

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



Conclusion: Agendas for Studying Communicative Capitalism

GINA NEFF
University of Oxford, UK

This short essay concludes a Special Section on the book *Venture Labor* and reflects on the directions for future research for media and communication scholars. The essay argues that new ways of studying the political economy of information-intensive industries stretch the traditional scope of media and communication studies. This “informational economy” relies ever more on the production and circulation of commodified and monetized values emerging within the media industry and media practices broadly construed. This essay concludes a collection of articles proposing theoretical frameworks and empirical examples to deal with the transformations of work and economic value within the media and communication field. Collectively, the authors in this special issue address how media workers are responding to technological and economic change and how new communication technologies influence the production of economic value. This essay argues that the field of media and communication studies can help scholars understand the practices of the informational economy, the status of workers within this economy, and their resistance to its exploitative tendencies.

Keywords: theory, political economy, risk, communication technologies, media production, media industries

Media have undergone a transformation of historic proportions and significant organizational and industrial restructuring. The so-called old media of broadcasting and print are struggling to adapt in digital media environments with increased competition for audiences, plummeting advertising revenue, and

¹ This selection is part of the forum entitled *Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary*, edited by Laura Robinson, Gina Neff, and Jeremy Schulz. All contributions and critiques to the forum should be read and cited as an interlocking dialogue created jointly by Laura Robinson, Jeremy Schulz, Alice E. Marwick, Nicole S. Cohen, C. W. Anderson, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Enda Brophy, Gina Neff, Paul Hirsch, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Ofer Sharone, Barry Wellman, Dimitrina Dimitrova, Tsahi Hayat, Guang Ying Mo, Beverly Wellman, and Antonio Casilli.

uncertain business models for content. At the same time, media production practices have become ever more closely entangled in a form of flexible capitalism that depends upon the constant flow of digitized goods and services with symbolic dimensions. As Allen Scott (1997) has written, "an ever-widening range of economic activity is concerned with producing and marketing goods and services that are infused in one way or another with broadly aesthetic or semiotic attributes" (p. 323). Jodi Dean (2010) has termed this "communicative capitalism," formed from the exploitation of economic value from the "intensive and extensive networks of enjoyment, production, and surveillance" (pp. 3-4) in media environments. Simply put, the informational economy relies ever more on the production and circulation of commodified and monetized values emerging within the media industry and media practices broadly construed.

These changes call for new ways of studying political economy in media and communication that stretch the traditional scope of our studies. What we have put forth in these collected essays on media work and the extensions of venture labor are emerging theoretical frameworks and empirical examples addressing the transformations of work and economic value. While each author of these essays approaches his or her own research agenda differently, collectively we address how media workers are responding to technological and economic change and how new communication technologies influence the production of economic value more generally. Some of this work falls within what has traditionally been understood as media work, and the research by Anderson, Cohen, and Brophy shows the urgency of continuing to study how media workers adapt and resist in this changed economic environment. In this context, communication and media scholars are well equipped to ask, as Schulz put it in his presentation at the 2014 International Communication Association conference in Seattle, "How can people live in the subjunctive mode?"

However, a disciplinary divide between studying media and studying human communication has prevented us from being able to build the theoretical bridges necessary for extending studies beyond the broadly defined media industries. Collectively, our field already possesses the pieces for thinking about interaction, meanings, and the social construction of value, as well as the mediation of those meanings. These count as critical parts of the emerging theories explaining the causes and consequences of capitalism as communicatively constituted and mediated, where communication plays a central role in the production of economic value. Such an ambitious scholarly agenda would center on questions about how communication practices are a foundation of value, how the work of news media and social media producers alike are exploited, and how the communication actions in the production and consumption of all goods and services are exploited within capitalism. To get there, we can start with media and culture industries, which have, in the words of Andrew Ross (2009), "emerged as an optimum field for realizing the longstanding capitalist dream of stripping labor costs to the bone" (p. 137). Such tendencies fuel the entrepreneurial pressures and responses outlined here by Marwick, Anderson, and Cohen. When commentators such as Thomas Friedman (2013) call on colleges to teach students entrepreneurship so they can learn to invent their own jobs, we are seeing the reflection of these entrepreneurial pressures in the media, the recasting of the occupation of journalism as an entrepreneurial endeavor, and an explicit call to venture labor as a solution to unemployment and underemployment.

As far as academic fields are concerned, media and communication studies are prime targets for intervention where the aim is to combat exploitation of workers through new technologies. As Melissa

Gregg (2013) has shown in *Work's Intimacy*, the Internet has not simply brought freedom to workers but rather increased the intimacy of the relationship salaried professionals have with their work. With constant connectivity, "presence bleed" occurs where much professional work now seeps into all sorts of experiential zones and territories outside the workplace. What does this mean that we are letting the Internet, and therefore the capitalist market, into our lives in this way? These questions go beyond what we can answer by looking solely at media practices. We need to also contextualize them within questions of the production and reproduction of labor more generally. As cultural sociologist Tom Streever (2010) argued in *The Net Effect*, the ideology of the free market and the empowered individual have found their perfect technology: The Internet is both tool and symbol for the reproduction of a set of positions and subjectivities in relation to the free market. In her essay, Rodino-Colocino enriches this line of thought by showing how easily even so-called emancipatory new technologies get marshalled into service of labor management. The tools themselves do not have the power to make or remake the political ideology in which they emerge.

The Internet as a sociotechnical medium has an extraordinary and unprecedented ability to subsume practices of resistance into its economic architecture, including, but not limited to, the extreme commercialization and monetization of the online sphere. Silicon Alley was a historical moment that helped to mark the extreme commercialization and monetization of the online sphere and the technological infrastructure. For example, Brophy points out in his essay that the democratized access to "communicative abundance" comes with exploitative costs to unseen workers. Another example is Marwick's (2013) "safe for work self" (p. 112), produced by a social media user who is always conscious of her position and lack of power within the labor market. Social media users are, thus, only varying degrees of *proto-* or *pseudo-*media professionals incorporated into an economic ecology that presumes a set of relationships to a market for media and content, regardless of the qualities in the content they produce and regardless of their awareness of or consent to the commoditization of the messages they produce and the attention that they give to those of others. This shift reimagines all cultural endeavors as potentially commercial products and positions cultural laborers as storytellers with a product to sell in service of branding, advertising, and marketing, regardless of their industry or profession. In this way, this culture helps construct a hyperindividualist labor market that echoes fundamental social shifts that are well under way in Western economies. Our work as scholars is to understand the complexities of the infrastructures, politics, and economics of communication and media technologies. This task has never been more urgent, as the lines between the texts and practices of users and the profits of producers blur.

I argued in *Venture Labor* (Neff, 2012) that the concept of individualized risk is now tightly linked to what it means to be successful, creative, and in control of one's career. The powerful cultural perceptions and narratives that entrepreneurial workers use to frame their jobs lead us to widely divergent political conclusions, depending on whether we see this entrepreneurialism as primarily empowering individuals or as primarily squeezing economic value from their informal forms of labor. The new research agendas in media and communication studies is therefore part of a much-needed—and much welcomed—extension of our theories to the larger economic changes at hand.

References

- Dean, J. (2010). *Blog theory: Feedback and capture in the circuits of drive*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Friedman, T. L. (2013, March 30). Need a job? Invent it. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/opinion/sunday/friedman-need-a-job-invent-it.html>
- Gregg, M. (2013). *Work's intimacy*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Neff, G. (2012). *Venture labor: Work and the burden of risk in innovative industries*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ross, A. (2009). The political economy of amateurism. *Television and New Media*, 10(1), 136–137.
- Scott, A. J. (1997). The cultural economy of cities. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 21(2), 323–339.
- Streeter, T. (2010). *The net effect: Romanticism, capitalism, and the Internet*. New York, NY: New York University Press.