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Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary¹



How Venture Labor Sheds Light on the Digital Platform Economy

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I draw attention to the entrepreneurial ideology that underlies both venture labor and several manifestations of digital labor, defined as deskilled and underpaid/unpaid work performed for online platforms. If contemporary workers seem more willing to accept the burden of entrepreneurial risk or the hardships of underpaid undertakings, this is because they reinterpret value-producing tasks as aligned with their private goals. At the same time, both venture labor and “implicit” work on digital platforms raise issues of distributive justice connected to value capture and centralization, thus increasing the potential for social antagonism and conflict.

Keywords: click workers, digital platforms, value distribution, digital labor

Gina Neff’s notion of venture labor provides important insights into fieldwork that extends beyond the tech community observed in the study. Her results encompass specific aspects of other industries, contexts, and occupations. By both conveying elements of empowerment through risk taking and exposing undercurrents of casualization and insecurity in today’s workforce, the concept of venture labor can be used to understand conflicted attitudes toward what counts as labor in economies increasingly dominated by the digital platform paradigm.

Platforms are to be construed as infrastructures coordinating access to services, products, data, and content, primarily through algorithmic matching. They also prompt the emergence of a distinctive form of “digital labor.” Whether they take the form of on-demand apps, microwork services such as

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Amazon Mechanical Turk, online marketplaces for “professional amateurs” (pro-am), or social media intensely relying on user-generated content, platforms thrive on value extraction from their users. They outsource huge numbers of tasks not to formally waged workers, but rather to crowds whose contributions exist in a continuum between underpaid, micropaid, or unpaid activities. Unlike the ever-receding core of formally employed workers of start-ups, media, and tech companies, the surging multitudes of external “complementors” produce value by acting as implicit laborers. Whereas Gina Neff focuses on skilled workers in constant interaction with professional ecosystems, digital labor studies tend to call attention to deskilled and “taskified” activities (Cardon & Casilli, 2015; Gray, Suri, Ali, & Kulkarni, 2016). But platform-based instances of production-consumption (“prosumption”) (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), audience participation, and crowdsourcing share a common feature with venture labor: a tension between the emphasis on free will and control by users/laborers and the perils of their increased subordination and dependence on the platforms to which they are tied.

At the intersection of digital and venture labor lie the emergent subjectivities of freelancers and self-employed workers. These workers appear as both paid independent contractors on online platforms and willing volunteers in Internet communities sustained by unpaid labor. Whether they subcontract for Uber and TaskRabbit, or perform “penny tasks” on Clickworker, or contribute reviews and metadata via sheer online engagement on iTunes and Netflix, some element of empowerment and desire have to be postulated—or so the academic literature seems to maintain. This is especially noticeable in instances of successful online contributors operating as intermediaries themselves: By benefiting from local information asymmetries and differential access to markets, they can ultimately act as supervisors and recruiters for other platform users to carry out specific tasks for them (Lehdonvirta, Hjorth, Graham, & Barnard, 2015). Amid pressure to perform and labor market volatility, some click workers develop a sense of selfhood and professionalism that can ultimately activate collective resistance regarding their working and living conditions (Sun & Magasic, 2016).

This is also the bedrock of the entrepreneurial ideology that underlies both venture labor and several manifestations of digital labor. If contemporary workers seem more willing to accept the burden of entrepreneurial risk or the hardships of underpaid and unpaid undertakings, this is because they reinterpret value-producing tasks as affective investments and private goals.

Analyses focusing on digital labor and venture labor struggle to appreciate how contemporary individuals adapt to the risks of this kind of precarious working life. Part of the challenge has to do with the blurring of the boundary between work and personal life, in which work absorbs elements of family life, lifestyle, and sociability (Conley, 2009). These elements both act as bulwark against the ups and downs of their atypical work by providing support networks and sustain value production within the digital economy by leveraging informal “shadow work” (Illich, 1981).

Over the past 50 years, narrow conceptions of workplace-bound wage labor have given way to broader views that take into account value-adding tasks that did not traditionally fall into the scope of formal labor (Star & Strauss, 1999). The recognition of women’s domestic work as well as the underground economy of minorities and marginal groups that had long been excluded from the workforce (Federici, 2012) brought to the fore the focus on “invisible labor.” A similar stance was subsequently

adopted to assess the labor power of consumers cocreating value with firms ("consumer work"), of publics of cultural industries producing the informational content of new commodities ("immaterial labor"), and even of audiences providing time and attention to media contents ("audience labor"; Caraway, 2011; Dujarier, 2016; Lazzarato, 1996).

Although scholarly and public debates have at times tended to downplay the exploitative nature of online activities and to emphasize elements of fun and sociability, supposedly hardwired in today's "participatory culture" and pro-am ethos (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009; Leadbeater & Miller, 2004), more recently a growing literature in social science and media studies has drawn attention to the social dynamics of value extraction from unpaid or underpaid activities of users of Internet and mobile technologies (Scholz, 2012; Terranova, 2000). These trends in the social understanding of labor aspire to redefine the relationship between formal and implicit work by recognizing the latter as activities producing actual economic value. They also raise the question of who is capturing and centralizing this value—and what can be done to redistribute it to the collective body from which it originated. Big platform tech companies, as well as traditional companies adopting big data analytics and smart tools to drive their business models, face a growing wave of social conflict. Whether it manifests itself through the creation of antagonistic commons and decentralized architectures (Dulong de Rosnay & Musiani, 2016), the plea for platform cooperativism (Scholz, 2016), or the renewal of the century-old tradition of worker unionism (Terranova, 2014), questions of property rights, governance, compensation, and accountability forcefully come to the fore. Thus, the rhetoric of risk acceptance among digital laborers cannot underplay the rising awareness of inequalities in value distribution and the proliferation of forms of organization among contributors of digital platforms.

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