

The Relevance of “Women’s Work”: Social Reproduction and Immaterial Labor in Digital Media

Television & New Media

2014, Vol 15(1) 14–29

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1527476413487607

tvnm.sagepub.com



Kylie Jarrett¹

Abstract

In the ongoing debates about the role of immaterial labor in digital media economics, the work of feminist researchers into affective labor performed in the home—“women’s work”—has barely featured. This article is an attempt to address this gap in the dominant framework for discussing consumer labor in digital contexts. It draws on feminist frameworks, particularly the work of Fortunati, in arguing that affective, immaterial labor has a variable and often indirect relationship to capitalist exchange. This indirect relationship allows the products of such work to retain their use-values while nevertheless remaining implicated in systems of exchange. This in turn draws attention to the immaterial product of reproductive labor, which is the social order itself, and the importance of the disciplining function of reproductive labor.

Keywords

immaterial labor, affect, discipline, digital media, feminist theory

The “spectral presence” (Staples 2007) of women and feminist thought haunts the growing range of theories and analyses of the free, unpaid, affective, immaterial labor of the digital economy, and related discussions of user exploitation and agency. For feminist researchers, and as experienced in the everyday life of many women, it is not novel or surprising that unpaid labor features in capitalist economics. Labor done in the home—“women’s work”—is a necessary input to capitalist circuits of exchange, producing healthy, socially adept, well-nourished laboring bodies. The separation of

¹National University of Ireland Maynooth, Ireland

Corresponding Author:

Kylie Jarrett, Centre for Media Studies, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Maynooth, Ireland.

Email: kylie.jarrett@nuim.ie

the domestic sphere from productive labor is arguably an effect of the systems of domination associated with capitalism (Alessandrini 2012; Dalla Costa and James 1972; Federici 2004; Fortunati 1995), yet these systems privilege strictly monetized exchange while undermining the importance of nonmonetized production, rendering it invisible in much thinking about capitalism. Such domestic activity is often viewed merely as a generation of fuzzy well-being that, by being beyond measure of the legitimized instruments (Adkins 2009), is not central to economic or political calculation. “Women’s work” has always had a pivotal but complex relationship with capital.

The work of (typically) feminist researchers has brought important understanding about the very particular, yet often unrecognized, capital relations associated with such unpaid and/or affective immaterial labor. Weeks (2007; see also Alessandrini 2012; Cameron and Gibson-Graham 2003) provides a valuable summary of these positions noting two important moments: the second wave Marxist feminists who fought to expand the critical account of productive labor to include the reproductive work of women and studies such as that by Hochschild (1983/2003) into the affective qualities of industrialized service and/or white-collar labor. While there are limits and problems with these individual approaches, this “struggle to expand the category of labor to include more of its gendered forms” (Weeks 2007, 233) collectively constitutes a complex interrogation of immaterial labor (although this designation is of more recent origin). The elision of such research within recent interrogations of labor in digital media industries is therefore surprising, made even more notable given the “feminization” of work in contemporary capitalism. This is not only in the sense of the increasing inclusion of women as paid laborers and the rising importance of services in economic systems, but also because of the “feminine skills” of flexibility and constant adaptability demanded within current precarious employment systems, including those of digital media industries. As Morini (2007, 41, emphasis in original) says,

in cognitive capitalism precariousness, mobility and fragmentation become constituent elements of the work of all persons irrespective of gender. The model advanced is pliable, hyper-flexible and in this sense it draws on the *baggage of female experience*.

Despite the obvious potential of research into the “baggage” of women’s labor to illuminate the specificity of user labor in digital contexts, the long history of thinking into feminized, affective work remains little considered (Alessandrini 2012; Weeks 2007). It often seems as if immaterial labor was only “invented” when it moved out of the kitchen and onto the Internet. This article is an attempt to address this gap in the dominant framework for discussing consumer labor in digital media. Investigating the particularity of “women’s work” and the associated notion of the social reproduction of labor as an *indirect* input into regimes of accumulation provides a clearer understanding of how consumer labor can function both as capitalist commodity and as nonalienated affective agency. I use the term *women’s work* throughout this article to designate the social, reproductive work typically differentiated from productive economics of the industrial workplace. Such work is often associated with unpaid domestic labor, particularly in those feminist arguments that struggle to revalorize this

activity and have it recognized as labor. This is not to imply that this work is exclusively done by women, nor to naturalize the categorization of such work as essentially feminine. As Weeks (2007, 238–39) summarizes, “Women and men are indeed still often engaged in different laboring practices, but these differences cannot be mapped onto a binary gender schema secured by recourse to a model of separate spheres.” My use of this problematic term is consciously to underscore the importance of placing feminist critiques of the historical labor relations typically experienced by, and attributed to, women in the interrogation of digital media economics.

This article will draw from the work of Leopoldina Fortunati (1995), specifically *The Arcane of Reproduction*, in which she describes the indirect but necessary relationship of domestic labor to circuits of commodified labor exchange. Fortunati’s appraisal of the specificity of “women’s work” not only provides a model for understanding the role of digital media consumers in value generation, but also focuses attention on the noneconomic importance of *social reproduction* and its capacity to generate other regimes of value that support and sustain the capitalist system. Using various examples of digital media practices, but focusing particularly on uses of the “like” button on Facebook, I will discuss the capacity of “nonproductive labor” to function as a disciplining technology reproducing (or indeed challenging) the social norms that enable the life-world to be harnessed by capital. At the core of this argument is the proposition that a feminist perspective exploring how supposedly “nonproductive” labor is of importance to capitalism allows for a more complex understanding of how consumer interactions are implicated in the maintenance of the economic circuits of the digital media industries, and of the broader mode of production that dominates society.

Immaterial Labor in Digital Media

An increasing amount of research explores user-generated content and the hypersurveillance of contemporary digital media environments by drawing on the notions of immaterial labor in the works of Hardt and Negri (2000; 2009), Negri (1989; 1996), Berardi (2009), and Lazzarato (1996), and articulated most clearly in relation to digital media environments by Terranova (2000). These theorists, associated with the Autonomia movement, note widespread expansion of the informational and cultural content of commodities alongside a general increase in the informational aspects of production processes. This points to the expanding amount of value being generated from affect, communication, cognition, and the immaterial actions of workers and consumers in contemporary capitalism.¹

Terranova’s important intervention was to directly explicate the dimensions of this type of affective immaterial labor within many digital media industry models. She identified the role of voluntary, unpaid contributions by Internet users and industry workers² within the economy of the digital media sector, but as part of the broader cultural economy in advanced capitalist societies. She argues that digital media environments—both production and consumption contexts—function with the same dynamics as contemporary capitalism in which value can be traced to the affective

energies of workers and consumers, and to the valorization of symbol manipulation and communication in “knowledge work.” She says, “Far from being an ‘unreal,’ empty space, the Internet is animated by cultural and technical labor through and through, a continuous production of value that is completely immanent to the flows of the network society at large” (Terranova 2000, 33–34). For Terranova (2000, 38), the digital economy serves as exemplification and intensification—“an important area of experimentation”—of broader social trends toward the reorganization of labor and value around unpaid, voluntary, and/or communicative/affective practices.

Since Terranova’s nuanced analysis, the notion of immaterial labor has become a potent means for understanding how Internet users, called upon to provide content, social organization, beta-testing, or community policing, and to generate user data that is abstracted and sold to advertisers, are integral to capitalist valorization in various digital media industries (e.g., Andrejevic 2002; Arvidsson and Sandvik 2007; Banks 2002; Benkler 2006; Cohen 2008; Kücklich 2005; Petersen 2008; Postigo 2003; Potts et al. 2008; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008). A key effect of this construction of immaterial labor is its often-reductive framing as a regime of “exploitation” due, first, to the unpaid qualities of the labor and, second, to the abstraction and alienation inherent to the transformation into exchange-value when such activity is monetized. The reconfiguration of affective or communicative exchanges, where value is based in nonalienable utility to users, to an abstracted, commodifiable form (consumer data, content) through which surplus is generated for capital, is argued to correspond with the alienating transformations of industrialized, masculinized labor. Underpinning this position is an assumption that there is an essential division between the realms of affect and economics, with each sphere necessarily proposing a contamination of the other. They are understood as fundamentally “hostile worlds” (Zelizer 2005; see also Banks and Potts 2010). Consequently, the transformation of complex consumer activity into exchangeable, surplus-generating commodities for exchange is often interpreted as negation or radical diminution of the “true” value of such interactions, and their ability to generate meaningful social relations and politics outside of the dictates of capital.

The assumption that consumer labor involves a process of “exploitation” has become increasingly contested in the field. For instance, Andrejevic (2011, 91) writes,

The mere fact that someone benefits from the efforts of another does not, in itself, constitute exploitation. In an online context, for example, the fact that others may benefit by having access to an open-source program or to the product of the collaborative contributions of others cannot be construed as *prima-facie* evidence of exploitation. The shared benefits of collaboration and the non-market benefits that economists describe as externalities are not indicators of exploitation.

The lack of coercion in the types of digital consumer labor typically explored through the immaterial labor thesis also tends to refute its categorization as exploitative exchange (Andrejevic 2009). As David Hesmondhalgh (2010, 271) asks, “Are we really meant to see people who sit at their computers modifying code or typing out

responses to TV shows as ‘exploited’ in the same way as those who endure appalling conditions and pay in Indonesian sweatshops?” Terranova (2000, 48) herself directly states that “Free labor . . . is not necessarily exploited labor.”

Studies of immaterial labor have also been criticized for their emphasis on the value for producers to the exclusion of the pleasures and agency of users; they fail to recognize that practices such as immaterial labor work in economies other than the directly fiscal (Spivak 1985).³ As Banks and Humphreys (2008; see also Banks and Deuze 2009; Banks and Potts 2010; Lamla 2007; Potts et al. 2008) insist, while the activities of users clearly generate direct and indirect inputs into the digital economy, such labor cannot be reduced to only that in effect, intention, desire, or function. Such activity also circulates within symbolic, social, and cultural economies in which “value” is constituted in terms other than the abstraction of “labor-time” (Alessandrini 2012; Arvidsson 2009; Morini and Fumagalli 2010). Malaby (2006), for instance, argues for the inclusion of cultural capital in understanding the value systems of synthetic worlds such as multiplayer online games (MMOGs). While forms of capital accrued in these economies *may* be converted into economic capital, they are also forms of currency in their own right, the possession of which affords power and agency to the possessor in specific realms of society. As Clough et al. (2007) argue, affect works as a value in itself adjacent to, but not contained by, the regime of capital exchange. Recognizing such adjacent economic regimes and expanding the notion of value from merely monetary exchange-value allows for such work to be simultaneously affective *and* economic such as in Lamla’s (2007) notion of market-community. These arguments, though, imply some phenomenological specificity of the types of “hidden labor” (Virno 2004, 103) that are increasingly associated with economic calculation in post-Fordist economies. But a model explaining the logic of this labor is rarely explicated. It is here that analysis of the particular qualities of “women’s work” provides useful insight.

Reproductive Labor

Women’s role in the household economy is not only about the direct material inputs provided by the *free* (unpaid) labor of domestic work, but it is also about the *freely* given labor (a distinction usefully made by Andrejevic 2009), the *gifts* of affect, and personal and domestic maintenance that reflect, reproduce, and/or transgress the social order, but which are framed as merely economic inputs to their detriment. It is this quality of “women’s work” that gives it its specificity. As Fortunati (2007, 144) says, the current debate on the nature of immaterial labor has

completely ignored the material labor of the domestic sphere (cleaning the house, cooking, shopping, washing and ironing clothes) and above all, ignored the labor done in order to produce individuals (sex, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and care), as well as the other fundamental parts of the immaterial sphere (affect, care, love, education, socialization, communication, information, entertainment, organization, planning, coordination, logistics).

The latter part of this statement depicting the work of the “immaterial sphere” neatly describes the types of work associated with the labor of consumers in digital media contexts—in the management of community forums, in uploading new data to Wikipedia, in commenting on a friend’s status on Facebook, in coordinating a guild run in an MMOG to cite merely a few examples. These are the practices associated with generating and maintaining social cohesion or dependency as well as generating the intellectual and creative commons shared by all users. With this correlation between a significant component of “women’s work,” the very *particular* relationship to capitalist exchange of this labor and the inalienable use-values that are its products provides a model for understanding the contributions of consumers to capitalism in digital media industries.

In *The Arcane of Reproduction*, Fortunati (1995, 72) argues that “women’s work” does not have a direct input into capital. Instead, the production of surplus value through the exploitation of labor-power involves “two distinct phases separated from each other by the moment of consumption.” The most commonly recognized phase is the exchange of the capacities of living labor—labor-power—in the commodified form of labor-time. The other involves the activities that reproduce that laboring individual bodily, mentally, and emotionally. Fortunati argues that the female “houseworker” involved in this latter reproductive labor is not able to directly produce the labor-power of the former phase as this is a capacity only instantiated in the (male) worker. This capacity, though, is generated by the consumption of the products of “women’s work” by that (male) worker. This worker

who has consumed his labor-power within the process of commodity production, is the same worker who must carry out the activity of consuming the use-values produced by the female houseworker, use-values that he needs for his own reproduction. Between the female houseworker (who manifests her own labor-power) and the product of her work—the labor-powers of the male worker, of future workers, and her own labor-power—there remains the individual consumption of each of these individuals. (Fortunati 1995, 73)

What Fortunati is describing is a two-step process where the value of a worker’s labor-power is generated through the consumption of use-values produced by the domestic laborer. Labor-power that enters directly into the capitalist circuit is a result of each worker’s individual consumption of the final products—of food, health care, emotional support, and so on—of the adjacent circuit of domestic labor (Fortunati 1995, 78). Fortunati insists, though, that this does not mean that such work is “merely” the production of (pre-capitalist) use-values but a distinct phase in the transfers of value inherent to the capitalist process. This model indicates, though, a distinction between the labor that can be commodified, exchanged, and directly exploited in capitalism and affective, immaterial reproductive labor. Such labor is involved in a process of production, but this production (and its products) has only an *indirect* relationship to capital. Its use-values—socialization, affective sensation, and esteem for instance—are not directly commodified, and so are not denied or erased despite their role within the circuit of capital.

This indirect relationship of “women’s work” to processes of commodification is important in conceptualizing the immaterial labor of digital media consumers. It may certainly be the case that some digital media practices—such as the modding of game players—provide direct, quantifiable inputs to capital akin to that of industrial labor, but many others may bear a more powerful resemblance to the indirect relations Fortunati describes. For instance, the communication between gamers that provides the core content of MMOGs may primarily generate the use-values of affective sensation and social engagement, and thus require secondary, interrelated phases of consumption by individuals, or by the platform itself, to enter circuits where such activity can be realized as economic value.

A two-stage process of value generation can be traced in the banality of “liking” on the social networking site Facebook. This ubiquitous feature of the system asks users to respond to the status updates or posts of others by selecting the “like” button. The same function also appears on commercial or corporate pages of the site and serves to subscribe the user to the feed of the corporate entity. The latter instance is obviously implicated within commodified contexts, but the former exchanges between users also become part of the site’s economic system based on the generation of advertising revenue. In this circuit, the user’s input is objectified in the back-end databases of Facebook, rendered into a product that can be sold to advertiser—the audience commodity (Smythe 1977). The “like” button has a particular function in this regard for Facebook as the company not only aggregates individual user or IP address data but also, assuming taste affinities among friends, gathers “likes” from across a user’s network to calculate the specific commodity it sells to advertisers and the advertising subsequently received by each user (Arvidsson and Colleoni 2012). In the data capture systems of the site, each click of the button, along with all taste indicators contained in status updates, are alienated from the user’s individual lived context and rendered into complex formulae for the ascription of advertising formats. These data correspond with the abstract representation of labor-power that enters into the capitalist relation as labor-time and which is used up in the process of its conversion to value. In this instance, value takes the form of advertising revenue.

In Fortunati’s model, “labor-power” (hitting the “like” button) must be produced and reproduced through a prior circuit of direct consumption of use-value. In this example, these use-values are the nonmaterial products of social interaction, esteem, or affective response that are produced and consumed by each user in the receipt or production of a “like.” Before it becomes user (and usable) data, the “like” is first a manifestation of an (already existing) set of social affinities, affective interactions, or personal desires that satisfy some nonmaterial need. We “like” things first and foremost because we like them, and it is this use-value that produces the impetus to use and continue to use the site; that produces the instantiated capacity to generate user data. Thus, Facebook can only convert the “labor-power” of user experience (living labor) into the commodified form of user data (labor-time) *after* its experience as inalienable use-value by the user.

It is important to underscore that, because of this indirect relationship, using Facebook is experienced primarily as an exchange of use-values. Consequently, the

affective intensity associated with exchanges on Facebook does not lose its capacity to build and sustain rich social formations even if, later, it enters into the commodity circuit. “Liking” a friend’s status update continues to manifest an inalienable and affectively powerful social relationship, or even asserts a political statement. Thus, while the generation of user data on Facebook is implicated in the capitalist valorization process, it cannot accurately be described as an inherently exploitative or wholly commodified process. A multistage relationship with capital accumulation such as that proposed by Fortunati leaves open the capacity for a single exchange to retain its non-alienated value to users while also, in a different step of the exchange process, to generate exchange-value. Fortunati’s model of women’s laboring thus draws attention to the need to map the specificity of any and all capital relations and transformations involved in a digitally mediated interaction rather than merely assuming a singular, unidirectional process of commodification.

Reproductive Labor

There is, however, another feature of “women’s work” that helps illuminate the relations of digital media consumer labor with capitalism: its status as the work of *social reproduction*. The domestic labor described by Fortunati is not merely reproductive in that the “natural” labor of women producing the use-values of food, clothing, and hygienic housing is central in the maintenance and reproduction of the labor force, in particular the laboring body. It is also reproductive in that it generates the nonmaterial goods of socialization and sensibilities that circulate in adjacent moral economies, but which (may) reflect the capitalist sociopolitical system. As Read (2003) suggests, capitalism must be sustained by being reproduced across the social fabric, providing the myriad regularities and stability that are both the effect and cause of capitalism. Consequently, every mode of production “involves the generation and normalization of beliefs, appearances, and desires, and thus the creation and generalization of particular quotidian practices, habits, or subjective comportments, as much as it involves the creation of new institutions, laws, and practices” (Read 2003, 41). These everyday dispositions are also the products of affective, immaterial labor.

The emphasis here is on the reproduction of the *social conditions* that make laboring under capitalist conditions sensible, and through that possible. As Althusser’s (1971/2008) distillation of Marx and Gramsci points out, the processes that fall under this rubric naturalize and normalize the capital relation through the formation and re-formation of subjectivities that support particular modes of production. These exchanges are not defined solely through their relation to fiscal value, but (also) in terms of social, cultural, or affective capital. It is this socially generative layer of value creation—the production of social relationships that reproduce the social order—that is a feature of “women’s work” and also the labor of digital consumers.

Women’s Reproductive Labor

Women’s domestic labor, in particular in the form of child care and education, has historically involved the generation and maintenance of appropriate social and cultural

dispositions. Emblematic of this role is the long history in which women have been instructed in the appropriate mechanisms for instilling “correct” values into those under her care (Ehrenreich and English 1978/2005). While these practices provide fruitful grounds for reproduction of the laboring body, they simultaneously generate and sustain regimes of affective, cultural, and social capital that (may) provide the naturalizing legitimacy of the capitalist order. What is important here are the myriad women who, in their role as domestic managers, mothers, or wives, quietly work to normalize a social and cultural standard of living for their families—to instill the discipline relevant to class, social, economic, gender, racial—and so on—location.

For instance, Diane Reay (2005) describes the reproduction of class position by mothers engaged in home education support for their children. Responsibility for developing cultural or educational capital in children typically falls to women but is shaped by each woman’s available levels of social, cultural, or educational capital. The working class women in Reay’s study emphasized their role in the practical aspects of educational care such as packing lunches and ironing clothes, despite actually being involved in various learning activities, while the middle-class women stressed the academic support they provide such as introducing children to the Suzuki method of learning music and other activities that generate high returns of educational and cultural capital. Reay (2005, 112) concludes that the various forms of capital available to each mother affected her ability and her attitude toward developing that capital in her child, contributing to intensified educational inequalities. Reay (2005, 113–14) summarizes that “the work they do as mothers is often more important than the work they do in the labor market in maintaining social hierarchy and the class inequalities that underpin it.” “Women’s work” generates a properly immaterial layer of social and cultural capital relations, a layer that does not have direct translation into the materiality of hard currency, factory walls, or material good, but which is not separate from the structures of economic exchange.

Similar to the “liking” of friend’s Facebook posts, reproductive work is typically not the onerous imposition associated with the subjugation of the laboring body into the system of exchanges, but social, cultural, and interpersonal rituals that are individually affirming and meaningful within their “natural” state. This “other economy” to that of market competition, “concerned with the direct production and maintenance of human beings” as an “end in itself” (Donath 2000, 116), is replete with use-value. At a phenomenological level, such work is not experienced as being within the service of economic capital because its value system is not that of fiscal gain. These are the gifts that are not captured directly or entirely by the economic production system—that retain use-value in adjacent economies—but which can nevertheless be interrogated for their role in maintaining or sustaining the capitalist order.

Disciplining Labor

By extending this understanding of women’s reproductive work to the labor of digital media consumers, I am advocating an exploration in terms of disciplining technologies in the manner proposed by Coté and Pybus (2007; see also Jarrett 2008; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008). By *disciplining*, I am not referring to the formal,

structured *discipline* of bodies or “souls” that bring them into extensive alignment with the machinery of the early liberal social system as described by Foucault. I am instead referring to the various and varied, ongoing and adaptable disciplining moments of neoliberal contexts where the individual consumer/citizen/web user is organized/interpellated/shaped/seduced into that sense of freedom and free expression that aligns them with the dictates of contemporary capitalism (Jarrett 2008; Rose 1999). When organized within the norms of a capitalist system, the capacity of socially reproductive work to generate the use-values of subjectivity, social relations, and affective intensities is also its capacity to secure a disciplined society appropriate for the perpetuation and persistence of that social order. Negri (1989) and Virno (2004) both depict the training of individuals into the habits of flexibility and adaptability important for managing the conditions of precariousness typical of labor in contemporary capitalism. But, as Virno (2004, 85, emphasis in original) suggests, “these requirements are not the fruit of industrial discipline; rather, they are the result of a socialization that has its center of gravity *outside of the workplace*.”

This disciplining capacity of immaterial labor in digital media contexts is recognized, but not developed, by Terranova. She describes the Internet as “a full consensus-creating machine, which socializes the mass of proletarianized knowledge workers into the economy of continuous innovation” (Terranova 2000, 39). Social reproduction is also a feature of some explorations of particular articulations of user labor but is rarely explicitly framed as a process of disciplining social reproduction. For instance, Arvidsson and Sandvik (2007, 101) discuss the extra layer of subjectivation involved in the exchanges between MMOG players where “(some of) the existential need to produce a subjectivity that marks post-traditional societies can (hopefully) be met” but do not develop this aspect of their study.

But it remains the case that various activities performed by users, many of which have complex inalienable use-values for users at affective levels, can be interrogated for their work in reproducing capitalist social relations. The aforementioned example of selecting the “like” button on Facebook registers as an expression of social solidarity for the user who generates it and for the recipient of that gesture. It also works to discipline users into a particular mode of being that supports not only the continued functioning of Facebook, but also of contemporary capitalism itself. The affective intensities generated in these interactions provide a reward, and through that a legitimacy, for continued engagement with the site. These seductive pleasures, which are legitimate disciplining in neoliberal consumer capitalism (Jarrett 2008), work to encourage continued contribution to the site, assuring the dominance of Facebook in terms of its market dynamics of data mining and brand-value. But these affective intensities also encourage the further generation of such sensations within commercial contexts.

At a macro-level, what is normalized and reproduced in each selection of the “like” button and the ensuing affective response is the basic social relation of capitalism in which an individual’s capacities are constituted as a resource for the accumulation of surplus value. As the often unread end user license agreements of commercial digital media sites loosely elaborate, to “like” something, add a status, upload a video or photograph, or participate in a guild run is to tacitly endorse the expropriation of your

social activity and its absorption into the commodity logic of capital. In doing so, you also submit yourself to, and legitimate, a historically contingent relationship to capital accumulation, which is part of a broad global system generating intolerable inequities and exclusions. “Liking” something on Facebook may be an innocuous interpersonal activity, but linked to all the other moments where subjectivities inherent to the capitalist system are rewarded and celebrated, it becomes part of a powerful disciplining machinery specific to this historical moment.

Other, more micro-level social relations are also reproduced in the normative activities of users. This phenomenon is evident in the power law distribution of “folksonomies” where, despite the vocabulary of tagging being determined by individual preference or “desire lines” (Mathes 2004), there is a clustering of use around relatively few tags, with the majority of tags being used by only a few users. Power law suggests that the most highly used tags are most likely to be seen and subsequently used by others (Guy and Tonkin 2006). While this research is not conclusive, the convergence of disparate users around the socially dominant terms that it points to indicates an emergent and “bottom-up” process of knowledge organization, based on a normative organization of user practice: a disciplining. Indeed Angus, Thelwall, and Stuart’s (2008) study into University student image tagging practices, indicating that tags are typically chosen for the value to the user community, is suggestive of normative social pressures in play, oscillating around the cultural capital of being “searchable.”

The accumulation of “esteem” in online communities (Lampel and Bhalla 2007; Malaby 2006) also indicates the role of user expectations in conditioning the practices of others. As O’Neil’s (2009) study of governance systems in various noncommercial online communities describes, what emerges over time in such moral economies is a form of “online tribal bureaucracy.” He demonstrates how despite being emergent from inalienable social practices, the reproductive practices of users generate normative models of activity, which ultimately manifest social structures. This includes the legitimacy of various authority forms and figures that ensures a relatively static and centralized distribution of power. In O’Neil’s study, this distribution is also remarkably and overtly gendered, indicating the reproduction of pervasive inequalities within the disciplining work of users.

Applying the concept of social reproduction to consumer labor allows for exploration of the reproduction of capitalist social norms through peer relations and not merely as the imposition of structure by a faceless, remorseless capitalist enterprise. Disciplining may be effected upon a “subject” by “capital” but also occur within exchanges between two relatively equal “subjects of capital.” This framework allows for the conceptualization of users as agents who, while exercising that agency, may nevertheless be working within capital, disciplining other users into social norms and patterns of behavior that support that system. The agency of users is not in simple opposition to the exploitative relations of capitalism but is deeply implicated in their maintenance in ways that require rigorous disentangling. This may, in fact, be an obvious point to make. That communities and social interactions generate normative models of behavior is not an uncommon insight, yet these *immaterial products* of digital media consumers’ immaterial labor are often overlooked in critical interrogations of

such activity in favor of their role in monetary value generation. The nonmaterial, noneconomic products of the reproductive labor of users must also be calculated to adequately conceptualize digital media's relationship with capitalism.

The Relevance of “Women’s Work”

There is much insight into the nature of immaterial labor and digital media economics that can be garnered from using the existing resources and conceptualizations of the qualities of “women’s work.” Even the necessarily superficial analysis⁴ both of the literature on women’s labor and of digital media practices provided here has offered two key directions for further research. The first is to focus on mapping the specificity of the exchanges involved in determinate moments of digitally mediated interactions. Through this process, the particularity of the relationship to commodification may be revealed. This approach requires eschewing the foundational assumption that there are necessarily hostile relations between the spheres of economics and affect (Zelizer 2005). As Fortunati’s argument indicates, the relationship between affective labor and capitalism is not always direct, and the vagaries of this difference allow space where use-value persists even within the broader context of commodified exchange. In a multiphase process of commodification, what is exploitative at one moment of the circuit may not be so at another. This approach thus provides a route around the impasse between exploitation and agency by indicating how an exchange can, at different moments of the same process, generate value for a media provider, retain its status as noncommodified, nonalienated interaction, or be both almost simultaneously. Identifying the progression through these moments will provide a more adequate picture of how and in what ways consumer labor contributes to digital media economics.

The second approach is to focus on the reproductive role of domestic labor to draw more attention to nonfiscal regimes of value and the importance of social disciplining as a key outcome of immaterial labor. While generating monetary surplus value through the indirect mechanism of providing use-values to individuals is vital in digital media economics, mapping the importance of producing and reproducing particular orientations within that process is just as significant. In the context of neoliberal consumer capitalism, the arenas within and the mechanisms by which the reproduction of ideologies and the securing of hegemony (to use out of fashion terms) are achieved *and contested* may be elusive, but these processes nevertheless exist. We ignore them at our peril, and a renewed focus on the ideological dimensions of nonmonetary economies would offer a richer grasp of manifestations of capital in digital economies.

It is important though not to overstate the totalizing and intractable nature of the social reproduction that occurs in online contexts. If users’ interactions with other users—for instance, sharing posts or commenting on the status updates of others on Facebook—are components of the mechanisms that reproduce normative social practice, then they are inherently part of the politics and contestation of those practices as well. There is a complex assemblage of disciplining processes involved in digital media interactions, and each instance of engagement may have its own disciplining

regime. More importantly, as Autonomous Marxist approaches remind us, the social cooperation of users and the regimes of affect involved in digital media are always *in excess* of commodification and the capitalist labor process. This excess is potentially disruptive. Thus, it is important to understand the radical, as well as the conservative, socially transformative capacity of the use-values exchanged between users, particularly in their nonmaterial forms.

But there is a third function I hope this article has achieved: the (re)placing of feminist thinking and women's experience at the forefront of contemporary understandings of labor. It is important that feminist research, typically generated by women, into the specificity of the kinds of affective and immaterial labor historically associated with women, is not lost in the novelty attributed to digital media. When given form, the uncanny, ghostly presence of women's labor can provide a framework to reinvigorate analysis of the specific qualities of the laboring involved in the digital economy. It also bears along with it the political qualities of such frameworks, and especially the emphasis on such labor as an immanent site of struggle. As Fortunati (1995, 75) says "non-material reproduction is the part of reproduction that is most in crisis because it is the least controllable by capital." This is not because such reproductive processes are outside of capital, nor because they rely on "a model of the self prior to its estrangement" (Weeks 2007, 234), but because they may produce alternative dispositions, orientations, and social relations *within capital*, thereby transforming the nature of capitalist accumulation itself. Just as feminist politics has reorganized understanding and practices of domestic labor, so such a politics may work to make visible and reshape working definitions of what constitutes work and what constitutes life in the context of digital media (Weeks 2007). In doing so, (new) parameters for acceptable articulations of immaterial labor in capitalist systems may be established. With this political possibility inherent in it, "women's work" has never been more relevant to researchers of digital media.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Rather than weighing into the semantic debate over the best description of such inputs—ranging from knowledge, cognitive, communicative, affective, or immaterial labor—this article will use the term *immaterial labor* incorporating within it informatization, communication, and affect as in the work of Hardt and Negri (2000). This term will often be supplemented with *affective* to more fully capture the tension generated by applying the weight of labor theory to intangible outputs and processes typically considered outside of productive, monetized exchange relations.

2. For the purposes of this article, I am focusing on consumer labor rather than the dynamics of precarious and voluntary labor associated with the formal digital media industry. Nevertheless, I contend that a richer understanding of women's laboring practices would usefully illuminate the dynamics of this industry sector.
3. It is important to recognize, as Spivak (1985) reminds us, that recognition of this alternative layer of value does not mitigate and should not blind us to the exclusions, violence, and suppression of the workers, often women in the developing world, whose very material exploitation remains essential to contemporary economics and, pertinently, the digital hardware industries.
4. Alessandrini (2012) offers a more powerful and thorough articulation of the importance of understanding feminist theorizing of labor, and of the elision of this thinking in dominant Autonomist paradigms.

References

- Adkins, L. 2009. "Feminism after Measure." *Feminist Theory* 10 (3): 323–39.
- Alessandrini, D. 2012. "Immaterial Labor and Alternative Valorisation Processes." *feminists@law* 1 (2): 1–28.
- Althusser, L. 1971/2008. *On Ideology*. London: Verso.
- Andrejevic, M. 2002. "The Work of Being Watched: Interactive Media and the Exploitation of Self-Disclosure." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 19 (2): 230–48.
- Andrejevic, M. 2009. "Exploiting YouTube: Contradictions of User-Generated Labor." In *The YouTube Reader*, edited by Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau, 406–23. Stockholm: National Library of Sweden.
- Andrejevic, M. 2011. "Social Network Exploitation." In *A Networked Self: Identity, Community and Culture on Social Network Sites*, edited by Zizi Papacharissi, 82–101. New York: Routledge.
- Angus, E., M. Thelwall, and D. Stuart. 2008. "General Patterns of Tag Usage Among University Groups in Flickr." *Online Information Review* 32 (1): 89–101.
- Arvidsson, A. 2009. "The Ethical Economy: Towards a Post-capitalist Theory of Value." *Capital & Class* 3 (1): 13–29.
- Arvidsson, A., and E. Colleoni. 2012. "Value in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet." *The Information Society* 28 (3): 135–50.
- Arvidsson, A., and K. Sandvik. 2007. "Gameplay As Design: Uses of Computer Players' Immaterial Labour." *Northern Lights* 5 (1): 89–104.
- Banks, J. 2002. "Games As Co-creators: Enlisting the Virtual Audience—A Report from the Net Face." In *Mobilising the Audience*, edited by Mark Balnaves, Tom O'Regan, and Jason S. Sternberg, 188–212. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Banks, J., and M. Deuze. 2009. "Co-creative Labour." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12 (5): 419–31.
- Banks, J., and S. Humphreys. 2008. "The Labor of User Co-Creators: Emergent Social Network Markets." *Convergence* 14 (4): 401–18.
- Banks, J., and J. Potts. 2010. "Co-creating Games: A Co-evolutionary Analysis." *New Media & Society* 12 (2): 253–70.
- Benkler, Y. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Berardi, F. 2009. *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Translated by Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

- Cameron, J., and J. K. Gibson-Graham. 2003. "Feminising the Economy: Metaphors, Strategies, Politics." *Gender, Place and Culture* 10 (2): 145–57.
- Clough, P. T., G. Goldberg, R. Schiff, A. Weeks, and C. Willse. 2007. "Notes Toward a Theory of Affect-Itself." *Ephemera* 7 (1): 60–77.
- Cohen, N. S. 2008. "The Valorization of Surveillance: Towards a Political Economy of Facebook." *Democratic Communiqué* 22 (1): 5–22.
- Coté, M., and J. Pybus. 2007. "Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0: MySpace and Social Networks." *Ephemera* 7 (1): 88–106.
- Dalla Costa, M., and S. James. 1972. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. London: Falling Wall Press.
- Donath, S. 2000. "The Other Economy: A Suggestion for a Distinctively Feminist Economics." *Feminist Economics* 6 (1): 115–23.
- Ehrenreich, B., and D. English. 1978/2005. *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts' Advice to Women*. 2nd ed. New York: Anchor Books.
- Federici, S. 2004. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Fortunati, L. 1995. *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labour and Capital*. Translated by Hilary Creek. New York: Autonomedia.
- Fortunati, L. 2007. "Immaterial Labor and Its Machinization." *Ephemera* 7 (1): 139–57.
- Guy, M., and E. Tonkin. 2006. "Folksonomies: Tidying Up Tags?" *D-Lib Magazine* 12 (1), January. <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/january06/guy/01guy.html>.
- Hardt, M., and A. Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, M., and A. Negri. 2009. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. 2010. "User-Generated Content, Free Labour and the Cultural Industries." *Ephemera* 10 (3/4): 267–84.
- Hochschild, A. 1983/2003. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jarrett, K. 2008. "Interactivity is Evil! A Critical Investigation of Web 2.0." *First Monday* 13 (3), March. <http://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2140/1947>.
- Kücklich, J. 2005. "Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Game Industry." *Fibreculture* 5, http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/kucklich_print.html.
- Lamla, J. 2007. "Building a Market-Community: Paradoxes of Culturalization and Merchandization in the Internet." Paper presented at Die Institutionelle Einbettung von Märkten, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Cologne, February, http://www.mpifg.de/maerkte-0702/papers/Lamla_Maerkte2007.pdf.
- Lampel, J., and A. Bhalla. 2007. "The Role of Status-Seeking in Online Communities: Giving the Gift of Experience." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12:434–55.
- Lazzarato, M. 1996. "Immaterial Labor." In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, edited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, 132–46. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Malaby, T. 2006. "Parlaying Value: Capital in and Beyond Virtual Worlds." *Games and Culture* 1 (2): 141–62.
- Mathes, A. 2004. "Folksonomies: Cooperative Classification and Communication through Shared Metadata." <http://www.adammathes.com/academic/computer-mediated-communication/folksonomies.html>.
- Morini, C. 2007. "The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism." *Feminist Review* 87: 40–59.

- Morini, C., and A. Fumagalli. 2010. "Life Put to Work: Towards a Life Theory of Value." Translated by Emanuele Leonardi. *Ephemera* 10 (3/4): 234–52.
- Negri, A. 1989. *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century*. Translated by James Newell. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Negri, A. 1996. "Twenty Theses on Marx: Interpretation of the Class Situation Today." In *Marxism beyond Marxism*, edited by Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl, 149–80. London: Routledge.
- O'Neil, M. 2009. *Cyber-Chiefs: Autonomy and Authority in Online Tribes*. London: Pluto Press.
- Petersen, S. M. 2008. "Loser-Generated Content: From Participation to Exploitation." *First Monday* 13 (3), March. <http://frodo.lib.uic.edu/ojsjournals/index.php/fm/article/view/2141/1948>.
- Postigo, H. 2003. "Emerging Sources of Labor on the Internet: The Case of America Online Volunteers." *International Review of Social History* 48:205–23.
- Potts, J., J. Hartley, J. Banks, J. Burgess, R. Cobcroft, S. Cunningham, and L. Montgomery. 2008. "Consumer Co-creation and Situated Creativity." *Industry and Innovation* 15 (5): 459–74.
- Read, J. 2003. *The Micro-politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Reay, D. 2005. "Doing the Dirty Work of Social Class? Mothers' Work in Support of Their Children's Schooling." *The Sociological Review* 53 (Issue supplement): 104–16.
- Rose, N. 1999. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smythe, D. W. 1977. "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1 (3): 1–27.
- Spivak, G. C. 1985. "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value." *Diacritics* 15 (4): 73–93.
- Staples, D. 2007. "Women's Work and the Ambivalent Gift of Entropy." In *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, edited by Patricia Ticineto Clough with Jean Halley, 119–50. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Terranova, T. 2000. "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." *Social Text* 18 (2): 33–58.
- Virmo, P. 2004. *A Grammar of the Multitude*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Weeks, K. 2007. "Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics." *Ephemera* 7 (1): 233–49.
- Zelizer, V. A. 2005. *The Purchase of Intimacy*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Zwick, D., S. K. Bonsu, and A. Darmody. 2008. "Putting Consumers to Work: 'Co-creation' and New Marketing Govern-Mentality." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8 (2): 163–96.

Author Biography

Kylie Jarrett is Lecturer in Multimedia and Program Coordinator of the B.A. Digital Media at the Centre for Media Studies at the National University of Ireland Maynooth.