2013

Working in the Data Mine (With Apologies to Allen Toussaint)

Michael J. Hughes
Trinity University, mhughes@trinity.edu

Repository Citation

Working in the Data Mine (With Apologies to Allen Toussaint)
A Review of "Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory" Edited by Trebor Schotz

Reviewed by

Michael J. Hughes

Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, U.S.

REVIEW
Last month Yahoo announced it would buy Tumblr, the popular microblogging platform, for $1.1 billion in cash, an astonishing sum for a company that is only this year expected to post an annual profit. The sale follows high-profile purchases by Facebook and Google, which scooped up Instagram ($1 billion) and YouTube ($1.65 billion) respectively, motivated by the same logic driving Yahoo's recent acquisition. It's not that reblogging animated GIFs from *The Colbert Report* is valuable in and of itself. Rather, as Lublin et al. explained in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Tumblr potentially offers personal data on millions of individual users [...] Data is at the heart of Yahoo's ability to sell online advertising across its sites, based on what it knows about its people's interests." As we click our way around the web we quietly communicate our lifestyle and consumer preferences to various hosts, generating an ocean of data in the process, the depths of which are good as gold to those with the know-how to trawl them.

Just 54% of adult internet users in the United States understand how search engines and social networks profit from their activity. And it's not as if they're compensated for their contributions. It will surprise no one to learn that Facebook's terms of service fail to outline a profit-sharing scheme.

The Open University

The concurrent collapse of boundaries between play and labor (or playbor, a neologism that could double as the name of an internet start-up) promises to accelerate the creation of rich user data by "effectively mask[ing] labour as play, and disguis[ing] the process of self-expropriation as self-expression," as media theorist Julian Kücklich put it. We add value to valuable enterprises, but we're not paid to do so. Rather, we trade our personal data for services: mapping tools, social networks, real-time search results, the cloud-based word processor on which this review was composed. Have we entered into an electronic Faustian bargain? If we are working for Twitter with each retweet, sweating for Google with each search, and worse, confusing that labor for leisure, are we being exploited on a massive scale? Should we be outraged that not one penny of Instagram's billion-dollar payday trickled down to the users whose contributions make the site possible?

In an effort to unravel these questions, and to do some good old-fashioned consciousness raising, Trebor Scholz, Associate Professor of Culture and New Media at The New School, convened the 2009 conference that gives *Digital Labor* its title. The book collects essays from sixteen contributors into four thematic parts that attempt a holistic survey of digital labor from its origins, to its sites of activity, to the different ways that capital is produced from the melting distinctions that separate work from play. Along the way the reader encounters theory about internet classicism, racism, and the evolving nature of power and control. McKenzie Wark, author of *A Hacker Manifesto*, expounds on a so-called vectoral class interested not in owning the means of production but "[controlling] the logistics by which they are managed", which allows it to "dispense with much of the machinery of the old capitalist ruling class" and instead "[contract] out such functions" (Wark, p. 69). In other words, information is power -- literally. Elsewhere the steady creep of real-world racism into the fictional universe of *World of Warcraft* is interrogated, and Christian Fuchs, in an essay revealingly titled "Class and Exploitation on the Internet," asks whether a participatory internet isn't a fiction given that ownership, and the profits thereof, are privately controlled.

Meanwhile, the intersection of gender and digital labor is given only glancing attention. Of the four authors who broach the subject, Andrew Ross devotes the most attention to it, though his concern is not digital exploitation but the feminization of the unpaid intern workforce. By one estimate, women comprise 77% of all unpaid internships, and these job hopefuls enter into work-for-experience arrangements that entail "sacrifices, trade-offs, and humiliations [...] more redolent of traditional kinds of women's work, whether at home or in what used to be called the secondary labor market" (Ross, p. 24). Women employed in the white-collar creative class, on the other hand, are valued for their "gendered skills and aptitudes around networking, multitasking, and social finessing of a whole range of work-leisure overlaps" (Ross, p. 30). But like the interns, they face disappearing job security, and must scramble to "fashion their own livelihoods by piecing together disparate lumps of work and income" (ibid).

Other mentions of gender are less substantial. One is a throwaway reference to Marxist feminism (Fuchs, p. 217); another inaccurately contends that blogs and social networks are "by and for teenage girls" (Dean, p. 127) [1]. And a third bizarrely suggests that "masculine understandings of labor within the digital economy" are to blame for the disproportionate attention given open-source software over "mailing lists and websites:"

> "It is an interesting feature of the internet debate (and evidence, *somehow*, of its masculine bias) that users' labor has attracted more attention in the case of the open source movement than in that of mailing lists and websites. This betrays the persistence of an attachment to masculine understandings of labor within the digital economy: writing an operating system is still more worthy of attention than just chatting for free for AOL. This despite the fact that in 1996, at the peak of the volunteer moment, over 30,000 'community leaders' were helping AOL to generate at least $7 million per month"
> (Terranova, p. 48, emphasis mine).

Never mind that many people, men *and* women, value "writing an operating system" more highly than "chatting for free for AOL." Never mind that those monthly millions were privately controlled and enriched only a few, whereas open-source software is communally developed and freely distributed. No, whatever points on masculine labor the author was hoping to score are catastrophically undermined by her admission that if the facts adduced are indeed evidence in support of her claim, she's not sure *how* they support it. It's an overreach that should have been dropped into a digital dustbin.

Not surprisingly, *Digital Labor* is best when its authors exercise restraint. They leave no doubt where they stand on companies whose business models consist of "rent[ing] back the product of your own labor," as McKenzie Wark puts it (p. 71). Consequently, the rhetoric sometimes trips into hyperbole. Andrew Ross finds, in the interns who "do not see themselves as hard done by," a "twisted mentality of self-exploitation that has marched onto the *killing fields of employment*" (Ross, p. 25, emphasis mine). Invoking, even unconsciously, the Cambodian genocide that claimed more than 1.7 million lives trivializes the historical obscenity while seriously undermining the credibility of Ross's argument. Yet this is the same author who had me nodding in agreement with his reflective consideration of technological determinism: "Blaming new media [...] ignores the proliferation of unpaid labor in old media and other parts of the employment landscape over the last decade and a half" (Ross, p. 22). The rest of his essay is similarly nuanced. It situates digital labor in an historical context, identifies instances where digital workers benefit under shifting modes of employment, and urges readers to keep the problem of digital labor in perspective. Ross reminds us that "the vast majority of human labor, historically and to this day, is wageless" (Ross, p. 26), and our concerns are rightly placed with Bangladeshi garment workers over First World citizens whose very capacity for digital exploitation suggests a material comfort that most people do not enjoy. Indeed, the book's best essay, a piece by Mark Andrejevic, makes this dilemma plain:

> "One of the challenges of mobilizing the notion of exploitation in online contexts is that it takes a critical concept traditionally associated with industrial labor's sweatshop conditions and transposes it into a realm of relative affluence and prosperity--that is, a realm inhabited by those with the time and access to participate in online activities. For good reason, it is harder to get worked up about the allegedly exploitative conditions of user-generated content sites than about the depredations of sweatshop labor and workforce exploitation."
> (Andrejevic, p. 153)

Andrejevic also presents a refreshingly balanced portrait of digital exploitation, which acknowledges that internet workers are not just complicit in their exploitation but often *enjoy* the work and, more importantly, do not recognize it as such. *Harry Potter* fan fiction and *Doctor Who* fan art may indirectly drive dollars to their corporate rights

holders, dollars that are not shared with fan creators. But this leaves intact the intrinsic motivations and rewards that inspire fans to create and share their work in the first place. Such work is created on the mediascape margins with no expectation of remuneration, and even as fandom gains credibility (and perhaps cynical exploitation in service of corporate marketing) its creative expression will likely continue along the same lines it always has. This playbor paradox is at the heart of Abigail De Kosnik's essay "Fandom as Free Labor," and it is a conflict that her essay fails to resolve. Consequently, her argument that fans should be compensated for their work is unconvincing and not likely to be taken seriously by those expected to dole out the payments.

Ultimately, much of the book's success or failure rests on this question of free labor, what Tiziana Terranova calls the transformation of culture "into excess productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (Terranova, p. 37). This exploitation is potentially multiplied by the blurring distinctions of work and play. My data trail, and yours, and the millions of others are used to sell targeted advertising that generates wealth for comparatively few people. But do I also derive pleasure and other intangible benefits from maintaining my little corner of the internet, regardless of whose property it remains? I'm entertained by cat photos and enlightened by blog posts attacking misogyny in pop culture. I receive a *frisson* of excitement when my witticisms are retweeted. I recommend and inventory my books, and delight in the books friends recommend to me. These examples of exploitable activity are not intended to repudiate or even counterbalance the concerns highlighted in *Digital Labor*; that personal information is used to enrich multinational internet companies is not in doubt. But time and again the essays fail to account for and give credit to the non-monetary rewards that users receive for blogging, commenting, posting, liking, reblogging, and otherwise engaging in the activities that encourage them to surrender data about themselves. They also fail to admit, even begrudgingly, that the value derived from user data is enabled by technological ingenuity, innovation, and investment. What looks to me like an eyeball-glazing spreadsheet of incomprehensible data is a finely grained portrait of consumer behavior to someone with the knowledge and training to make a product of it. Value is added through computation, data cleaning, data mining, and so forth. We can argue about the appropriate level of compensation for this value, or if we should contribute our data to it as freely as we do. Nevertheless, it *is* added value -- there is labor at both ends of the spectrum -- which inconveniently blurs the picture of pure exploitation that these essays continually try to draw.

One encounters this tendentiousness throughout *Digital Labor*. Arguments too often stem from ideology rather than evidence. This leads to absurd claims, such as Christian Fuchs's accusation that Facebook is somehow responsible for marginalizing "alternative political views" in favor of "established actors", as if voluntary 'likes' aren't the metric that determines the popularity of a Facebook page (Fuchs, p. 213). The table he presents to support this accusation says more about a depoliticized citizenry than it does about the social network operating as a virtual sweatshop (Rihanna has more Facebook fans than Karl Marx - go figure). Sometimes these broadsides walk right up to the line of parody. In Jodi Dean's "Whatever Blogging," the author embarks on what may go down as history's most overwrought analysis of word clouds: they privilege frequency and repetition over meaning, and shift communication "away from a language constituted out of sentences that are uttered in contexts according to rules that can be discerned and contested" (Dean, p. 143). They "capture the shift from message to contribution characteristic of communicative

capitalism." As if word clouds were a popular mode of communication rather than the tired cliché they've been since 2005.

Finally, a word on academese, which rages through the book like unchecked avian flu. It's too easy to remove a jargon-heavy paragraph from its context in order to make the tired point that academics sometimes engage in wooly-headed thinking camouflaged by a dense thicket of verbal sophistication. But because I've been reading William Zinsser, who reminds us to beware "the long word that's no better than the short word," or perhaps because *Digital Labor* is ostensibly concerned with the exploitation of everyday people, I found myself especially irritated by the impenetrable prose in some of these essays. At a time when academic publishing is on the ropes [2], and the humanities and social sciences are increasingly expected to justify their existence against decreasing enrollment, this book is a missed opportunity to connect with the people who most need to contemplate the issues raised here, and who are least cognizant of the ways their personal data are being exploited.

As it happens, Jaron Lanier is out with a new book, *Who Owns the Future?*, which attacks the same threat that *Digital Labor* struggles to anatomize. Reviewing the book for the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin writes that Lanier excoriates the "tempting Siren Servers (as he calls them) that depend on accumulating and evaluating consumer data without acknowledging a monetary debt to the people mined for all this 'free' information". Lanier's solution is the same one that De Kosnik proposes for fan labor: netizens should receive "nanopayments" for the data they contribute to server farms, a token remuneration in recognition of all we do to give power to search algorithms, targeted ads, and predictive preferences. This is a sweetly outlandish scheme. It's hard to imagine how people would organize in order to create the kind of leverage required to secure these nanopayments from corporations who are legally bound to consider only the profit hunger of their shareholders.

But feasibility aside, Lanier's argument is in major newspapers like The Guardian and the Washington Post, raising consciousness around the dark side of the knowledge economy in ways that Digital Labor can only profess to do.

NOTE

[1] The Pew Internet and American Life Project presents a more diverse portrait of social network users. Women outnumber men, but only by 9 percentage points, and 83% of all users are aged 18-29, a wider range than Dean's "teenage girls" suggests.

[2] In a June 2012 presentation at the Annapolis Conference, Bryn Geffert, Amherst's Librarian of the College, noted that 56 disciplines have lost university presses since 1993.

REFERENCES

Geffert, B. (2012). A future for publishing and scholarly communication?
[Video file]. Retrieved from amherst.edu/library/about/news/annapolis2012

Maslin, J. (2013, May 5). Fighting words against big data. The New York Times.
Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/06/books/who-owns-the-future-by-jaron-lanier.html

Schott, B. (2010, March 12). Schott's vocab: playbor. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from schott.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/03/12/playbor

Zinsser, W. (2006). *On writing well: The classic guide to writing nonfiction*. New York: HarperCollins.