism**

‘In the end’, Marx writes, ‘an inhuman power rules over everything, including the capitalist himself’ (1964: 156). The immediate manifestation of the alienation of species-becoming described in Manuscripts is the subjection of the worker to the rule of the factory master. Behind this, however is a deeper process in which the system of commodity exchange assumes an autonomy to which both worker and capitalist are subordinated. Today, however, there is visible a further stage, as this system generates micro-systems of control assembled from digital, genetic and mechanical components which approach a life of their own.

That capitalism favors the rise of the machines is recognized in classical Marxist theory as a secular tendency towards alteration in its ‘organic composition’ – that is, the ratio between ‘constant capital’ – buildings, raw materials, and, especially, machines, and ‘variable’ capital – living labour (Marx, 1977: 762). The long-term tendency of the capitalist system, driven by competition, is to raise the proportion of constant capital to variable capital. Though Marx had in mind mechanization at the point of production, it his argument can be extended to include technological means of speeding up circulation and reproduction. Since the direction is, broadly, an increase in the ratio of technology to humans, it might be better termed a rise in the inorganic composition of capital, a system whose metabolism grows increasingly machinic.

The organic composition of capital usually figures in complex debates about a declining rate of profit arising from the increasing proportion of constant to variable capital. This essay does not enter that discussion, (though the historical path it has sketched, from the crisis of the industrial factory to the creation of global workforce and financial meltdown does suggest that capital’s resort to high technology brings it increasingly baroque and ramified economic problems). The point here, however, is that the rise in the organic composition of capital becomes a change in species-composition.
In Marx’s time the increase in C relative to V – aka industrialization – drove a massive increase in the mechanical and built environment, the creation of a ‘second nature’ (Lukács, 1972: 19). This is now overlain by the ‘third nature’ (Wark, 1994: 86) of informational technologies which do not just increase the ratio of C to V but break down the distinctions between them in new forms of bio-technological and nano-technological production, creating ‘cyborgs’ (Haraway, 1985), ‘flesh machines’ (Critical Art Ensemble, 1998), and ‘cyber-carnal’ composites (Papadopoulos et al., 2008: 132). This process works along two axes – on the one hand, the exploration, via molecular sciences and other life-sciences of the assembled, machinic, and hence engineerable, basis of biological life; on the other, the construction – via computing science – of increasingly intelligent, and hence life-like, machines. At the point where these paths converge, changes in the organic composition of capital, driven by the imperatives of surplus extraction, becomes a transformation of species composition, in which the distinction between organic and inorganic is slowly collapsed into emergent entities shaped by the priorities of accumulation.

The momentum of capital thus eventually points to an attempt to break through the barriers posed to accumulation by the current form of the human, by generating a ‘successor species’. This trajectory today does not lack for explicit ideologists: Hans Moravec (1990), patriarch for ‘mind children’ who will upload their consciousnesses into cybernetic entities; Ray Kurzweil (2006), proselytizer of a ‘singularity’ produced by human–AI fusion; Kevin Kelly (2010), celebrant of a self-determining ‘technium’, and a whole array of trans-humanists and extropians, many situated within the research centers of the high-technology industries. It is easy to ridicule these confident predictors of humanity’s technological self-supersession – the ‘rapture of the nerds’ (McLeod, 2000: 115). But these millennial prophecies intersect too closely with the prosaic systemic demands for faster turn-over and more accurate weapons delivery to be safely ignored.

Marx’s account of species-being is an affirmation of the dynamic capacity of humans to change themselves. But singularity capitalism promises such transformations to a few, denies any meaningful determination of the direction of the process and dictates that some step onto the train across the backs of others. Today’s species transformations are fueled not just by the continuing labours of an industrial proletariat, building machines for its own replacement, but a new realm of bio-workers whose role is to provide the raw materials for the creation of alien life, for the fabrication of successor species: the organ sellers, surrogate mothers, experimental subjects of big pharma, plant and animal breeders dispossessed by corporate biopiracy, coltan miners, e-waste scavengers, and chip assemblers, the labourers of the singularity, whose destroyed lives feed the next mutation in life itself.

When the bio-rifts of neoliberalism make the masters of the planetary economy more and more literally alien from those they rule, no wonder archaic fundamentalisms are the reactive response. The Manuscripts identify two forms in which species-being is alienated: capital and religion (Marx, 1964: 111). As these two complicit alienations of species-being, futuristic capital and atavistic faith, twine around and turn on each other and on themselves in increasingly terrifying wars, all these species-altering forces converge in the one activity where Marx underestimated capital’s transforming powers:
the means of destruction. Today, the American armies operating in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan are an allied force of humans and robots, with over 7,000 semi- or fully-self directed autonomous mechanical agents – robots drones and tanks, such as the Predator, the Reaper, and the Talon – conducting reconnaissance, disarming IEDs, identifying targets, launching attacks (Singer, 2009; Economist, 2010).

This post-humanized military apparatus has its own escalatory dynamic. The video output from Unmanned Autonomous Vehicles (UAVs) flying over the Iraq and Af-Pak theatres is so large that the combined total for the single year 2010 ‘would take one person four decades to watch.’ That volume will increase as America deploys drones equipped with a new surveillance system, Gorgon Stare, that ‘stitches together images from lots of cameras to provide live video of an area as big as a town,’ with users zooming-in to look at ‘whatever takes their interest: a particular house, say, or a car’ (Economist, 2010). The answer to this looming information overload is the development of systems such as ALADDIN (Autonomous Learning Agents for Decentralized Data and Information Networks) being researched in a $5 million collaboration between defense giant BAE and a consortium of British universities. This would allow automated agents to process the massive data streams flowing in from UAV observations, soldier-based sensors, satellite data, and other intelligence sources, and bargain or bid according to preset algorithms over what to do in battlefield situations. It is in the light of such experiments that we must now read the passages in the Manuscripts that speak of expropriated labour standing over and against the human as a force not only ‘alien’ but ‘hostile’ (Marx, 1964: 108).

A biocommunist prospectus

Four years after the Manuscripts came the Manifesto. What can be said today about prospects for anti-capitalist reappropriation of the products of digital labour?

At the turn of the millennium, the advent of the planet factory generated a so-called anti-globalization movement that was, ironically, the first outburst of the global worker. Integral to that wave of activism was the lateral connection of struggles in the street convergences of summit activism, the meetings of the World Social Forum, and, especially, through digital communication. Altermondialisme was a movement of ‘electronic fabrics of struggle’ (Cleaver, 1994: 20), of digital civil disobedience (CAE, 1996) and virtual temporary autonomous zones (Bey, 1991). The Internet disseminated the example the Zapatistas, and after the Battle of Seattle Indymedia Centers spread summit activism.

The ‘movement of movements’ (Mertes et al., 2004) was also, however, a movement of many internal contradictions, both tactical and strategic: between social democrats and anti-capitalist, verticalists and horizontalists, violent and non-violent resisters. How, or if, these might have been resolved in time is impossible to tell. Anti-globalization was abruptly cut short by 9/11. The destruction of the Twin Towers revealed that the planet factory had bred problems deeper than most imagined – an armed, militant, profoundly reactionary counterforce. War on terror hijacked public attention, chilled activism, and redirected the remaining street-energies on opposing invasions.
Many activists have, however, suggested that, beyond internal division and imperial war, the counter-globalization movements had another problem – overreliance on the Net. Enchantment with the fast virtual coordination of summit demonstrations led to a neglect of long term organization. The Net speed that gave the movement of movement its élan also made it evanescent. This suggests a strange parallelism. If digital technology was part of finance capitalism’s nemesis, leading it to attempt a bypass of material production by a leap to ephemeral forms, it might be that the global justice movement similarly attempted to short circuit the materiality by reliance on the virtual, so that at times there was more news about struggle than actual struggle – a circuit without nodes.

The brief window in which virtual culture seemed galvanized by dissident energies was, moreover, closing quickly. In the aftermath of the dot.com crash, digital capital was already finding ways to subsume network experimentation, absorbing many apparently subversive initiatives – creative commons, user-generated content, open source software – into ‘Web 2.0’ business models, so that virtual activism seemed lost amongst the simulacral forms of capital’s real abstractions.

Thus when in 2007 financial capital suddenly started to auto-cannibalize itself, anti-capitalist networks went silent. If in the US the disaster translated into Obama’s electoral win, enlisting the digital acumen of many activists to party campaigning, this was an ambiguous victory. Crisis at the arcane heights of capitalist command, amongst networks indecipherable even to their owners, didn’t present the same targets as the sitting-duck summits of the WTO. In addition, the very conditions that produced the meltdown incapacitated opposition to its consequences. This was not a crisis ignited by worker militancy, but the cardiac attack of a system struck down by its own victorious excess. The working class confronted the near collapse of the system in a state of demobilization, with union and social movement organization worn down by a quarter century of neoliberal attack, precariously employed, heavily indebted, and also speeded-up to a state of pathological exhaustion by 24/7 financial networks and digitalized value-chains. Because of the left’s silence, opposition to corporate power travelled right, to tea parties and militias, filling the blogosphere with simultaneous denunciations of big government, bankers and black presidents in a toxic right wing populism. The momentum is not towards a re-compositional circulation of struggle, but of a de-compositional antagonism of struggles, leading to, at best, a restoration of capitalist discipline, possibly to something worse.

Nonetheless, even in North America there is left resistance to the austerity regimes by which capital intends to pay for its crisis: anti-eviction movements, the 2009 wave of student occupations against university cutbacks; and, in Canada, an anti-G20 protest that resulted in the country’s largest mass arrests ever. As the epicenter of the crisis travels towards the Euro-zone larger and longer-lasting mobilizations have appeared in Greece, France, Britain, Spain and Italy.

The question confronting all these efforts is whether, as the editorial collective of the journal Upping the Ante puts it, ‘novel patterns of political affinity, practical activity and leadership – the building blocks of a new “we” – can emerge from the radical left as it currently exists’ (Editors, 2010: 36). This search for a new organizational plateau is
so nascent and involves so many experiments, some from within older vanguard or trades unions traditions that have learned from horizontalism, others from younger activists who find rhizomes not everything they were cracked up to be, that generalization is almost inevitably premature.

One feature, however, seems to be the creation new physical spaces for aggregation, allowing a persistence and connection lost by overreliance on virtual communication. The people’s assembly is a characteristic form. So too are what Tiqqun (2001) calls ‘zones of offensive opacity’, militant cells intentionally avoiding the surveillance and chatter of the virtual scene. At the same time, however, these resistances also practice sophisticated digital communication strategies, whether of organizing wild demonstrations, or more strategically in circulating news of struggles. It seems symbolic of this counter-offensive ‘on all fronts’ that the street battles with police of the British students protesting university cutbacks unfold almost simultaneously with the explosion of hacker activity around Wiki Leaks.

These new struggles are driven by anger and desperation very different from the relative optimism of the counter-globalization movement; they are the insurgencies of a generation for whom capital has, in so many dimensions, decreed ‘no future.’ Yet the question of a strategic objective is inescapable. David Harvey (2009) remarks that, in an era when all liberal and social democratic ameliorations have weakly prostrated themselves before the prime directives of finance capital, the question is not is another world possible, but ‘is another communism possible?’ Oppositional rebellions face a ‘double blockage’ because ‘the lack of an alternative vision prevents the formation of an oppositional movement, while the absence of such a movement precludes the articulation of an alternative’ (Harvey, 2010: 227).

Can one start to think a communism adequate to the era of climate change, synthetic biologies and global networks? The gamble of Marxism is that liberation lies through, not prior to, alienation: there is no way home, only the capture of the strange planet to which the global worker has been abducted. A politics against the fourth alienation, the alienation of species-becoming, will have to produce a post-capitalism order as different from industrial socialism as industrial socialism was from the agrarian commune, an intensification of tendencies to socialization implicit in the new forces of production and destruction – something we might call a biocommunism.

Powerful technology-systems produce large-scale effects rationally incommensurate with private ownership and market allocation. These effects are both constructive and destructive. They include both catastrophic ecological hazards and the productivity necessary for large sectors of the global populations to emerge from chronic immiseration. Confronting this contradiction, socialist progressivism and romantic primitivism alike appear hopelessly linear and one-sided. A diagonal approach that puts to the front the question of the social form within which technologies are produced and deployed is required.

The autonomist tradition inverted the concept of the organic composition of capital to produce the concept of class composition: the technical composition of the class, the labour process in which it was involved, became the basis for a political composition, a
capacity to become a counter-power against capitalist command. Extending this line of thought, perhaps we can say that the objective of political struggle is to replace organic composition of capital with the organic composition of the communal, in which decisions of resource allocation and investment are determined in a collective and democratic fashion.

In such a composition, the creations of digital labour could have at least three important roles. First, productivity increases from computerization could be translated, not into profits, but into resources, not just of goods but of time, allowing collective participation in decision making. Second, ‘open source’ circulation of knowledge and inventions would be an important element of new forms of cooperative production. Third, networks would be part of the architecture of an infrastructure of distributed democratic planning and debate of the difficult questions a biocommunist society would face: slowing or mitigating climate change, the role of genetic engineering outside corporate ownership, and, recursively, the level of virtualization that is commensurate with collective democratic planning. As Marx (1977: 447) put it, in one of his very few allusions to Gattungswesen in his later writings, ‘when the worker cooperates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species’.

Economic crisis is colliding with climate chaos, ecological exhaustion, energy depletion and emergent challenges to a fiscally bankrupt but militarily dominant imperial hegemon. To foresee cataclysmic instabilities ahead is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but a historically-informed extrapolation from current tendencies. In this context, it becomes realistic to consider the cycle of university rebellions now traversing Europe, the pulsing of industrial revolt in Southern China, the climate change assemblies of the farmers and miners of Bolivia and the migrant worker movements raging from Phoenix to Marseilles as anticipations of larger tumults to come.

As this essay undergoes final revision, the contending potentials of planetary labour under digital conditions have become dramatically visible in the popular revolts sweeping North Africa and the Middle East, revolts whose main antagonists are dictatorial and kleptocratic client regimes of global capital. On the one hand, the ignition of these uprisings—one of whose immediate catalysts was the Wikileaks exposure of the corruption of the Tunisian regime—and their rapid circulation, via satellite television, mobile phone, and social media networks, testify to how contemporary means of communication can, despite censorship and black-out, abruptly burst apart the limits on thought, speech and action imposed by the dominant order. On the other, however, the insurgents who fought out against security forces in streets and squares with stones, sticks and small arms, in the most brutally immediate combat, are a defiant, collective self-assertion by subjects who have been excluded from the benefits of the so-called information economy. They are an eruption of populations consigned by the world market to the margins of high-technology development, to labour at its ignored material base, in oil fields and gas pipelines, mines, waste sites and farms. They are consigned to a reserve army of the un- and under-employed, suffering gyrations in food prices dictated by climate change and financial speculation in an immiseration from which migration offers the only escape. Western media have focused on the first part of this equation—the undeniable importance of computer networks—for the
uprisings; but in doing so they have created a narrative that not only focuses on the most affluent elements in the insurgent movements, but also complacently affirms the merits of market-driven technological progress. What such narratives underplay is the second, crucial, aspect of the uprisings, namely the explosive stockpile of equally market-driven unemployment, exploitation and inequality— that is to say, of class conflict—that underlies the revolts.

Regardless of their outcome, whether catastrophic, compromised or victorious in unimaginably experimental ways, these uprisings have already returned to the political horizon possibilities of radical self-organization that have in so many places been banished for a generation. They are revolutions detonated by the meeting of extraordinary high technological development and extreme inequality, a contradiction that defines the condition of the global worker, and whose resolution will determine the trajectory of human species-becoming. In such struggles, the future of the ‘actual living species’ (Marx, 1964: 112) will depend on the level of biocommunist organization.

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Expression and expropriation: The dialectics of autonomy and control in creative labour

Ursula Huws

abstract

Creative labour occupies a highly contradictory position in modern, global, ‘knowledge-based’ economies. On the one hand, companies have to balance their insatiable need for a stream of innovative ideas with the equally strong imperative to gain control over intellectual property and manage a creative workforce. On the other, creative workers have to find a balance between the urge for self-expression and recognition and the need to earn a living. This article explores the interplay between these doubly contradictory impulses, drawing on the results of European research carried out within the scope of the WORKS project as well as other research by the author. It argues that the co-existence of multiple forms of control makes it difficult for workers to find appropriate forms of resistance. Combined with increasing tensions between the urges to compete and to collaborate, these contradictions pose formidable obstacles to the development of coherent resistance strategies by creative workers.

Introduction

Creative labour occupies a highly contradictory position in modern, global, ‘knowledge-based’ economies. On the one hand, companies have to balance their insatiable need for a stream of innovative ideas with the equally strong imperative to gain control over intellectual property and manage a creative workforce. On the other, creative workers have to find a balance between the urge for self-expression and recognition and the need to earn a living. The interplay between these antagonistic imperatives produces a complex set of relations, encompassing a variety of forms both of collusion and of conflict between managers, clients and workers, with each action provoking a counter-reaction in a dynamic movement that resembles an elaborate minuet, in which some steps follow formal conventions but new moves are constantly being invented.

This dialectical dance forms the subject of this article. The choice of topic is rooted in a general interest in the contradictory role of creative workers in the restructuring of global capital, a role which renders them simultaneously both complicit agents of restructuring and victims of it (see Huws, 2006). However the immediate stimulus for
the article was the results of some European research carried out by the WORKS (Work Organisation Restructuring in the Knowledge Society) project\(^1\) which carried out extensive research across the EU between 2005 and 2009. Alongside quantitative and theoretical analysis, this project carried out in-depth case studies on the impacts of value chain restructuring on work organisation and the quality of working life, across a range of different industries (Flecker et al., 2008) and occupational groups (Valenduc et al., 2007) and in contrasting national settings.

These studies uncovered major differences between countries, industries and occupational groups. Nevertheless, there were some very striking common trends that cut across all these variables, in particular a noticeable standardisation and intensification of work and a speed-up of its pace. Linked in many cases with a growing precariousness of work, these had strongly negative impacts not only on the quality of work but also on feelings of security and career prospects as well as on the quality of life outside the workplace, especially for people with children or other care responsibilities (Flecker et al., 2009; Krings et al., 2009; Huws et al., 2009). These results, which were confirmed by an analysis of the results of the European Working Conditions Survey (Greenan, Kalugina and Walkowiak, 2007), were particularly pronounced amongst white-collar workers, who were being put under pressure from a number of different directions, including the need to work to externally-determined targets, to respond directly to demands from customers, sometimes in different time zones, and to exercise a growing range of communications and emotional skills on top of their core tasks (Ramioul and De Vroom, 2009).

Despite the fact that a high proportion of the workers interviewed experienced these effects as negative and that many of the 57 in-depth organisational case studies were carried out in companies and industries that were unionised, and quite a few in countries with a strong tradition of collective bargaining that is consensual, at least in comparison to the USA or UK (e.g. Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands), it was striking that there had been remarkably little resistance to these changes. As Meil, Tengblad and Docherty (2009: 65) concluded, ‘Union or works council response was generally passive or reactive and focused mainly on dealing with the employment consequences of restructuring rather than influencing the shape of the new structure’; and ‘very few (if any) examples of representation influence the change itself. The management prerogative in defining restructuring seems almost total’ (ibid: 69).

The 300-odd workers interviewed in the 30 ‘occupational case studies’ linked to the 57 ‘organisational case studies’ included a range of different groups, some of whom might be regarded as having quite a bit of individual negotiating power with employers or clients (fashion designers, researchers in R&D for IT products, and software engineers), so it might be expected that some would resist in individualised and personal ways rather than collective ones. However the interviews showed little evidence of this either.

\(^1\) This project was funded under the European Commission’s 6\(^{\text{th}}\) Framework programme as an integrated Project, under the leadership of Monique Ramioul, at the Higher Institute of Labour Studies of the Catholic University of Leuven, with 17 partner institutes in 14 EU countries. See http://www.worksproject.be for further information.
In fact it was software engineers, who might be supposed to be more individualistic than the manual or clerical workers also included in the study, who provided the only instance of a strong collective response to restructuring, with one group of IT workers taking strike action in an attempt to resist outsourcing (Dahlmann, 2007; 2008).

In retrospect, this failure of ‘knowledge workers’ to resist restructuring of their work even when they know that it will be deleterious is one of the most surprising results of the whole project. Like the dog that failed to bark in the night in the Sherlock Holmes story, it provokes the question: ‘Why not?’ What can account for this failure to resist these negative changes either individually or collectively?

It occurred to me that, although this question was not directly addressed in the WORKS research design, it might be productive to re-examine the rich mass of data from the project to see what light it could shed on the contradictory position of ‘creative’ or ‘knowledge’ workers in value chain restructuring. In particular, I wondered whether these results might illuminate the complex and dynamic interplay between management’s drive to control the creative workforce on the one hand, and workers’ urges for autonomy on the other. This article is a first result of this process, looking at the results of the WORKS case studies but also drawing on some of my other past research as well as work by other authors. It begins by outlining the role of knowledge workers in value chain restructuring. Then it looks at what is distinctive about ‘creative’ knowledge-based work. It then moves on to a summary of current trends in the reorganisation of knowledge work before embarking on an analysis of the multiple forms of control that operate in knowledge work and the ways in which their interactions might impede effective resistance to management imperatives. Finally I draw some brief conclusions.

I have used the overlapping terms ‘knowledge worker’ and ‘creative worker’ somewhat interchangeably throughout, aware that neither is really adequate, especially when the knowledge which forms the content of the work and contributes to the occupational identities of many non-manual workers is undergoing a rapid process of commodification, degradation and reconstruction. I have discussed this vexed question of definition in greater depth elsewhere (Huws, 2003). By discussing the role that creativity plays within ‘knowledge’ work, as I do below, I hope to avoid too much terminological confusion.

The role of creative workers in capitalist development

It is more or less axiomatic, at least in a capitalist economic system, that growth depends on innovation. And the more global and competitive that system is, then the greater is the need for rapidity in this innovation. Since all innovation comes, ultimately, from human creativity, then creative workers are ipso facto integral to any development process.

This assertion is easily made, but distinguishing ‘creative workers’ from the general crowd of the global labour force is by no means a simple task, such is the complexity
and interconnectedness of the division of labour in which each activity is linked interdependently with so many others across spatial, temporal and corporate boundaries.

There is a sense in which all economic activity requires human ingenuity and knowledge. Just as basic human needs – for food, shelter, warmth, etc. – have not really changed over the millennia, neither have the tasks required to meet them. Human beings still extract and harvest the planet’s natural resources, manipulate and recombine them, distribute them, consume them and dispose of the waste, as well as caring for and entertaining each other. Back in the mists of time, no doubt, many of these activities were carried out by workers who were fairly autonomous and free to improvise within the constraints of the resources and time available to them. However, over the centuries diverse social systems have developed complex divisions of labour, usually strongly gendered, many involving hierarchical forms of control. In these divisions of labour those who give orders have removed much of the scope for creativity of those who follow these orders. Under capitalism, changes in this division of labour have been highly dynamic – a continuous, if uneven, process of destruction and recomposition of sectors, organisations, labour processes and skills, driven by the imperative of maximising the extraction of value from any given unit of labour. In this process there has been an ongoing process of separation of tasks, in particular a separation of routine activities from those requiring initiative and imagination. Braverman (1974: 85-121) analysed and documented the use of Taylor’s (1911) scientific management approach and its extension from the factory to office work (Braverman, 1974: 124-137) and introduced the concept of ‘deskilling’ as an essential component of this process, showing the ways in which the tacit knowledge of workers, as expressed in their labour processes, could be captured by managers, analysed, standardised and mechanised to create simplified processes that could be carried out by less skilled (and hence cheaper) workers. Followers of Braverman have tended to emphasise this ‘deskilling’ aspect of the restructuring of labour processes. However Braverman himself, like Taylor before him, made it clear that he regarded the separation of ‘mental’ activities from ‘manual’ ones as a process that also involved the creation of some new, more highly skilled activities. There is a close connection between the simplification of routine tasks and an expansion in the role of the manager. As Taylor put it: ‘The management must take over and perform much of the work which is now left to the men; almost every act of the workman should be preceded by one or more preparatory acts of the management which enable him [sic] to do his work better and quicker than he otherwise could’ (Taylor, 1911: Introduction).

As the results of the past division of labour become increasingly embedded in technologies, social systems and the physical infrastructure, and the current division of labour becomes more complex and geographically and contractually extended, there is often a separation between these ‘mental’ and ‘manual’ activities that makes it difficult to perceive their interconnections. When workers are in different companies, on different continents, linked only, perhaps, through a shared software platform, occasional meetings between intermediaries or the presence of the same logo, the interdependence of their activities (and their shared origins in a previously integrated job description) are rendered invisible.
Nevertheless, it is difficult to understand the role of creative labour in the overall development process without some analysis of the interlinkages between the different components of global value chains. Only then does it become possible to gain an insight into the functional relationship between creative work and capitalist development and, in doing so, the contradictory pressures which shape, and reshape, creative work, simultaneously generating new openings for innovation, and new skill-sets associated with emerging technologies, whilst routinising and deskilling, or even rendering obsolete, older occupations.

What, then, are these roles, and what imperatives shape them?

One important creative function is the invention of new products. There are several ways this can take place under advanced capitalism. One is a simple appropriation of something that has traditionally been made using craft methods and devising a means of mass production for it. Another is to develop new products in the Research and Development (R&D) department of a company where the creative work is carried out by employees. Alternatively, the labour might be acquired from a freelancer, an independent entrepreneur or smaller company (either voluntarily, through a subcontract, or involuntarily, through predatory acquisition). In yet another scenario, the research may be carried out in a university, subsidised from public or charitable funds and then handed over to a private company for exploitation. In each of these situations, the relationship of the creator of the work to the company producing the final product will be different, as will his or her relationship to the intellectual property in the creation. These specific conditions of ownership, control and management will, directly or indirectly, influence the power relations between the parties and shape the working life of the creative worker in terms of income and autonomy.

Related to the function of developing new products is that of customising, improving or adapting them for different purposes or different markets. Once again, we have a wide range of possible relationships between these creative workers and capital, which may be governed by a range of different employment contracts, licensing agreements or contracts for the supply of services. This category may be expanded to include a variety of activities involving ephemeral design and styling (e.g. of clothing or household goods).

Linked to the function of adapting and customising products is that of providing content for various forms of media. Many such activities have their origins in traditional forms of art and entertainment and the workers who produce them cover a vast range of occupations: writers, musicians, visual artists, film producers and technicians, graphic designers, translators, web-site designers and many more, with solitary and introspective activities at one extreme and highly technical ones, requiring intensively interactive team-working at the other. These are, perhaps, the workers most people think of when the term ‘creative’ is used. However their activities are increasingly embedded in the global value chains of large companies or reliant on such companies for distribution or patronage and, although their relationships with these companies are perhaps even more varied than those described so far, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish these workers clearly from other categories in the same value chain.
Overlapping with these content-generating activities is another set of activities connected with providing information to the public, education and training. Again, these are increasingly hard to isolate. As education and training become commodified, for example, there is a continuum between face-to-face teaching in real time, engaging in various distance-learning activities and providing content for course materials delivered electronically. Similarly, the provision of government information, usage instruction for appliances or customer service information by companies is increasingly likely to be delivered online or via a call centre, with new divisions of labour between specialist authors at one extreme and deskilled workers providing information from standard scripts at the other. In the past, it might have seemed logical to make a clear distinction between commercial information provision and the provision of information to citizens by the state (and regard the latter as part of the function of governance), but the commodification of public services and the growth in outsourcing them to the private sector or consigning them to the voluntary sector has rendered such a distinction increasingly anachronistic. Nevertheless, it remains the case that a considerable amount of creative labour is invested in the legitimation and reproduction of the power of the state, as well as the reproduction of the workforce, so creative work should not be regarded as solely concerned with the development and circulation of commodities for the market. Here too we find a variety of different relationships both to the intellectual property that is produced and to the employer, including the bureaucratic relationships of civil servants with the governments that employ them, more contingent employment relationships, including self-employment, and commercial contracts between companies, with the workers’ output being regarded sometimes as a public good, sometimes as a product in its own right and sometimes as a form of advertising.

My final category of creative work is even harder to delineate from other categories of labour, only in this case the blurred boundary is with management and technical functions. This is the creative labour that goes into inventing new systems and processes, or adapting old ones for new purposes. Very often, these systems and processes involve the labour processes of other workers. Without this particular form of creativity, the current global division of labour could not exist. Christened ‘living think work’ by Hales (1980), this is the labour that analyses the labour processes of others, works out how to standardise them, automate them, outsource them, manage them and recruit and train the workers. Its practitioners may be systems designers or managers but they are increasingly likely to be working in large project-based teams that include technicians, trainers, human resources managers, managers who liaise with customers and suppliers and representatives of the local state, logistics experts, lawyers and a host of other specialists. Their ‘soft’ and ‘knowledge-based’ skills are not just used to develop new systems and refine and trouble-shoot older ones; they are also essential for the management of these systems once they are up and running, including ‘knowledge management’.

This schematic overview demonstrates that creative work is involved in a range of different activities that are crucial to the development of capitalism. However it warns us against any assumption that the relationship between a worker’s creativity and capital takes a single standard form. Rather, creative labour should be conceived as something extremely heterogeneous which is, moreover, undergoing rapid and dynamic change. This overview also demonstrates the impossibility of distinguishing ‘creative
work’ in any definitive way from other forms of work that can be loosely described as ‘knowledge work’. Nevertheless, it can, perhaps, be said to have some distinguishing features which are worth investigating further. I now address these.

What is distinctive about creative work?

As already noted, it is impossible to draw an absolute line between ‘creative’ work and other forms of knowledge work in any structural analysis that looks at its relation to capital. Nevertheless, if we change the focus to the agency of creative workers and the ways in which their occupational identities have been socially and historically shaped, it becomes possible to identify some features, which, while neither unique to these creative workers nor universally prevalent amongst them, could be said to characterise them in certain distinctive ways. They are of interest here because they may be hypothesised to shape these workers’ attitudes to their work and their relationships with employers and clients.

One of these features is a high commitment to the work itself. Applying one’s mind to solving a new problem, as opposed to repeating a known activity, is of the essence of creative work, a process that Karl Marx, in the Grundrisse described in these terms:

this overcoming of obstacles is in itself a liberating activity – and [that,] further, the external aims become stripped of the semblance of merely external natural urgencies, and become posited as aims which the individual himself posits – hence as self-realization, objectification of the subject, hence real freedom, whose action is, precisely, labour. (Marx, 1973: 611)

Even if, much of the time, creative workers are engaged in mundane or repetitive work that does not require such original mental effort, insofar as this sort of problem-solving is involved, there is a sense in which this work contains elements of ‘really free labour’ which is experienced as unalienated – a form of personal fulfilment (see Sayers, 2003). This constitutes a source of genuine satisfaction, creating an additional motive to work that cannot be subsumed into the simple economic motive of earning a living. The worker does not only care about the monetary reward but also about the work’s content (or intellectual property) which, even after it has been sold, may still be experienced as in some sense ‘owned’ – something of which it is possible to be proud. This attachment to the work may express itself in the form of a commitment to service users (for instance in education), audiences (for instance in performing arts) or customers (for instance in product design). It may also be linked with concerns about the worker’s own personal reputation. In any bargaining process with employers or clients, trade-offs may be made between financial reward and other factors, such as public acknowledgement, a prestigious client or a greater degree of artistic freedom. This makes for a form of negotiation that is complicated in comparison with other employment relationships, and may be disadvantageous to the worker financially, especially in a situation where there is an oversupply of creative labour.

This strong identification with the product of the labour can leave workers with an illusion of continuing ownership, even when their intellectual property rights and control have been handed over. Being faced with the reality of this loss may then be painful. The experience of expropriation may come as a recurring shock, closer to the
surface of consciousness than in other forms of work where alienation is taken for
granted. To the extent that it is genuinely innovative, creative work could be said to be
permanently poised at the moment of alienation, and the creative worker at the centre of
a drama of contradiction: the work, as it comes into being, both belongs to and is torn
away from its begetter. Part of this belonging is the risk of failure; no innovation can be
known before it comes into being (if it did, it would not be an innovation), so each time
there is a risk that it will not work, or will be found ugly or otherwise unacceptable.
Because in that moment of creativity the worker has not yet separated from his/her
creation, this is experienced as a personal failure. The potential for rejection lurks
always in the background of the creation-expropriation drama. This is most obviously
acute in forms of creative work that are overtly affective and demand self-exposure (e.g.
the performing arts, fiction-writing or film direction).

The identification of creative workers with their output was illustrated in the WORKS
project by several fashion designers, such as those interviewed by Muchnik (2007). One
said ‘For me, fashion is a continuation of myself’. Two other designers were even more
graphic: ‘When you’re a designer, it gets you in the guts’ and ‘It’s a job you have to
love because we spill our guts out’ (quoted in Valenduc et al., 2007: 36).

But performers and designers are not the only creative workers who make themselves
vulnerable in carrying out their work, as is evidenced in the ubiquity of statements like
‘you’re only as good as your last project’ or ‘I put my reputation on the line’.

The personal identification of the innovative worker with his or her innovative idea also
gives rise to another contradiction: between the individual and the collective interest;
between competition and collaboration. If your ideas and knowledge are all you have to
sell in the labour market, then they constitute a form of personal intellectual capital
which, for reasons of self-interest, should not be parted with freely, but should be
guarded and kept for future sale wherever possible. Offering these to the employer or
sharing them with colleagues, with little guarantee of reward, can seem like a form of
generosity verging on career suicide. However few forms of creative work can be
carried out in isolation. Most involve team-work and, for the team to be successful,
there is an equally strong self-interested imperative to share knowledge. A general
willingness to share enables both learning and teaching; it also improves the overall
standard of the project as a whole, thus enhancing everyone’s chances of further work.
Another important motivation for creative workers is a craving for recognition. Ideas
may be shared, even with competitors, for the reward of appreciation or admiration.

Another associated feature of many types of creative work is that it has a ‘meaning’ in
the form of some sort of ideological content or potential for social impact, positive or
negative. Creative workers therefore have ethical choices to make about how their work
is carried out. Sometimes this is linked to a formal responsibility, for instance in rules of
professional conduct or in codes of practice. In other cases, it is up to individual
workers to make a personal judgement about where to draw the line between meeting
the demands of the employer or client on the one hand and standing by their own values
on the other. Where creative workers feel themselves to have responsibility without
power, taking an ethical stand may entail considerable courage and sacrifice. Failure to
do so may result in being haunted by guilt.
We can conclude that, although creative workers form part of a continuum with other workers whose work, albeit knowledge-based, would not normally be regarded as creative, their experiences exhibit in a particular acute form a range of contradictions which, in more routine occupations, lie further below the surface. To the extent that they are actively engaged with a quest for meaning in their work, feel personally attached to it, seek aesthetic or moral rewards from it and invest their powers of mental focus on addressing the challenges it poses to them, they are unable to engage in the simple form of economic transaction that forms the basis of a labour market – ‘how much will you pay for my bodily time and effort?’ – without additional qualification and trade-off. This would seem to be a marketplace in which capital holds most of the bargaining power. However creative workers also hold some strong cards: they are not – as are many other workers – interchangeable with anyone else with equal bodily strength, endurance and agility; they have something capital desperately needs in order to develop further – new and original ideas. But, in a rapidly-changing economy, these ideas have a short shelf-life, and, with employers able to tap into an expanding global creative workforce, the competition is fierce. It is therefore not easy to predict how creative workers will fare in the next phase of capital restructuring. To set the context, the next section summarises current trends in the restructuring of knowledge-based work.

**Current trends in the restructuring of knowledge-based work**

The WORKS project carried out its research in a range of different industries, in contrasting national settings, and interviewed large numbers of workers in occupational groups ranging from fork-lift truck drivers to senior scientists in cutting-edge R&D laboratories. Nevertheless, despite numerous national, sectoral and occupational differences, it uncovered some strong common trends linked to value chain restructuring.

One of the most noticeable of these is a general trend of work *intensification*.

...not only a lengthening of working hours, but also as a saturation of time, a speeding up of pace and rhythm, tighter deadlines, higher pressure, and sometimes a ‘colonisation’ of the other spheres of the individual’s life. (Krings et al., 2009: 37)

In some cases, this is experienced as continuous round-the-clock pressure. In other cases, intensification takes the form of expecting workers to add new tasks to their existing core activities, a concept they refer to as ‘skill intensification’, as opposed to a simple upskilling.

First, the new competences required from occupational groups involved in restructuring are not necessarily related to the core of their profession, but rather seem to concern ‘side’ skills such as social skills, problem solving skills and resource management skills. Hence, these new competences come on top of the existing professional requirements and may even push aside the further development of the core professional skills. Second, ‘upskilling’ is often related to a considerable work intensification and an enlargement of the skills that the employees need: ...to understand and combine very different types of knowledge and the required speed to process and apply a lot of information in a short time. (Ramioul and De Vroom, 2009: 85)
Work intensification is particularly noticeable in project-based work. In R&D\(^2\), for instance, there has been a sharp increase in orientation towards markets, with ‘pure’ research increasingly being ousted by research that can be readily brought to market (Valenduc et al., 2007: 54), exposing workers to direct pressures from the market, experienced as tight deadlines. In general, the regulation of work has increasingly shifted from one based on working time to one based on ‘work done’ (Krings et al., 2009: 30).

Linked to this intensification of work is a general speed-up of its pace. Sometimes this is the result of a general drive to improve efficiency or competitiveness but often it is a response to market pressure. In the fashion industry, for instance, ‘the most conspicuous feature is the overall acceleration of business activities and workflows. Across the industry, the traditional pattern of seasonal collections has dissolved, and collections are continuously modified and updated... retailers and distributors demand increasingly rapid responses’ (Flecker et al., 2008: 24).

This is exacerbated by the global division of labour in the industry. The longer it takes for finished products to be transported (for instance, by boat, from Asia) the less time is available for creative work. As Krings et al. put it: ‘the consequence of this development is a dramatic reduction of the time required for production and of the time available for inspiration, creation and innovation’ (2009: 30).

According to the interviewees\(^3\), time pressure leads to an impoverishment of creativity for designers. Moreover, checking and improving stages of design are shorter and shorter, and sometimes simply removed, leading to more stress... It can also lead to dissatisfaction related to a loss of control over the results of their own work, particularly because the results of their work play a crucial role in their self-fulfilment and are essential for the expression of their own subjectivity. (Valenduc et al., 2007: 41)

A third striking transversal trend is that of standardisation. In R&D, for instance, there is:

a growing formalisation and standardisation of the tasks in view of facilitating communication along the value chain. However, this does not mean that tasks are necessarily becoming simpler. The use of project management tools and more documentation of the work are examples of such formalisation that originally applied to market-related and commissioned research projects but are then increasingly transferred to all the work of the unit. (Ramioul and De Vroom, 2009: 45)

For software development professionals:

Standardisation transforms pieces of tacit knowledge into codified knowledge... [It] also concerns the relationships with customers and is linked to the quality criteria laid down in the Service Level Agreement (SLA) ... Many interviewees perceive standardisation as a threat to their own expertise.

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\(^2\) For the ‘occupational case studies’ on R&D in the IT industry, four case studies were carried out, in Norway, Austria, Germany and France, each involving 7-10 interviews. These complemented ‘organisational case studies’ of value chain restructuring in the industry.

\(^3\) For the ‘occupational case studies’ of fashion designers, interviews were carried out in France, Germany and Portugal with 22 designers in nine firms, of whom 17 were women and five men, aged between 27 and 53.
Expertise becomes easily transferred or shared, and specialists become more interchangeable. (Valenduc et al., 2007: 86)

The fashion designers we interviewed also complained of the ways in which trends towards standardisation were reducing their scope for creativity. In some cases this was linked to the increasing requirement to use image processing software packages and to make use of standardised component modules. One German described how the modular construction system they were forced to use meant that pockets always had to be the same standard shape, ‘and that’s something that we designers do very, very reluctantly’. A French designer spoke of the work becoming ‘industrial’ and losing its creativity (quoted in Valenduc et al., 2007: 38).

Standardisation is a prerequisite for outsourcing and relocation but, once it has taken place, it can also make it easier for further outsourcing and relocation to take place in a recursive process that can be described as a ‘snowball effect’ (Ramioul and Huws, 2009). However managers often underestimate the amount of tacit knowledge that is required to enable supposedly standardised systems to operate smoothly. In order to get the job done, workers have to bring into play creativity, skills and knowledge for which they are not credited or rewarded. This sometimes results in an unseen slippage of tasks from ‘knowledge workers’ to others, further down the chain.

Increased demands on documentation and standardised procedure render knowledge explicit but get in the way of actual, situated problem-solving and longer-term creative vision as they cut into the time and discretion workers have available for both aspects of innovation... Standardisation and new demands on tacit knowledge are interrelated, and put on workers (and their ad hoc functional flexibility and tacit skills) an additional demand in both innovative business functions and the less-than-knowledge-intensive areas. Especially there, in the face of Taylorist standardisation, the remaining and increased demands on knowledge tend to be invisible and underrated, specifically when newly imposed routines get in the way of competent work performance. (Flecker et al., 2009: 94)

Intensification, speed-up and standardisation of work are three of the most universal trends accompanying global value chain restructuring. There are many other trends that affect knowledge-intensive work some of which are more specific to particular industries or occupational groups. These include: an increasing requirement to work in response to customer demands, whether these are embodied in contracts or more ad hoc, and to absorb the impact of customer dissatisfaction; an increasing requirement to be available round-the-clock, to communicate with workers or clients in other time-zones and to use global languages (especially English); a need to exercise communications and emotional skills on top of their ‘core’ expertise; an increased likelihood of having to work to targets or performance indicators; the introduction of new forms of monitoring and control; pooling of specialist knowledge into broader databases, leading to the development of two-tier structures with a small number of specialists and a larger number of increasingly interchangeable generic workers; bundling of services into standardised marketable products; externalisation of labour to service users, for instance via self-service websites; and a general casualisation of
employment relationships with a ‘just-in-time’ approach to staffing that puts the entire workforce under continual stress⁴.

**Control and autonomy in creative work**

As already noted, in contemporary capitalism, there is no single standard form of relationship between creative workers and those who pay for their work. They may be paid a salary, a fee, a commission, a royalty or a lump sum for what they produce. They may be employees, independent entrepreneurs, freelancers, partners, franchisers or day labourers. Just as there are multiple forms of contractual relationships, there are multiple forms of control. And, to make things even more complicated, these forms of control are not necessarily single or stable; several may co-exist alongside each other, and one may transmute into another. Global value chain restructuring often involves changing patterns of overall governance and, within these, shifting power relationships between different units along the chain. The impact of the changing relationships of control between these units is experienced on particular sites as a change in the style of management and the degree of coercion exerted by managers over the local workforce (Huws et al., 2009).

As Damarin has observed, ‘there is no clear consensus on how control operates or what autonomy looks like in post-industrial settings’ (2010: 1). Empirical observation throws up a number of different distinctive types, each of which, however, is modified by a number of contextual factors including national culture and tradition, gender relations and factors specific to a particular firm or sector.

One of these types is personal control exercised through relationships and obligations between known individuals. This could be a paternalistic form of control exercised through family relationships, for instance in the setting of a family firm, or it could be a more individual form of patronage like that of an aristocrat for a favourite artist. It might be thought that such forms of control are increasingly anachronistic, edged out on the one hand by equal opportunities recruitment and promotion policies and on the other by the impersonal nature of the standardised procedures adopted by global companies for quality-control purposes as well as by public bodies for bureaucratic reasons. Caricatured in the Hollywood ‘casting couch’ stereotype, this form of control has been associated for many years with the entertainment industries. The increasing precariousness of labour markets in these and other ‘creative’ industries means that it still thrives, encouraged by such practices as the provision of work experience through unpaid internships to keen young creative hopefuls. This form of control is bolstered by gift relationships, the mutual exchange of ‘favours’ and a complicity in ignoring the formal terms of contracts. It can not only lead subordinated creative workers into situations that are highly exploitative but can also make it impossible to seek recourse if the relationship breaks down. It may also be associated with forms of sexual predation or harassment. The forms of resistance to this type of control that are open to workers

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⁴ There is no space to do more than list these here. Readers who are interested in finding out more can find a number of relevant articles in *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation*, which can be accessed online at [http://analytica.metapress.com].
are individual and informal: outmanoeuvring the boss, using personal charm or manipulation, using gossip networks to shame and blame, or simply walking away.

A second type of control is *bureaucratic*. This form is exercised through formal and explicit rules, often negotiated with trade unions. It has traditionally been the dominant form not only in the public sector but also in other large organisations, such as banks. It is associated with hierarchical structures and strict rules of entry, with many of the characteristics of an ‘internal labour market’ (Doeringer and Piore, 1971). Here the forms of resistance open to workers include subverting the rules, operating them obstructively or obeying them only minimally (as in the form of trade union action known as ‘working to rule’) or formally challenging them in order to negotiate improvements that are in workers’ interests (for instance by reducing agreed working hours, increasing rewards, lengthening rest breaks etc.).

A third type is the sort of *Tayloristic* control anatomised by Braverman (1974). In essence, this involves a system of management (and sometimes also of payment) by results. Targets, or quotas may be set individually or for a whole team. In the latter case, simple instrumental rationality is not the only motive to work: workers’ solidarity with team-mates is leveraged as an additional form of motivation. Control may be exerted overtly by a line manager. Or, more insidiously, as Burawoy (1979) observed, it may be internalised and become a form of self-exploitation by complicit workers. In an era when targets may be set by external agents (for instance the client company for outsourced services) or embedded in quality standards or the design of software systems, when much work can be monitored electronically, and when teams are provisional and geographically distributed, Tayloristic systems of control may be hard to pin down, with a high degree of internalisation of control by workers and with the source of power often invisible. The most effective form of resistance to Taylorism takes place prior to its introduction, and involves resistance to standardisation, demands for more varied work, job rotation or the introduction of various forms of job enrichment or ‘human-centred design’ (Cooley, 1982). These have rarely been achieved outside Scandinavia. Once it has been introduced, apart from out-and-out sabotage, forms of resistance to Tayloristic management include conscious collective efforts by groups of workers to slow down the pace of work in order to gain some time and reduce stress (Beynon, 1975), negotiations over the type and level of targets or performance indicators, and the use of health and safety regulations to try to ensure that stress and speed-up do not reach inhuman levels. Many of these are difficult for creative workers to adopt, because they imply an attitude that inhibits creativity. An interesting case here is that of the Californian employees of the video game company Electronic Arts, who (despite the fact that their work involved producing the audio and video content for the company’s games) had to prove that their work was not ‘creative’ in order to win a class action suit against their employer to gain a reduction in working hours (Schumacher, 2006).

A fourth type is control by the *market*. Unless what they have to offer is exceptionally sought-after, self-employed workers and independent producers have little choice but to offer what their customers want, at the price they are prepared to pay, in the face of competition which, in many industries, is increasingly global. Whilst there may be some scope for individual negotiation in some circumstances, the main form of resistance
here lies in the creation of professional associations, guilds or trade unions in which suppliers combine with each other in order to try to set out basic ground rules and avoid undercutting each other in a race to the bottom in which everyone loses. Actors, writers and photographers are examples of groups that have achieved this, to some extent. However in any such grouping there is always a tension between competition and collaboration; between the urge to become a star no matter what the cost, and the compensations of solidarity. Insofar as it is successful, this kind of resistance strategy can lead to another form of control, exercised through the membership of the association, which might be called peer or professional control. In some cases, self-regulating professional bodies, such as those that represent lawyers and doctors, have succeeded in institutionalising such forms of control with sufficient success to enable them to become embedded in national or even international regulations. With forceful sanctions, including the right to exclude transgressing members from practicing their professions, many such organisations exert considerable power. Even these, however, are currently under threat of modification, if not erosion, from the commodification of knowledge (Huws, 2008; Leys, 2003).

Damarin (2010: 8) argues that within particular industries (her own case study concerned web designers) other, more diffused forms of control exist, which she refers to as ‘socio-technical networks consisting of relationships to persons, technologies, conventions, and typifications’. This conception has some features in common with the concept of ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Rather than seeing this as a separate form of control, I prefer to regard it as a striking and insightful characterisation of the complexity of control patterns in creative work in which elements of several of the various forms of control discussed above (and others I have not mentioned) may be brought together in particular configurations in specific regional, cultural and industrial contexts.

The management of creative workers is widely recognised as a challenge for capital. A recent Economist article put it like this:

Managing creativity involves a series of difficult balancing acts: giving people the freedom to come up with new ideas but making sure that they operate within an overall structure, creating a powerful corporate culture but making sure that it is not too stifling. (Economist, June 17, 2010)

In practice, this may often mean the coexistence of more than one form of control, involving both sticks and carrots. But, as we have noted, each form of control evokes a different form of resistance. A defensive response that is appropriate to one form of management aggression may be futile or even counter-productive if it is adopted in relation to another. For instance in a situation where workers are obliged to work excessively long hours, invoking an official regulation that limits the working week (an appropriate response in a situation of bureaucratic control) will have little effect if workers are paid only if they meet certain targets (a Tayloristic form of control) or if they believe that they will bring disgrace on their family firm if they leave a job unfinished (a personal form of control) or if they know that their reputation depends on completing it on time (a market form of control).

When several forms of control exist alongside each other, the contradictory pressures on workers seem to be so great that they are often disempowered from adopting any
effective form of resistance. Instead, they may only be able to respond by becoming physically or mentally ill, letting their families take the strain (or abstaining from any form of adult family life altogether – see Steinko, 2006), burning out, dropping out, striking a pose of cynical anomie, indulging in isolated acts of ‘letting off steam’ or sabotage or adopting a ruthless ‘devil take the hindmost’ attitude that may involve trampling on the interests of fellow workers. Developing new forms of collective organisation and resistance is, of course, an alternative option but one that we found rather little evidence for in the WORKS research (but see Mosco and McKercher, 2010, for more positive evidence).

Case study research throws up many examples of such contradictions. For instance, as we have already noted, the standardisation and fragmentation, or ‘modularisation’ (Huws, 2007) of tasks and processes which is a requisite for outsourcing or relocating them requires Tayloristic forms of management. However in order for these fragmented labour processes to be managed seamlessly over time and space and across cultural divides new ‘soft’ skills are also required which require commitment and motivation and cannot be managed Tayloristically.

In discussing the WORKS results, Ramioul and De Vroom (2009: 41) speak of the ‘prisoner’s dilemma’ of knowledge sharing in software production. On the one hand, companies mid-way down the chain want to outsource as many activities as possible to cheaper locations in order to keep their costs down and remain competitive. On the other, they are well aware that their supplier companies, further down, want to ‘move up the chain’ to get higher value contracts. Two companies thus become clamped together in a relationship that is simultaneously strongly mutually dependent and intensely competitive (if company A passes on too much knowledge to company B it may find itself outbid and bypassed altogether when the contract comes up for renewal). Similar dilemmas can arise when individuals are thrust temporarily together in a team: on this project, they need each other’s trust and collaboration; on the next, they may be locked in deadly competition.

D’Cruz and Noronha (2009) describe a case in an Indian call centre where the very tight targets are set by client organisations in Service Level Agreements (SLAs). Local management, whilst exerting such strict control that the authors regard it as ‘depersonalised bullying’, nevertheless manage to escape the consequences of this, at least in the form of any direct resistance by the workforce. By blaming the external clients, appealing to their workers’ loyalty to the national back office processing (BPO) industry and inculcating an idea of themselves as ‘professionals’, these managers have succeeded in demonising trade unions, deflecting direct hostility to themselves and persuading the workforce to internalise many of the control mechanisms that push them to reach their targets. The build-up of pressure, however, is so extreme that the workers have to resort to occasional acts of sabotage as a way of ‘letting off steam’.

Another case study illustrates the contradictions that arise when restructuring substitutes one type of management for another. Bramming, Sørensen and Hasle (2009) studied the reorganisation of the Danish tax system, whereby a number of specialised professional tax experts, who had previously been employed by different national and local government department under civil-service-type forms of management, were
transformed into a large centralised pool of more or less generic tax advisors giving information to the public by telephone and email in a call-centre organisational model. Although softened by the context, which was one of active collaboration between the trade union and the management to ensure a transition that did not do too much violence to their professional norms, this was essentially a substitution of a Tayloristic form of management for a bureaucratic one. Collectively, these workers, who typically had a long-term loyalty to their employers, had built up a large body of knowledge (sometimes in part tacit) over many years. Pooling this knowledge in shared databases and introducing Tayloristic forms of control appeared to be quite successful in the short term. However it raised big questions about how the knowledge could be updated in the future. With all their working time spent either in meetings or on the phone to customers, staff did not have a chance to update their knowledge; and the higher staff turnover and flexible work practices associated with the new form of organisation meant that new recruits were likely to be much less knowledgeable than the workers they replaced. Short-term gains for the organisation could lead to serious problems in the future.

Such examples could be multiplied. I hope I have presented enough evidence to demonstrate that the interaction between different management drives for control does not only create near-paralysing contradictions for creative workers, but also creates contradictions for management itself.

Conclusions

We can conclude that, for capital, there is a contradiction between, on the one hand, the need for a continuous (but dispensable) supply of new ideas and talent in order to fuel its accumulation process and, on the other, the need to control these processes tightly in order to maximise efficiency and profit and to appropriate the intellectual property so that companies are able to trade freely in the resulting commodities. On the side of labour, there is the urge by individual workers to do something meaningful in life, to make a mark on the world, to be recognised and appreciated and respected, on the one hand, and, on the other, the need for a subsistence income, the ability to plan ahead and some spare time to spend with loved ones. This is often expressed as a contradiction between a drive for autonomy and a search for security. These contradictions are played out against each other in a complex dance in which different forms of managerial control give rise to (or bypass) different forms of resistance by workers. New twists in the organisation of global value chains are constantly confronting workers with new shocks and surprises, even – or perhaps especially – those who have in the past regarded themselves as skilled and specialist enough to have a strong bargaining position. Meanwhile, unexpected new ideas from labour could pose new risks to management. (Who, for instance, 20 years ago, could have predicted the ways in which Indian software engineers are able to use the Internet to inform themselves of global rates of pay for the work they are doing and use this to their advantage in the global labour market?)

With multiple forms of employment relationship and multiple types of relationship to intellectual property there is no single, simple way to characterise the relationship...
between creative labour and capital. This very heterogeneity, and the many
contradictions it gives rise to, could, however constitute as much of a strength as a
weakness – to either side. Perhaps it is time for creative workers to invest some of their
creativity in finding ways to exploit these contradictions.

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The impact of digital technology on media workers: Life has completely changed

Lise Lareau

abstract

Digital technologies have transformed the media industries for better and for worse, but how can journalists win the battles against layoffs, declining wages, and stress? Collective action and the reaffirmation of journalistic skill provide a big part of the answer.

This conference was a tremendous and long-overdue opportunity to unite knowledge workers of all kinds. Media workers and university professors and other culture workers need to work together because no one else can or will do what is needed. There is no white knight on the horizon, no one waiting to ride in and solve the many issues of media transformation, value for content or the infinite work expectations created by digital technology.

This is an on-the-ground review of what has taken place in the so-called ‘digital revolution’ in my industry, the media industry.

We have lots of cool tools now. We file stories on our blackberries from inside courts, from inside hearing rooms – from anywhere. We have cell phone cameras and video. We use Twitter and Facebook to track down newsmakers or people who know newsmakers. We can edit video on our desktops – in fact video is digitized so everyone in a newsroom has all the video on their desktops (when the server is working). We use services such as ‘Coveritlive’ to do press conferences via cyberspace – there is no longer even a need to go to the conference itself.

But the very technology that has given us cool tools has had significant side-effects. I’ve grouped them as follows: 1) the downward pressure on job numbers; 2) the downward pressure on wages; 3) the stress factor… or feeding the ‘need for speed’; and 4) the effect on collective power.

The downward pressure on job numbers

First the obvious: All this digitization has meant a move away from equipment-based jobs. Audio and video editing can be done on a reporter’s or producer’s desktop.
Videotape no longer requires lighting or sound technicians. A TV studio can be replaced by a big desktop set up known as Parkervision, which needs just one director/switcher; the rest is automated. The fact that digital equipment is easier to use has led to new expectations of how we work, and blurred job titles and job descriptions. There are producer/editors (one employer, S-Vox, calls them Preditors), and video-journalists at CBC, and whether or not their actual job titles have changed, the fact is that most media employees are doing a wide range of technical tasks in addition to other primary functions. For example, reporters at Canadian Press are expected to file copy, then do a voice report for radio clients, and many shoot video too. Sometimes they do online work after that. The growth in online departments hasn’t made up for the huge losses of more traditional work.

Citizen journalism has allowed the numbers of reporters and photographers to be lower. It may not have directly led to layoffs but it’s been an enabler of layoffs. The growth in numbers of amateur columnists and opinion writers is staggering.

And finally, and possibly most importantly, the digital revolution prompted another disastrous series of events in journalism: it fuelled the great rush to media convergence – those big conglomerates that are now coming apart. Media convergence has been the ‘holy grail’ for media owners since the 90s, but it was never about improving content. Media managers smelled money in the idea that you could cross-promote between TV, newspaper and online properties, so they rushed to own properties on all platforms. The problem is that every time one company bought a newspaper or TV station, the first thing they did was lay off people to pay for it. This approach has been the vicious cycle of the past decade. It has led to three big companies owning all media in Canada, major layoffs exacerbated by the October 2008 crash, a stripping of local news operations for the most part, centralization of work and one of the three owners in bankruptcy protection.

The end result? Huge drops in the number of reporters actually covering news. The Globe and Mail now only has one reporter at the Ontario legislature; it used to have five or six. Competitor Quebec newspapers are doing deals with one another: one will cover Ottawa, the other staffs Quebec City. CBC and the National Post (strange bedfellows) are sharing sports and business content. Here in London, the Free Press used to have a newsroom staff of about 130, but now it’s in the 30s. It’s like that everywhere. So what are the consequences? Only Tier One stories are done: the obvious stuff, the event, the major news conference, the disaster. Anything that requires digging of any type is very difficult when staffing is so low. When you only have a handful of daily reporters, you assign them stories that can be completed in a day, preferably less. So environment, education, city hall – the stories that take longer and some risk on the part of a reporter acting on a tip or a hunch – they are all at risk here. And no one notices because they think that because there are so many online sources and blogs and 24/7 channels that there’s more news. There’s not more news…just more sources of the same news. And lots of opinion
The downward pressure on wages

Digital technology has allowed our work to be outsourced. There’s word that ad designer jobs at the Hamilton Spectator and Waterloo Region Record are to be outsourced to India or the Philippines. Thomson Reuters does its business headlines from Bangalore, and in a twist on our perceptions of ourselves, Thomson Reuters offshores some work to Toronto. Its Japanese desk is here because it’s cheaper than Tokyo. Canwest newspapers (Montreal Gazette, Ottawa Citizen, etc.) have their pages laid out at a non-union plant in Hamilton, Ontario.

Freelance rates have shifted from stagnant to declining over the past decade. In fact, freelance rates haven’t really changed in thirty years. There are fewer clients to sell to (blame conglomerate ownership), and engagers can demand ‘use in perpetuity’. Consequently, the creator no longer owns the item after it’s sold so there’s simply less incentive to do this work. If we are to truly corral knowledge workers into moving in the same direction, we need to fight to change labour laws that consider many of them independent contractors. That’s the next frontier.

Then when you add it the citizen journalism factor, you have to conclude that our work, our intellectual property is simply being devalued over time.

Feeding the need for speed

A major impact of all of this has been the changing expectation of what people can actually do in a single day. A Canadian Press reporter told me that as a wire service (news service) reporter, it’s always been this minute, this second. But now she says it’s faster. Gone are the rough deadline times of 12 noon and 5 pm. Now the expectation is file video, audio and print, all the time. It’s all about getting those six paragraphs out faster than anyone else. The pressure is to beat the other news services’ online news.

Another example of how digitization has given us an unlimited capacity for immediacy comes, once again, from Thomson Reuters. Employees in Bangalore read news releases and pump out short tweet-size headlines for the financial markets within three to five seconds – hopefully faster than Bloomberg or Dow Jones – and they are timed. They may put out five or six tweet-size headlines on a single quarterly report in 30 seconds.

Live television producers at CBC are soon expected to Tweet from the scene in addition to producing live events. Because apparently being live at an event is not immediate enough. There’s a demand for added colour on Twitter…immediately, of course.

And at a recent conference I heard about how a Toronto Star sports columnist does three or four blogs, then goes to the game, then does a column for the next day. And he may also participate in a ‘Coveritlive’ chat during the game.

Can everyone be expected to function in such a super-speedy environment? Will the main criteria for success be speed, with content and context a distant second?
The effect on collective action and power

The good news is that the blogosphere and social media in general can be powerful tools to link people if they are harnessed appropriately. During the CBC lockout in 2005, my union made a conscious decision not to force the 5,000 affected employees to walk around doing picket duty. Instead, because we knew there were a lot of different activities they could do to earn strike pay, they were ‘set free’ to use their skills. They did so in amazing ways. There are parallels to the US writers strike a couple of years later. Our members did community radio, blogs, podcasts, concerts in parks, and organized events, but it was all orchestrated online and it all carried our various messages.

The bad news is that we are all losing exclusive control of the tools of our work. This is a real problem for freelancers. Why? Well, we at the CBC got bargaining rights for freelancers in 1981. This happened specifically as a result of Quebec’s Union des Artistes arguing that because they had to use tape machines, typewriters and other equipment inside the CBC building, they had sufficient community of interest to allow for representation by the union representing employees. The labour board agreed and that’s why we are the only union in North America that has bargaining rights for freelancers. Unfortunately, that argument could not be made today.

Conclusion

So we have a big job to do. We need to ensure the specific skill sets in our work continue to be valued and to fight against the generic media model where everyone can do everything, from anywhere, and for free if possible. We know people are used to getting content for free – be it editorial content or intellectual content. Let’s educate the public about the real value of solid and reliable information. We need a coalition of knowledge workers and a campaign – and of course, we can put to use all those cool digital tools.

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What about citizens?

Mark Bradley

abstract

What is the future of unions within the entertainment industry? One thing is certain: As it continues to ‘go digital’, cultivating a wider solidarity – inside and outside the business – matters more than ever.

It has been an honor to participate in this conference. I hesitate to use the word ‘contribute’, but it’s been a pleasure to be here.

The topic of our final panel is ‘Looking Ahead’. My principal concern is the future of unions in the digital industry. The good news is we have something of a head start. Along with airlines, media/entertainment is the most heavily unionized private-sector industry in the United States. However, as with the airlines, our employers are huge and rapidly getting huger.

As you know, in spite of the apparent diversity in media outlets, only six enormous companies control most of the media in the United States. Our unions must finally suck it up and abandon a quaint 19th century idea of independent craft unions and similarly consolidate. Of course the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) and the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) should join – we share jurisdictions and 44,000 members. But we should also unite with Actors’ Equity, the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA), the American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA), the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), the American Federation of Musicians (AFoM), the Directors Guild of America (DGA), the Writers Guild of America (WGA), the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET), the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), and the Newspaper Guild. For a start.

Whether or not we can consolidate our unions anytime soon, we have two enormous overarching goals. First, we need to secure jurisdiction as new media platforms and business models arise. I’m proud to say that in the commercials contract of 2006, AFTRA and SAG secured jurisdiction over all commercials – television, radio, and Internet, but also over all media platforms that exist now or will be developed in the future.
Our second goal is to grow our membership. The Employee Free Choice Act will only bring us back to the 1930s, when AFTRA and SAG were founded. We don’t face the same professional and even physical risks they faced, but there are serious challenges. In the United States, unions are just barely legal. And in many minds, it’s not a given that unions have a right to exist, even in the minds of workers who know they’re being exploited.

To grow our membership, we have to find a more powerful way to think and talk about organizing. All too often, we talk to pre-union people only about the goodies they’ll get as union members. But union membership isn’t about health and pension or members-only perks or even, really, about wages and working conditions. Ultimately, it’s about dignity and respect: dignity for the workers and respect for the work they do.

A few years ago, I was talking with a labour organizer and I asked him how I can sell these ideas to a pre-union person. He stopped me cold and said, ‘When you’re organizing, you’re NOT a salesman selling a service to a consumer, you’re an agitator promoting a movement to a citizen!’

The title of this conference is ‘Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens’. We’ve heard a lot about authors and creators and their concerns and rights, and we’ve heard a great deal about workers, but not much about citizens. The concept of citizenship is a key to organizing workers. In the United States, citizens all too often describe themselves only as ‘taxpayers’. But to be a citizen means much more.

When I think about citizenship, I’m reminded of that wonderful evening in 2008 when we saw a worldwide outpouring of joy over the results of the election in the United States. Whatever you may think about President Obama’s performance, it’s instructive to ask what made people literally dance in the streets on that November night. In the United States, people were happy that their candidate had won, and they were probably excited about the prospect for change. Certainly everyone was caught up in the historical significance of electing our first African-American President.

But it goes much deeper than that. On that night, a great many people realized, some for the first time in their lives, what it means to be a citizen. It’s the empowering feeling of taking personal responsibility to contribute to the greater good, which is also precisely what it means to be a union member.

Am I optimistic about the future? Guardedly, yes. I don’t think that thirty years of Reaganomics has completely extinguished the feeling that we’re all in this together.

Let me share a little story. During the six-month AFTRA-SAG commercials strike of 2000, I was serving as President of the Twin Cities AFTRA Local. When people ask me what it was like, I’m reminded of a comment by a veteran of the Second World War, who said that it was a million dollar experience, and he wouldn’t give you a plug nickel for it. For me, the ‘million dollar’ part was finding again and again that in the general public there is an abiding reservoir of support for working people.

One day, after we had picketed at the AT&T Building in Minneapolis, a couple of us were stranded and had to take a cab back to the AFTRA office. From his appearance
and speech pattern, our cab driver appeared to be Somali. (There is a large Somali population in the Twin Cities area.) He saw our signs and asked what we were doing, and we briefly explained. When we arrived at the office, our driver absolutely refused to take a tip. ‘You’re on strike’, he said. ‘No tip’. Here was a man from another continent, another culture; God knows what horrors he had seen or even endured. But he GOT IT. He knew nothing about AFTRA or commercials, but he felt solidarity with us as fellow citizen-workers, taking power into our hands.

How did the strike turn out? Not bad. You never ‘win’ a six-month strike, you only survive. (That’s the ‘plug nickel’ part.) But they didn’t bust us, we didn’t give anything back, and we got jurisdiction over advertising on the Internet. In short, a bunch of actors stood up against some of the most powerful corporations on Earth and we not only survived, but also moved ahead.

If we can raise that sense of empowerment in our citizens who labor in the digital industry, then we may someday all dance together in the streets. Thank you.

The opinions expressed here are those of Mark Bradley and do not necessarily represent those of Actors’ Equity, AFTRA, or SAG.

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Mark Bradley has been a professional actor for 39 years, spending most of his career in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. He has performed in theatre, film, television, radio and TV commercials, industrial/corporate videos, print work, and live industrials. He is a member of Actors’ Equity, AFTRA, and SAG, and has been active on his local Equity Liaison Committee and the Local and National AFTRA Boards. He attended Dartmouth College (A.B.) and the University of Minnesota (M.A., Ph.D.), and has taught and directed theatre at the college level. As a freelance writer, Dr. Bradley has created corporate educational materials, written and edited newsletters, edited a job-seeking manual, and written and performed in independent video productions, one of which won a national award from the AFL-CIO. He is the author of the online book The Actor’s Tax Guide, and has recently competed two children’s stories and a screenplay.

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The singularity of intellectual property

Mike Kraft

abstract

Whose intellectual property is an actor’s performance? Digital production and distribution present a whole new set of challenges for working actors.

According to futurist Ray Kurzweil, we are fast approaching ‘The Singularity’, or a point at which the rapid acceleration of technological capabilities will reach a point beyond human comprehension. The subsequent rise of machine intelligence will far surpass our capabilities, rendering corporeal beings nearly unnecessary. It is predicted that the leading edge of this singularity will occur approximately by the year 2035.

Whether or not you believe in this concept, it is a certainty that the value of the intellect will soon exceed all other forms of revenue-generating economies. The agricultural, industrial and service economies have all been through this accelerating process, with each having a diminishing window of economic influence. As creators and conduits of intellectual property, it appears we may have a relatively narrow time in which to assert our rights for appropriate consideration, representation and compensation for our (digital) labour.

As a professional union actor working in the United States, I see the exploitation and theft of intellectual property on a daily basis. In its most immediate form, this happens at the hands of those who benefit from the use of the property, i.e. producers, employers and clients. This comes from a willful, constant devaluation of the performance by those producing the media, despite the fact that it is often the performance that brings the most value to the ultimate product.

As relatively powerless individuals, with no means to afford legal representation to negotiate contracts on a per-job basis, non-union performers are at a complete disadvantage when negotiating for fair compensation. Additionally, they have little or no recourse in the event the employer reuses the product or expands the scope of the media usage, or even if they deliberately withhold pay completely.

Exacerbating this is the frustrating tendency for less-experienced performers to give away their rights for little or nothing, gaining only the experience or at most, a very small emolument. This, despite the fact that the (lack of) quality of the performance
work often times has no bearing on the value of the product created. This may seem at odds with the concept of experienced, professional performers adding value to a production, but all productions are not created equal. Take as examples any of the hundreds of ‘reality’ shows and commercials that rely on ‘real’ people as the willing participants in the creation of value for producers. These producers effectively and efficiently monetize and leverage inexpensive productions for vast revenue, including multiple reuses of the original product, all with the tacit assistance of the ‘performers’, who are often paid little or nothing.

As representative bargaining agents, the performers’ unions (primarily AFTRA and SAG) do a fairly good job of negotiating and enforcing their contracts with producers and employers. However, their influence is not evenly distributed, and many parts of the US remain uninfluenced or less impacted by these efforts than the media centres of Hollywood and New York. Performers in Topeka, Kansas have little or none of the protections afforded those in Burbank, California or even Boston, Massachusetts, and yet their rights as individual performers should be the same as those in New York City.

Insofar as the American government is concerned, their focus on intellectual property theft is largely aimed at brands, logos, patents and completed films and music properties owned by corporations. It is less focused on the individual’s rights to protect their intellectual property, whether they are independent actors, musicians, photographers, videographers or graphic artists.

As performers, we face multiple issues regarding fair use and fair pay for performances, depending on the type of performance and its ultimate usage. There are many categories of performances, each with its own business model and unique circumstances that require deliberation and bargaining to arrive at fair compensation structures. These include local, regional and national commercials; scripted television dramas, comedies, soap operas and reality shows; major motion pictures, independent films and low-budget theatrical releases; industrial, educational & informational on-camera and voice-over performances; episodes, webisodes, mobisodes and dozens of other modes of media transfer. This creates a confusing and rapidly changing milieu for parties on both sides of the bargaining fence.

Compounding this, it is difficult to valuate content for web-only distribution. This poses many vagaries, including variations in local, regional, national and global scope; misrepresentation by the producer or client as to expected audience size; unknown variables in distribution such as viral videos; the nature of the content itself, including educational, entertainment, advertising and informational; and calculating the anticipated value of advertising revenue generated by the production.

Regardless of these difficulties, the essential element to all of this is the idea that the intellectual property created at the individual performer level, regardless of ultimate ownership, has certain value that should be inalienable from that performer without their explicit consent. Unions are currently the only agencies capable of exercising any authority on behalf of performers toward this ideal, and should be seen as the enablers of performers’ rights, while not being antithetical to legitimate business interests.
The Singularity of the intellectual property economy is upon us, and is accelerating logarithmically. It is up to us as performers and creators of intellectual property to seize this fleeting moment and capitalize on it. If we do not, others surely will, and it will not be to our benefit.

The opinions expressed here are those of Mike Kraft and do not necessarily represent those of AFTRA or SAG.

the author  
Mike Kraft has been a full-time professional performer since 1981. He is a member of both AFTRA and SAG, and is currently the President of the Cleveland AFTRA local, and chairman of the national Non-Broadcast Standing Committee. He has appeared in over 2000 industrial training films, hundreds of television and radio commercials and numerous live performances, hosts distance learning events for General Motors and Volkswagen and moderates live interactive webcasts for Ernst & Young. He has also appeared in independent and feature films.  
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Information workers in the academy: The case of librarians and archivists at the University of Western Ontario

Melanie Mills

abstract

Think you don’t go to libraries anymore? Far from it! As the library goes online, the labour of librarians and archivists is becoming increasingly invisible – and inflexible.

In 2004 I joined the highly lauded profession of academic librarianship with a newly minted Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) in hand and a great deal of energy and enthusiasm. My inaugural appointment at one of the Canada’s largest, most well regarded research institutions was quite simply a perfect fit for me, and I was very excited to begin my career. In my mid-twenties and straight out of graduate school, my focus at the time was so squarely fixed the role I had been hired to fill that I gave the broader organizational culture, and in particular the proportion of teaching, research and service responsibilities allotted to academic librarians at The University of Western Ontario (Western), little more than a second thought. It had been my understanding that I was joining the university community primarily to support the work of the academy, not necessarily to engage in it myself. Upon entering the profession, however, my perspective soon changed. I learned that academic librarians and archivists not only support research, but actively pursue their own research agendas. Not only do they partner with teaching faculty to embed information literacy into the curriculum, they independently design and deliver for-credit courses in colleges and universities. So how was it that I had missed this message during my MLIS studies?

When I began at Western, the predominant organizational culture for information workers was that of the practitioner. Librarians and archivists staffed public service points, provided one-on-one research assistance to students and faculty, delivered in-class and online library instruction, and catalogued and administered the university’s library and archives research collections. While the nature of this work in and of itself was not unusual – librarians and archivists elsewhere engage in these, or similar professional activities – the overall scope of the work was. Such activities typically constitute only a portion of workload for most academic librarians, and yet at Western they constituted the entire workload. Unlike their counterparts at other academic
Institutions, Western’s information workers did not have workload allocations, which mirrored those held by members of the academic community at large, with responsibilities in each of the areas of teaching, research and service.

It soon became apparent to me and to many of my colleagues that those who retained the full rights and privileges that most faculty, librarians and archivists enjoy – namely, academic status and workloads which include some ratio of teaching, research and service – were employed at colleges and universities where academic staff are organized. It did not take long for the librarian and archivist community at Western to recognize the value in aligning with their faculty colleagues, and in turn for faculty to acknowledge the largely untapped potential for their academic librarian and archivist allies to contribute more fully to the teaching, research and service mandate of the University. Born out of this collective awakening, a successful union drive and shortly thereafter an inaugural Collective Agreement for The University of Western Ontario Faculty Association – Librarians and Archivists (UWOFA-LA), ratified by the University’s Board of Governors in September 2006.

The proceeding three years are best characterized as a period of adjustment, where librarians, archivists, faculty and university administration all began the transition toward a new organizational culture at Western. Though it has taken significant time and effort to initiate the change, slowly but surely the culture is shifting.

Over and above the evolution underway within our local organization, the broader cultures of higher education and of academic librarianship are changing too. Just as teaching and research have been forever altered by innovations in communications and technology, so too has the very nature of information work. No longer does the work of the academic librarian or archivist occupy the long-held stereotype of the eccentric recluse with their nose buried in a book. Rather the work of today’s information worker is dynamic, and in ever increasing proportions, digital. To be certain, much of the work that occurs in academic and research libraries today bears at least some resemblance to the work of our bibliographer, cataloguer and reference librarian predecessors. For example, many of us still evaluate, select and acquire research materials for our libraries. The tools that we use to accomplish this work and the very resources that we acquire and provide access to, however, are by and large online. In an effort to illustrate the breadth and depth of the digital labour in which many information workers in the academic sector are engaged, and also to highlight a few of the key challenges our profession faces, let us further explore the working example of collection development in research libraries.

Selection, acquisition, access provision and collection administration comprise four key elements of the work traditionally characterized as ‘collection development’ in library practice. While each continues to play a role for those academic librarians whose workload includes responsibility for some level of collection development, the nature and scope of the work is changing dramatically as a result of the broader digital landscape. For much of the history of the profession, the selection of materials for academic research collections often comprised a significant investment of time and intellectual energy on the part of a library subject specialist. Through the careful evaluation of published research materials, academic librarians selected those resources
they deemed to be the most relevant to the research mandate of their local institution, and in doing so, developed the highly specialized research collections that our colleges and universities so prize today. This was a time when universities routinely invested significant resources, both human and financial, in the selection of library materials, and when subject specialists with advanced degrees were sought after and hired as library selectors whose core contribution to the academy was to build and maintain high level research collections.

While this approach may still be in place at some institutions, the broader trend across academic libraries today is to automate the selection process. Third party book and serial vendors offer services that profile the library’s collection mandate, identify and apply appropriate subject and non-subject parameters to target published materials that match the profile, and subsequently select resources for the library. While few would argue about the immediate efficiencies gained by automating materials selection, the long term implications for the very nature and quality of academic library research collections has yet to be fully realized. Will it be possible to maintain the legacy of research collections that our library selector predecessors cultivated so carefully when academic librarians are relegated to play ever decreasing roles in the selection of research materials for our institutions?

The nature of library acquisitions is also evolving as a result of digital innovation. Pricing, copyright and licensing, as well as the provision of access, serve as only a few examples of acquisitions work that has become increasingly complex as a result of the push to ‘go digital’. Whereas the labour of acquiring a printed work is relatively straightforward – a book is selected, purchased, and shipped to the library and remains accessible so long as the library retains the work in its collection – the very same process is made much more complex if the resource being acquired happens to be digital. First, pricing for the very same content is often set at an exorbitantly higher rate, as publishers posit that providing digital access to information cuts into their print profit margins. As a result, the wider the access secured (i.e. the more people licensed to view or download content simultaneously), the more costly the digital acquisition. Questions regarding platform stability, the availability of both ongoing and archival access to content, and off-campus or remote access must also be addressed – all before even so much as a link appears in the library catalogue.

Challenges in digital access provision and collection administration often continue well after the decision to acquire online access is made. These constitute yet another aspect of information workers’ digital labour – one that remains, by and large, invisible. As new electronic publishers are born and traditional presses supplement their print publications with digital access, or even migrate entirely to online content, a library’s institutional subscriptions must be renegotiated and subsequently, difficult decisions must be made. Most libraries can ill afford paying twice, thrice or yet even higher subscription rates to provide both print and digital access to the same content; as a result many elect to cancel print subscriptions in lieu of e-access.

In Ontario, colleges and universities have worked collaboratively in an effort to stretch their acquisitions dollars as far as possible, negotiating consortial package pricing with publishers. Though the benefits of such collaborative acquisitions are great,
disadvantages do exist. Local control over the provision, maintenance and preservation of stable electronic access is largely relinquished when content is acquired consortially, which may result in confusion when access is disrupted, or still worse, content withdrawn. Given the sheer magnitude of content in question, front-line information workers are seldom aware of access issues until they are reported by students or faculty, and even at this juncture are often precluded from resolving the issue locally. Rectifying even the most simple of issues, such as a broken link, can prove a monumental task in the digital library. Paradoxically, the more fluid and intuitive an information search and retrieval experience we facilitate, the less visible the contributions of information professionals become. As a result, communicating the nature of our expertise and the contributions that we make to the provision and preservation of digital access to research resources on our campuses is most certainly a challenge, but one that is most critical to address, and soon.

Even though academic librarians have been engaged in various kinds of digital labour for many years now, far too often those outside the immediate community of the academic library neither recognize nor respect our contributions to the academy. In September 2009, when commenting on the changing nature of education and learning in his inaugural address to University Senate, Western’s incoming president remarked that he had given up going to the library, as his research needs are met by subscribing to electronic services. In his worlds, ‘Life has changed – I don’t have to go to libraries anymore’. Though the statement may not seem all that provocative in and of itself, for Western’s librarians and archivists (who at the time had been working without a contract for several months), it demonstrated a lack of appreciation for and understanding of the role of the information worker on campus.

A failure on the part of university administrations to recognize the meaningful contributions of its academic librarians and archivists on campus can also be a failure on the part information workers’ ability to clearly and succinctly communicate their value, a lesson we were fortunate to learn quickly at Western. When contract negotiations seemed near an impasse in the fall of 2009, librarians and archivists began talking about their role on campus with very students, faculty and staff with whom and for whom they work so diligently. In the weeks that followed, UWOFA-LA Members received a strong showing of support from academic and library communities at the local, provincial and national levels. This, along with the incredible dedication and resolve of a talented negotiating team, resulted in a narrowly averted strike in late October 2009.

So what lessons have I learned in my short tenure as an information worker in the academy thus far? I have learned that librarians and archivists have much to contribute to the digital labour dialogue. As active members of the academic community who are fully engaged in the digital information and knowledge economies, our perspective will only serve to broaden and enrich the discussion. By continuing to contribute to our academic communities beyond the parameters of our professional practice through participation in forums such as the Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens conference, through active participation in the union, and by engaging our academic colleagues and administrative leaders in open and honest dialogue about the nature and role of the information worker on campus, we can begin to close that gap that exists
between the perceived roles of librarians and archivists on the one hand, and our many actual contributions on the other.

**the author**

Melanie Mills is Assistant Librarian at the University of Western Ontario. She has worked as a Research & Instructional Services Librarian with Western Libraries since 2004, with the exception of an eighteen-month Term Appointment as Manager, Graduate Resource Centre in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies, a post she held from 2008 through 2010. Actively involved in the work of The University of Western Ontario Faculty Association (UWOFA), Melanie currently serves as chief steward for Western’s Librarians and Archivists and represents UWOFA-LA Members on the Faculty Association’s Board of Directors and Executive.

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Digital labour in the academic context: Challenges for academic staff associations

Paul Jones

Abstract

Digital technologies create new opportunities and new challenges for university teachers, researchers and librarians. Under changing conditions of academic labour, how best to protect academic freedom?

Overview

The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) represents 65,000 teachers, researchers, librarians and other academic professionals at 122 colleges and universities across Canada. CAUT defends academic freedom, assists its members with collective bargaining and grievance handling and advocates on a range of public policy matters related to post-secondary education and the broader struggle for social justice.

Over the last decade the interaction between academic labour and digital technology has grown more complex, placing additional pressures on teachers, researchers and librarians and creating new challenges for academic unions. These developments have not occurred in a vacuum; they are unfolding against existing contradictions between public and private interests, between labour and capital.

Given this context, CAUT welcomed the announcement of the Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens conference and was pleased to be invited to speak at the event. Our presentation focused on three areas of particular concern: teaching, scholarly communication and copyright law.

Teaching

Digital technology is facilitating on-going efforts by employers to replace full-time, tenured positions with part-time, precarious employment. On-line education and the digitization of course material more easily allow the ‘unbundling’ of the teaching process into multiple, artificially delineated components, including course preparation, delivery, assessment and revision and interaction with students. Employer expropriation of course material is also facilitated by digital technology. Electronic documents are
physically easier to seize and re-distribute than written text and live performance. On the legal side, employers are arguing that their provision of the equipment and technical assistance utilized in course preparation provides a claim at law to ownership in the material.

The speed at which this technology was adopted initially placed academic staff in a defensive position. Through collective bargaining and grievance litigation, academic unions are now resisting this assault by protecting creator ownership in course material and attempting to secure the right of academic staff to collectively control and deliver courses.

**Scholarly communication**

Digital technology has provided academic staff an opportunity to assert greater control over the dissemination of their work. In recent years the cost of journal subscriptions has far out-paced inflation, forcing drastic reordering of library collection policies. In response to this crisis, academic staff are utilizing new technologies to claim control of scholarly communication. This is the ‘open access’ movement, facilitated by digital information systems that substantially reduce the distribution and reproduction costs of scholarly materials. Instead of creating and transferring journal articles to the private sector and buying them back at great cost, the academic community is ‘eliminating the middleman’ by establishing open access journals and institutional repositories for articles. While resistance from private publishing companies and some academic societies and faculty continues, and there are still serious financial issues to be resolved, the idea of an intellectual commons filled with freely available, peer-reviewed material is moving towards reality, facilitated by digital technology.

**Copyright law**

Over the last several years, successive governments have attempted to update the Copyright Act to reflect developments in digital technology. The copyright amendment process has traditionally been an unhappy one for the academic community and users of creative works more generally. Publishers and entertainment conglomerates have typically been able to secure ever more restrictive legislation at the expense of educators, students, librarians and the general public.

This situation has changed. A powerful coalition of groups and individuals representing the interests of the users of copyright material has been able to repeatedly halt the passage of new copyright law. This is a victory, as the proposals presented in Canadian Parliament represented a serious threat to academic labour, especially the ability to fair deal digital materials for purposes of research, review, private study and criticism.

This success is due in part to the contribution of faculty who in the role of public intellectuals have shaped popular opinion and mobilized opposition to the corporate copyright agenda. Figures such as Laura Murray at Queen’s University, Sam Trosow at The University of Western Ontario and Michael Geist at the University of Ottawa
deserve great credit in this regard. These scholar-activists have provided CAUT with the analysis and advice that has formed the basis of the organization’s copyright advocacy. Working in alliance with groups such as the Canadian Federation of Students and the Canadian Federation for Humanities and Social Sciences, CAUT has forced education and library issues into the copyright debate. New legislation will be introduced into parliament soon. Through the combination of critical scholarly analysis and traditional political work including letter-writing, op-eds, meeting MPs, attending government consultations, the position has been forcibly advanced that in the new digital environment the Copyright Act must serve the public interest and not simply the needs of private corporations.

Looking forward

The conference overview for ‘Digital Labour: Workers, Authors, Citizens’ indicated that new information technologies are creating both challenges and opportunities for workers. For academic unions this is certainly true, as these examples of teaching, scholarly communication and copyright reform demonstrate.

In addressing these challenges and opportunities, the conference assisted CAUT by providing a forum to present an overview of its work in the area and, more importantly, to meet activists and individual academics concerned with digital labour issues. A better world will be built, in part, by progressive academics working with CAUT and their academic staff associations to meld theory and analysis into practical action plans.

the author

Paul Jones is a Professional Officer with the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). Before joining CAUT he practiced law at an Ottawa union side labour law firm. Prior to his career as a lawyer, Paul worked for a variety of environmental and community organizations, including the Ontario Public Interest Group. At CAUT the focus of his work is public policy matters, with particular emphasis on research ethics, scholarly communication and intellectual property issues. He is also the Professional Officer assigned to the CAUT Librarians Committee.

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