

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



### Venture Labor and Media Work: The Canary Has Flown

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The essays in this series provide valuable insights and commentaries on Neff's *Venture Labor*. They show both the gains and losses and the winners and losers as work is transformed by the Internet and social media apps. How venture labor benefits employers as more professionals become freelance contractors as well as how going freelance "liberates" some professionals are well addressed and explained by the authors in this Special Section.

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The essays in this series brilliantly address how work has been transformed by the Internet and its social media apps. The redefinition of media work as freelance, which Neff and Marwick found professionals following in Silicon Alley and Valley, is now common throughout the industry. Professionals at every level are entrepreneurs. Their "venture labor" enables them to work their own hours, raise funds from investors, and possibly win in the contests to invent and own what could become the next Facebook or Twitter. Antennae are up for new opportunities, and promotion and self-branding become the new norm. As what Robinson insightfully calls such "entrepreneurial Darwinism" takes hold, work hours and social networking increase and private moments become fewer. Hopes and dreams for hitting it big outdistance the higher risks of failing to achieve them, as (for many) the conventional benefits and safety nets from what used to be more traditional employment are rejected or, if known, forgotten. As Neff describes in *Venture Labor* (2012), these professionals like the prospect of high payoffs from taking the

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risk of freelance entrepreneurship, and they prefer it to having a full-time job with a salary and benefits. They see their work as freelance and entrepreneurial, with little expectation of (or interest in) remaining long with a single company.

One theme shared by the reviews of Neff's findings in this issue is some ambivalence about how positively to consider this transformation. As Marwick notes, although it has been framed as more democratic, bohemian, and cool, she and other reviewers also point out some likely costs and negatives in its path. Statistically, there are more losers than winners in the contests these dot-com professionals are engaged in. Just as lottery ticket buyers focus on the potential payoffs while ignoring the great likelihood they will not win, these professionals pin their hopes on hitting it big in these winner-take-all contests with their peers. From a critical standpoint, Cohen shares Schulz's concern that when this occurs, they may confront the alternative of having to "rely on ordinary labor-power" and be "haunted by the specter of long-term unemployment." To Anderson, buying into this arrangement lowers the cost of labor for employers and borders on "ideological delusion."

Analytically, as Rodino-Colocino's review points out, technological advances have always exerted change on working conditions and how work gets done. Filmed time and motion studies, Ford's assembly lines and reengineering, followed by more flextime and work away from home enabled by greater communication over the Web all have contributed in their times to higher productivity, greater ease of supervision, and control. The rise of venture labor seems exceptional so far in not generating a backlash from the larger workforce. Schulz suggests our culture's idealization of individualism may help explain this lack of response. There is some variation by industry in how its workers respond to losing the benefits and greater security of being contractually employed.

While the professionals in Neff's study see some opportunity in being their own boss, lawsuits have been filed (and won) against firms such as FedEx and against UPS's movement toward venture labor practices when it declared drivers to be self-employed rather than employees on its payroll. Generally, across industries, our understanding and practice of what comes with being "employed" has been on a downward trend since the 1980s. Way back then—when corporate America downsized at all levels and having a good "temp" job became a new definition of doing well—I initiated the term "free agent" manager in my book *Pack Your Own Parachute* (Hirsch, 1987) to advise protecting oneself when "you can no longer rely on your company to look out for you." Since then, employment at will has become more of a norm, and the attraction of staying with a firm so one's pension becomes vested disappeared as companies replaced pensions with an invitation to set up your own (portable) 401(k) account.

The reframing of employment in media industries is a logical extension of this "you're on your own" trend. In terms of an agenda for the field, I am excited by the "turn to labor" noted by Rodino-Colocino. I recommend continuing to research how well media workers and professionals are able to manage the power relations in which they typically hold a weaker hand, and publicizing instances when this can be reversed. One good place to focus is on expanding research into developing trends in labor law and greater engagement with the legal profession. When authors submit their books to publishers, they often are able to retain the copyright, and when independent television and film producers contract with distributors, the rights for syndication or release in other countries are part of the negotiation. For our

studies of how media professionals fare under venture labor, these types of protections are important to become more familiar with as part of our research. For journalists, while the “buyers” of the stories have well-paid lawyers on hand, the power equation of a byline “brand” should be cultivated. We can trace instances of when this is tried and how it works; a good example is Ezra Klein’s transition from a *Washington Post* staffer to editor-in-chief of the Internet’s Vox.com.

As the most visible parts of the media industry consolidate and continue weakening the bargaining positions of workers, we have an opportunity to learn more about and, I would add, wish well the media professionals Neff characterized as nonentrepreneurs adopting entrepreneurial values. It is clear from the high quality of the contributions to this forum that good research is on the way. Venture labor may be a necessary mind-set as the labor market moves toward more free agency. I look forward to seeing more work on the topic and research on the changing work and working conditions in these areas.

### References

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