

Gendered Blindspots: Feminist Political Economy and The Critique of Free Labor Online

Abstract:

This commentary reviews the two major 1970s theoretical traditions recently revived to investigate free labor in social media: the blindspot debate and the Wages for Housework campaign. Exploring the tension between the two frames can build from the blindspot debate's critique of Keynesian demand management to include contemporary outsourcing and the expansion of wage labor. Those same historic shifts matter when comparing the specific demand of Wages for Facebook to Marxist feminism's broader critique of global reproduction crises. I argue that this broader context, the global subsumption of reproductive labor to commodity production, shows the need for a research and political program focused on the different spaces and times of labor, waged and unwaged, along the supply chain reproducing the social Web. The article reviews the history of the blindspot debate and the Wages for Housework campaign, compares their contemporary critiques of the audience's/user's bifurcated labor, and locates the specific work of unwaged laborers online within recent patterns of capitalist geographic expansion. Its goal is to model feminist political economic research into the supply chain for free labor online and to situate that free labor and political demands around it within the global subsumption of reproductive labor.

Keywords:

social media, feminist marxism, labor, globalization, social movements

Introduction

Two critical traditions from the 1970s have been revived to analyze free labor in social media—the content and data-trails produced by users of such platforms as Facebook which are then harvested by those companies, packaged, and resold to advertisers who push ads to those same users. The first is the blindspot debate, initiated by Canadian political economist Dallas Smythe (1977). He argued that the commodity produced by mass media was not a package of ideology but an audience whose viewing time was measured, bundled and resold to advertisers. The second is the Wages for Housework (WFH) campaign which followed the trail blazed by the Welfare Mothers Movement in the US. Marxist feminists such as Silvia Federici (1975), Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Selma James (1972) called for state remuneration of housework so that women could exercise further control over their labor and call attention to the critical role of unwaged labor in reproducing labor power (i.e., the laborer's ability to work, sold to the capitalist). The blindspot debate instructs us to follow Facebook's production and circulation as we did for broadcast television. From WFH, we learn to question the social necessity of labor on Facebook amidst capitalism's historical reliance on women's unwaged, reproductive labor.

The two frames are in tension, and not only in patterns of citation. Exploring those tensions can build from Smythe's critique of Keynesian demand management to include contemporary outsourcing and the expansion of wage labor. Those same historic shifts matter when comparing the specific demand of Wages for Facebook to Marxist feminism's broader critique of global reproduction crises. I argue that this broader context, the global subsumption of reproductive labor to commodity production, shows the need for a research and political program focused on the different spaces and times of labor, waged and unwaged, along the supply chain reproducing the social Web. In what follows I will first review the blindspot and WFH traditions, compare their critiques of the audience's/user's bifurcated labor, and locate the specific work of unwaged laborers online within recent patterns of capitalist geographic expansion. My goal is both to model feminist political economic critiques of the supply chain for free labor online and to situate that free labor within the global subsumption of reproductive labor.

Gendered Blindspots

In the mid-1970s, Smythe was dismayed by dominant research paradigms on communication industries which focused on ideological functions and neglected their economic base. He argued that the editorial content of advertiser-supported media was a mere 'free lunch' enticing people to the TV set so that they could give their time to the network and thus produce the audience commodity, the real product of the industry, which was packaged and assessed by ratings agencies such as AC Nielsen, and then sold to advertisers for a profit. Here, all time is work time, even if the worker is not actively engaged in waged labor. The labor audiences do is two-fold: First, they produce the non-durable good, the audience commodity, sold to advertisers as they market those advertisers' goods to themselves and, second, they reproduce their labor power, refreshing themselves for work tomorrow and learning to adjust social routine to the limited options of the mass market.

Refining this formulation, Jhally and Livant (1986) argued that the network, like any capitalist, accumulated surplus time, audiences doing the work of watching extra, revenue-generating content beyond the free lunch. Meehan (1984) showed that the audience commodity is not just discovered but actively produced, and gendered, by ratings agencies defining the value of different times and

demographics. Contemporary work such as Lee's (2011) demonstrates the vertical integration of the rating, content, and broadcast functions in search engines such as Google's as well as the more precise measurement and sale of free labor enabled by the tracking of unique pageviews, clicks, and personalized search results.

WFH demanded a wage not to enlarge the proletariat, but to gain further control over a role imposed by capital in the wake of the Second Industrial Revolution, when mechanically-intensified work was met with a family wage for the male laborer while many working-class women were pushed into the home to reproduce the laborer's ability to work (e.g., providing food, clothing, love, sex). A wage for 'women's work' would be the first step towards refusing it, freeing the homemaker to create spaces of valorization outside the circuits of capital and stall capitalist reproduction. This drew attention to two under-theorized strands of Western Marxism. First, the reproductive labor performed by women in the home, but also in institutions such as schools and hospitals, which rather than producing surplus value instead sustained others' ability to do so. Second, so-called 'immaterial' or 'affective' labor wherein the commodity produced for exchange is not a specific object but a specific feeling or idea, often embodied by the laborer.

Today, this critique is mobilized around free labor online with such projects as Laurel Ptak's Wages For Facebook, which takes Federici's "Wages Against Housework" essay and trades references to miscarriages, kitchens, and sex for Likes, comments, and data profiles in order to draw attention to the labor of unwaged Friendship which, like housework, is excused by an ideology of freely-given, 'natural' sociality untouched by labor-capital relations in order to reproduce those same relations. But there is a second, post-WFH theoretical project advanced by this cohort of Marxist feminists: The mapping of crises in the global reproduction of labor, where, in a response to 1970s stagflation, structural adjustment programs forced the enclosure or wholesale destruction of natural and reproductive commons (e.g., forcibly replacing subsistence farming crops with cash crops such as soybeans) as part of a new round of primitive accumulation that disciplined entry into the world market and forced women's labor especially from the sphere of reproduction into commodity exchange. This second critique, largely ignored in the deployment of Marxist feminism to address free labor online, is crucial to what follows.

Both the blindspot and WFH frames argue that the audience performs two kinds of labor at once. For Smythe, broadcast audiences produced a commodity for exchange. Today we could think about content contributions to a platform and data surveillance on it, as well as the reproduction of labor power—not food or sleep but the discipline of freely-given labor and the consumption of mass-market commodities. Within the WFH frame, Jarrett (2014, 20-21) argues that the first sort of labor turns inalienable interpersonal connection into the commodified Like of Facebook's social graph while the second sort of labor is part of non-fiscal value circuit that still legitimates capitalist social relations.

This formal division between productive and reproductive labor was perhaps tenable under the broadcast model but is under assault online. There are surely spaces of daily life where reproductive labor is not subsumed within commodity production but social media is not one of them. Social demands outside of social media compel free labor on it. Such demands may include the maintenance of 'personal brands', the nurturing of ties with family and friends when work time erodes other spaces of reproduction, or a generalized fear of missing out on social life. And they fall harder on women (Portwood-Stacer 2014). Here, love's use value becomes Like's exchange. This can be, in Marxian

terms, both formal subsumption, where existing patterns of reproduction merely move online and surplus value is captured from their data profile, or real subsumption where users produce their own 'free lunch' and reproduction is restructured under Facebook time: neighbors log on at the same time everyday to chat, photographs are selected to garner the most Likes. This conclusion does not erase the possibility of struggle against productive time, but rather locates that struggle within a contemporary campaign to subsume reproductive labor within the demands of surplus value production.

Spaces of Reproduction

This struggle within social media is thus a small part of the movement Federici (2012) calls the restructuring of the (re)production of labor power in the global economy. It includes:

- The separation of laborers in the Global South from the means of subsistence and their forced proletarianization.
- The dominance of financial capital and its global penetration into homes, schools, farms, etc.
- The state's retreat from social reproduction and its frequent commodification (e.g., healthcare privatization, public transportation cuts, pensions become 401ks).
- Structural adjustment's destruction and commodification of natural resources.

The result is the “worldwide devaluation of labor-power, and underdevelopment of social reproduction.” The increasing social necessity of services such as Facebook can be read as a nonviolent corollary to the latter three features of the restructuring, where users are forced out of other reproductive commons—conversations, hugs, letters—and onto Facebook so as to commodify that reproductive work and speculate on the commodity produced.

For the blindspot debate, the structural function of the audience commodity was to manage consumer demand. This function persists since the 1970s collapse of the Keynesian industrial compromise. However, Federici's global restructuring is not chiefly an effort to maintain profits through increased consumption, but rather a series of spatial fixes to falling profit rates emphasizing the export of fixed capital to sites where production is cheaper and/or the forceful accumulation of cheaper labor (Harvey 1981). Geographically, we can see this subsumption at work when American women who refused or reduced their own reproductive labor, often not by choice since stagnant wages necessitated two-income households, and turned to the commodified reproductive labor of, for example, Filipino women forced to migrate because of rising subsistence costs and the urgent need for remittances at home (Parreñas 2001). But this spatial fix need not be a move between nations, it can be a move between spheres of everyday life, as when reduced state support for social reproduction forces that labor into the home or the market (Bezanson 2006). The free labor of social media users, while not equivalent to the above, should be considered part of this trend: Capital is exported to new digital spaces, where it develops ever more precise means of enclosure and surveillance to subsume the caring clicks of unwaged users to the demands of commodity production.

Differentiated Tactics, Empirical and Political

This is an incomplete sketch suggests the need for both a research and political program that tracks

movement between digital and physical spaces and asks exactly who is doing what reproductive labor where, and why—whether for capital or, keeping WFH's hope for an outside in mind, the laborer.

All unwaged labor online is not equally engaging or productive. A feminist political economy of social media must explore the different demands placed on different users of different digital spaces, how users deal with that overlap, how reproduction is restructured (or not) for maximum exchange value, and where that work is willfully sabotaged by savvy users who decide to 'go dark.' Portwood-Stacer's work on social media refusal provides an excellent example here. Fine-tuning our focus does not, however, mean narrowing it because this value chain will necessarily be a global one, stretching from injured miners, to hardware manufacturers, to migrant programmers, to mobile users, to assembly-line spammers, to curious bots, to trash pickers.

A feminist political economy of social media must balance broad political demands with the differentiation of that global supply chain. A careful consideration of the gendered division of labor led to WFH and informs contemporary pushes for a Universal Basic Income. We must consider the ethics of transferring these politics to Facebook wholesale and whether that respects lived experiences along the social media supply chain. It may have the paradoxical effect of marginalizing the abuse of paid and unpaid (i.e., interns) laborers in digital industries (Hesmondhalgh 2010). Pointing out that a de-friending is not a risk for the unwaged laborer on the scale of a miscarriage is not a pedantic rejoinder to Ptak or others 'get serious'. Rather, it suggests that really disrupting the accumulation and alienation of social media on the scale approaching WFH's ambitions may require looking elsewhere on the supply chain of reproductive labor. Content moderation, for example, is often outsourced to countries like the Philippines, where poorly paid workers scrub images of sexual assault and beheadings from social networks, absorbing the trauma of that reproduction so that users can continue to feel safe laboring for free (Roberts 2014). Billions of social media profiles rely on mere thousands of paid content moderators. Disrupting that business model offline—giving moderators a venue to disclose their trauma, organizing them to request workplace support, or stopping work entirely—would go a long way towards halting the subsumption of reproductive labor online.

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Biography

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Dan Greene is a PhD candidate in American Studies at the University of Maryland and a University Flagship Fellow. His research focuses on the hope that internet access and internet industries and will lift up people, cities, and countries. He draws on years of fieldwork among Washington, D.C.'s tech start-ups, public libraries, and charter schools, in order to build a political economy of the so-called digital divide and show how wealth and poverty are produced and understood in cities trying to kickstart their tech sectors.