

## Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary<sup>1</sup>



### Entrepreneurial Subjects: Venturing from Alley to Valley

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In *Venture Labor*, Neff describes an entrepreneurial subjectivity in which creative workers focus on presenting a portfolio of work to potential employers, positioning themselves not as employees of a company, but as creators of a particular voice or style. In my book, *Status Update*, I examine the logical outgrowths of the practices examined in *Venture Labor*, three self-presentation techniques aimed at attracting attention—microcelebrity, self-branding, and live streaming—all representing the leading edge of social media practice. In *Status Update*, I show how presenting the self became a form of labor that extends venture labor to formulating, packaging, and presenting the self.

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In *Venture Labor*, Gina Neff (2012) argues that the venture-backed content startups of 1990s Silicon Alley encouraged entrepreneurial behavior, shifting risk-taking from the responsibility of the collective to that of the individual. Dot-com workers, rather than their companies, were responsible for managing their own career paths, skill development, retirement plans, and training. This transformation was framed in the workplace as bohemian, cool, and “a more democratic and participatory form of organization” (Neff 2012, p. 11). Neff coins the term *venture labor* to describe investing personal resources into one’s workplace and, in the process, endorsing entrepreneurial values. In comparing Neff’s findings with my own research on Web 2.0 workers in Silicon Valley, two points become clear. First, the entrepreneurial practices identified by Neff not only exist in today’s technology culture, but have expanded

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and grown stronger. Second, entrepreneurial labor has, primarily through the popularity of social media sites, expanded into self-governance of identity and relationships beyond the workplace.

The workers of dot-com-era Silicon Alley represent but one historical point on a timeline of both American technology development and attitudes toward work and self. In my book, *Status Update* (Marwick, 2013), I examine the next cycle of the turbulent technology industry, the Web 2.0 bubble, which took place in San Francisco from approximately 2005 to 2009. (Dividing the frenzied timeline of technology into distinct periods is problematic in itself, but is made more so by the fact that funding and valuations of social and mobile apps are higher than ever. I differentiate Web 2.0 from the present moment in terms of ideals and major players). Like Neff, I immersed myself in the day-to-day work and social worlds of young people pursuing both idealism and wealth through venture-capital-supported technology startups, but my fieldwork took place a decade after that described in *Venture Labor*.

Unsurprisingly, there is a great deal of similarity between the work practices of Silicon Alley in the 1990s and Silicon Valley in the 2000s. Neff observed workers networking at lavish parties that, despite the vast sums of money spent on them, were not considered fun but a professional duty. Likewise, Web 2.0 workers framed their social life as a technology “scene,” a term taken from the “music scene,” which imbued the geeky tech-focused world with the heady aura of rock music. Just as in Neff’s descriptions of New York, Californian Web 2.0 workers formed tight social and professional networks that allowed for mobility and free flows of venture capital and engineering talent.

More important, the elements identified in Neff’s “venture labor” have expanded to form an entrepreneurial subjectivity. The tech worker, wannabee entrepreneur, or budding startup owner configures his or her own online self-presentation to fit that of a proper working subject—in other words, to market forces. While Neff’s informants worked hard to fit themselves into approved categories of ideal workers, the popularity of social media has extended this presentation outside the office and even beyond the networking event. Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and an ever-expanding array of apps were used by the workers I observed to portray an attention-getting, work-friendly, professional persona. This is a new type of venture labor, one focused not just on skill development, but on the presence of a watchful, judgmental audience. While in the 1990s, dot-com workers believed that “content is king,” Web 2.0 workers believed, and lived the ideal, that the *social* was king.

We see traces of self-promotional activities in *Venture Labor* (Neff, 2012). Neff chronicles creative workers who focus on presenting a portfolio of work to potential employers, positioning themselves not as employees of a company, but as creators of a particular voice or style. In *Status Update*, I identified three self-presentation techniques aimed at attracting attention—microcelebrity, self-branding, and live-streaming—the logical outgrowths of such practices. Because the Web 2.0 boom was social, success often depended on successfully utilizing computer-mediated communication. Presenting the self and communicating with others became a form of labor that extended *venture labor* to formulating, packaging, and presenting the self. Self-branding provides a good example of these self-presentation strategies, especially as it is deeply rooted in dot-com-era rhetoric (Hearn, 2008).

Self-branding is primarily a series of marketing strategies applied to the individual. It is a set of practices and a mindset, a way of thinking about the self as a salable commodity to a potential employer. The term first came to prominence in a 1997 *Fast Company* article by Tom Peters, who wrote, "The good news—and it is largely good news—is that everyone has a chance to stand out. Everyone has a chance to learn, improve, and build up their skills. Everyone has a chance to be a brand worthy of remark" (para. 9). Peters saw the Internet as a leveling mechanism that made it possible for individuals to gain an audience as large as that of a major corporate brand. He advised young dot-com workers to use the Internet to strategically formulate and disseminate a version of themselves that would appeal to potential employers—the modern portfolio.

This was generally a niche practice during the dot-com era, since people engaged in similar practices did not think of themselves as brands, but it has become quite common, especially for young people seeking creative jobs in an uncertain employment climate. Self-styled experts like Wine TV guru Gary Vaynerchuk (2009) advise readers to choose a topic they are passionate about, use social media to get attention for their expertise, and then use this attention to find a lucrative job in the field of one's choice. I observed that rather than landing a dream job, most people who engaged in such practices experienced several downsides. People self-censored their online expression and social media presences to seem corporate friendly, seeing the online realm as a never-ending job interview. Self-branders had a difficult time drawing lines between their work life and their friends and family relationships; they were never off the clock. And finally, such expression required emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). Presenting a safe-for-work self at all times was often difficult and stressful. It could be hard to be in the public eye, and it required constant monitoring of oneself through other people's eyes. What distinguishes this entrepreneurial subjectivity from Neff's venture labor is the presence of a broad audience in social media—the tight networks described by Neff as existing in clubs and after-hours networking events are present 24/7 in one's everyday online communications.

Neff successfully argues that technology workers were the "canaries in the coal mine" of venture labor. The work practices pioneered in the dot-com boom that framed the nonhierarchical company as revolutionary and counterculture have spread much further than their origins. And just as Neff found that her Silicon Alley workers represented the leading edge of work practice, the Web 2.0 workers I studied represented the leading edge of social media practice. They used social media to present a certain type of identity to an audience that was constrained by their norms of employment and integration of work and life, as well as countercultural norms and tech "solutionism." And, just as Neff outlines, modern technology workers are equally representative of neoliberal thinking about the importance of individualism and taking on the burden of skill development and risk.

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