DOES THE TIN MAN HAVE A HEART?: ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORIC AND THE

PUBLIC DEBATE OVER PRECARITY IN THE AMAZON-*NEW YORK TIMES*

CONTROVERSY

by

EMMA E. COLLINS

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Bryan Taylor

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Ruth Hickerson

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Jody Jahn

Date _____

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Collins, Emma E. (M.A., Communication)

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in the Amazon-*New York Times* Controversy

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with public discourse and cultural controversy around labor precarity in high-technology organizations. Through analyzing a case study, in which a *New York Times* exposé of Amazon's treatment of white-collar workers inspired thousands to join a conversation on labor rights, this thesis contributes to discovering how organizational identity is co-constructed with the public and journalism's (constrained) role in labor activism. Just as the *New York Times* article exposed the still present reality of labor exploitation in the "new economy," this project seeks to rupture the myth of utopian labor conditions in the high-technology sector. This thesis examines how organizational rhetors discursively maintain legitimacy and authority while depicting labor precarity by reframing these practices as allowing employees freedom and choice. The project also uses the methodological tool of external organizational rhetoric to uncover how external stakeholders interpret and add to controversy, expanding the scope the story through their discursive representations of labor precarity. I conclude this project with some thoughts on the lasting impact of the controversy on Amazon's organizational identity, as well as some future possibilities for labor resistance against precarity.

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CHAPTER I

An Introduction to Labor and High-Technology Organizations

Labor Precarity as Cultural Controversy

As labor market and job characteristics are transformed by evolving political-economy, popular and academic sources are rife with references to a new economy that is "post-Fordist" and "post-industrial." This phenomenon is usually associated with changes in career expectations, access to technology, and transnational economic integration. Broadly, Taylor (2001) defined the new economy through these features: "the rise of shareholder value and short-term strategy, downsizing, outsourcing, mergers, innovations in computing and telecommunications technology, market differentiation, flexible production, globalization, and hegemonic discourses that prioritize knowledge, enterprise, and the customer" (p.32). The new post-industrial economy is often lauded for its worker flexibility and transition away from physical labor jobs. Microsoft Corporation founder Bill Gates infamously announced that capitalism was becoming "friction free" (as cited in Brophy, 2006, p.620).

However, for people that are not among the richest men in the world, the new economy has proven to be *filled* with friction, tension, and a new term coined by academics to explain the uncertainty of labor in the new economy, *precarity*. Brophy (2006) explained:

Precarity…refers to the growing insecurity brought on by the flexible management of the global work force within post-fordist capitalism. Formally, precarity entails a range of labour conditions that escape the traditionally understood Fordist relationship to labour: a job for life, dependable benefits, steady work rhythms, union protection, a fairly clear

separation between work and free time, a social safety net if all else failed and so on."

(p.622).

While knowledge workers, and more specifically high-tech workers may be thought to be too skilled or too privileged to be exploited by labor conditions, they are increasingly affected by uncertainty and exhaustion. Rodino-Colocino (2006) argued that technology jobs are often represented as an excellent opportunity for economic opportunity and advancement. These jobs often require training but not advanced education and are possible for many historically marginalized groups on the wrong side of the digital divide. However, the dream of achieving equality through employment in well-paying technology jobs remains elusive for many. Rodino-Colocino explained "as critique of the IT labor market demonstrates, technological proficiency and even mastery do not ensure stable, living waged work" (p.495).

Further, Brophy explained that high-tech work "is a paradigmatic form of work in the knowledge economy" and features "increasingly precarious" occupations. (p.623). Software engineers and computer scientists are increasingly being hired as temporary and contract workers, leaving them without consistent work, pay or benefits. Brophy compared the scene to 1930s auto factory workers, because although the work is definitively less physical, corporations are yet again taking advantage of labor and there are not yet strong unions or protections in place for the workers. Rodino-Colocino (2012) explained that the reality of the instability of technology work shocked many that were affected from 2002-2005, an era filled with technology firm layoffs and offshoring. Traditionally privileged identities, including white-collar professional white men in the technology sector, were outraged when their jobs and livelihoods proved to be disposable during this especially tumultuous time in the technology sector (Rodino-Colocino). In response, unions have begun to emerge in the high-tech sector, demanding stable

work and benefits (e.g., Washington Alliance of Technology Workers). However, there is still a cultural hesitance among many high-tech workers to unionize or collectively bargain (Brophy, 2006).

The myth of a new economy, in which the need for unions and collective action is anachronistic, is so pervasive that workers who are the most exploited believe it most strongly. Dempsey and Sanders (2010), for example, studied the published autobiographies of a related group of professionals, social entrepreneurs. They highlighted how these narratives emphasized the glorification of self-sacrifice and the "privileging of organizational commitment at the expense of health, family and other aspects of social reproduction" (p.439). The narratives suggested that "because meaningful work is inherently inspiring and highly fulfilling, there is less need to protect the boundary between professional life and personal life, or to inquire about the costs of the resulting overwork, exhaustion and self-sacrifice" (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010, p.452).

It is clear that even highly skilled knowledge workers are not immune from exploitation by capitalist logics that consistently privilege corporate revenues and stockholder value over worker's rights. As Rodino-Colocino (2002) reported, the Amazon corporation was likely trying to impress investors and Wall Street about its gritty willingness to cut costs when the company laid off nearly 400 Seattle customer service employees in 2001. de Peuter (2011) called for a reformed labor politics that includes knowledge, communication and media workers. Workers employed in the so-called creative economy ought to be involved in discussions of labor and rights, and as de Peuter argues communication studies scholars can contribute this inclusion as they take up the analysis of labor issues. Cloud (2001) has cautioned that we must recognize age-old patterns of worker exploitation even when operating in a supposed "new" economy.

Although jobs now are often different than they were at the height of a manufacturing based economy, the economy is certainly no more egalitarian because of the dearth of manual labor. Saez (2008/2013) explained that income equality is higher in the U.S. than at any time since 1929, and the gap continues to grow as the rich get richer and wages stagnate. Then and now, Cloud argued we must continue to take up the work of studying "the most fundamental feature of workplace social relations and communication: a powerful class antagonism between workers and employers" (p.269).

Another important issue for communication scholars – and one that forms the focus of this thesis is how these antagonisms are communicatively translated from the realm of individual experiences and workplaces to become a feature of widespread cultural knowledge. Rodino-Colocino (2002), for example, studied media coverage and interviews of laid-off technology workers in the early 2000s. Through this coverage, she argued, labor precarity, structural unemployment and high-tech unions became topics of larger cultural debates and controversies, rather than remaining framed exclusively as being an individual person's misfortune. In this case, nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiments were also central to the cultural debate, as Indian call centers and immigrant visas were used by various speakers as scapegoats to explain the widespread lay-offs.

In this way, labor issues are often at the center of larger cultural discussions. For example, the jobs report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics makes headlines every month, President Trump tweets about factories being built inside and outside the country from various car manufacturers, people debate the likelihood of a potential strike, and large regional layoffs make national news. Most recently, Uber Technologies was the central topic of labor news and conversations, as the company was accused of covering up widespread sexual harassment at its

headquarters, and a video was released of the CEO of the company yelling at an Uber driver when he brought up declining driver pay (Vaccaro & Adams, 2017). Labor precarity remains concerning for individuals at risk for constant job loss, change and uncertainty. However, precarity has also become a topic of mediated cultural controversy that allows many different voices to sensemake, critique, and decide how we talk about workplace practices in our post-industrial economy.

Labor Precarity in High Tech Organizations

High-technology organizations are at the nexus of labor precarity and the post-industrial economy. Although there is not a singular accepted definition for a high-technology organization, Rogers and Larsen (1984) suggested they include these four elements: highly skilled workforce, fast growth, high ratio of research and development (R&D) investment to sales and a global market for products. Beyond their mechanical definitions, high-tech organizations are also cultural artifacts, that are influenced by and influencers of contemporary culture. It is through this lens that this project approaches the high-technology sector. To gain a better understanding of this perspective, I will first summarize common elements of contemporary high-tech firms and how these elements contribute to precarious professions.

High-technology organizations are often characterized by their heavy investment in R&D (Grinstein & Goldman, 2006). As a result, high-technology firms are often highly concerned with the production of R&D, innovation. Ou and Hsu (2013) assessed that the two lynchpins to a high-technology firm's success are its technology and reputation. Innovation is critical to maintaining both of these critical elements. Many academic studies of the high-tech sector are focused on optimal conditions for innovation (e.g., Magri, 2014) and return on investment dollars for R&D (e.g., Coad & Rao, 2008). High-technology companies, and by extension,

employees, become obsessed with the next big idea and invention. This mentality, explained by Taylor and Carlone (2001), seeps beyond the workplace and encourages people to not only look for the newest and greatest product, but also the latest and greatest job and relationship, encouraging a lifestyle that thrives on uncertainty and adaptability.

While high-technology organizations often share industry-wide traits such as attention to innovation, they are also regionally situated. Perhaps the most famous collection of high-technology companies is known by its geographic location: Silicon Valley. High tech organizations, however, have increasingly sprung up around the country and the world. Each collection of organizations is both affected by and influences its regional environment. Taylor and Carlone (2001) summarized how Silicon Valley firms are highly inflected with a particular way of operating influenced by the norms and values of the area. The massive collection of high-tech firms has also had a great impact on the surrounding area, including rapidly rising housing prices and resource depletion. Similarly, James (2005) studied the regional cultural influence on high-tech firms in Salt Lake City, Utah, discovering that successful firms had a mix of industry-wide accepted norms and locally-expected customs in a highly Mormon area. James concluded that there was not a one-size fits all formula for a successful high-tech firm, even as many organizations around the country tried to copy the Silicon Valley characteristics: "provision of venture capital, additional spending for education, incubator space, prestigious addresses in local university based science parks and technical assistance" (p.1212). Further, Mayer (2013) identified how one large technology company ("a hub company") may change the local culture of technology as their employees break off from the hub and create their own tech startups ("spoke companies"). Mayer studied Microsoft's role as a hub company in creating the vibrant technology sector and culture in Seattle and discovered that management practices and

organizational culture often spillover from hub to spoke companies and spoke companies are likely to be engaged in similar, but not identical industries, often creating robust and layered local economies.

In this process, however regions of high-technology organizations also develop norms of precarity. High-technology firms rely on a constant and changing workforce hopping from one technology company to the next. They may recruit from the employees of another nearby technology firm or because of the high-tech sector's notoriously high turnover rate, wait for employees in the region to come to them after they've spent a couple years somewhere else. High-technology firms are also often known for imposing demanding work hours on employees. Taylor and Carlone (2001) explained Silicon Valley companies "are notorious for collapsing boundaries between work and nonwork spheres" (p. 292-293). More recently, Pfeffer (2011) furthered:

> Many of the accommodations made to enhance work-life balance, such as health clubs and concierge services at the job site, merely make it easier to never leave work. Cell phones, computers at home, and other technologies that enhance access have increasingly blurred the boundaries between work and nonwork. It is hard to know how studies that demonstrate the increasing time devoted to work can actually be reliable, given that many people, particularly in managerial and professional occupations, are on call all the time, their company activities easily penetrating their presumably nonwork and even vacation time. (p.37).

Because of the long work hours and expectation to available for work 24/7, workplace practices and norms become life encompassing, and thus, essential to study. The collapse of the boundaries between work and nonwork also affects some identities more than others. Caregivers,

typically women, are often forced to choose careers that allow for more flexibility in work hours because of nonwork obligations. Rutherford (2001), for example, argued that time spent and expected at the workplace was a main contributing factor to women's non-advancement in their careers. Because there is not yet equality in the expectations for women raising families or taking care of elderly family members, increased expectations for work disproportionately adversely impact women. Expectations for work continuously increase as the social safety net erodes, leaving workers in the high-technology sector left overworked and uncertain of their future.

Finally, high-technology organizations often rely on low-wage workers on the periphery to support their operations. Taylor and Carlone (2001) explained, "employers increasingly exploit two-tiered structures in which a small number of core knowledge workers are surrounded by a large contingent of temporary and contract laborers" (p.295). Organizations may outsource this work domestically through third-party employers or offshore the work entirely. Both practices have often led to controversy. In 2011 and 2012, for example, the publications *Mother Jones* (McClelland, 2012), Pennsylvania's *The Morning Call* (Soper, 2011), and *The Huffington Post* (Jamieson, 2011) all published exposes in revealing the low paying, mentally demanding and physically dangerous jobs in "customer fulfillment centers" that make Amazon's fast and cheap shipping possible. News coverage erupted around the world when a series of employees at a Chinese factory supplying companies such as Apple, Hewlett-Packard and Dell, committed suicide (Guo, Hsu, Holton, & Jeong, 2012). High-technology workers at all levels of organizations are left in precarious work situations and contracts, but this pressure is likely felt the hardest at the lowest-levels and periphery of the firms.

High Tech Organizations as a Cultural Text

Beyond the inner-workings of day-to-day life at a high-technology company, however, the organizations are also the subject of public interest and imagination. Taylor and Carlone (2001) describe Silicon Valley "both as a real site of high technology organizations and as a contested symbolic site of cultural discourse," (p. 289). High-technology organizations are often the subject of television shows and movies (e.g., *Halt and Catch Fire*, *Silicon Valley*, *The Social Network*), syndicated cartoons (e.g., Dilbert), investigative and financial journalism and dinner table conversations. Office perks of Silicon Valley companies such as Facebook's laundry services, Google's lunchroom, and the popular office Ping-Pong table have become commonplace cultural knowledge. Further, high-tech companies draw thousands of people to conferences for product launches and millions from around the world tune in later (or even live) to watch. Altogether, high-technology organizations are positioned at the nexus of technology, ethics, politics, work expectations and public imagination. This makes this industry an ideal place to analyze the cultural and communicative underpinnings of organizational life. A recent exposé on the working conditions of one of the most well-known technology companies offers an opportunity to explore the relationship between culture, communication and organization.

A Bruising Workplace, Contested

After conducting nearly 8 months of research and over a hundred interviews, news journalists Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld (2015a) had their story "Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace" published on the cover of the *New York Times* Sunday edition. The story detailed the online-retailer's quest to perfect the productivity of the white-collar worker and the accompanying mental, physical and emotional toll this goal took on the company's employees. Kantor and Streitfeld (2015a) reported that Amazon's workplace culture was so demanding and unrelenting, employees frequently cried at their desk, their promotion

criteria treated motherhood as a liability and "some workers who suffered from cancer, miscarriages and other personal crises said they had been evaluated unfairly or edged out rather than given time to recover" (para. 4). Workers reported regularly working 80-hour weeks and being emailed after midnight "followed by text messages asking why they [those emails] were not answered" (para 3). Although Amazon offers competitive pay and stock options for management positions, the story noted that there are few other typical high-tech benefits such as free lunch buffets or bonuses for new parents. Kantor and Streitfeld also publicized the organization's use of the Anytime Feedback Tool, which allows Amazon employees to give anonymous comments on peers or bosses at, well, anytime. The company reported it is used mostly for praise. However, sources to Kantor and Streitfeld argued it was often used coercively; for example, employees would collude with one another to simultaneously leave negative comments about a shared target in order to artificially increase their impact on the target's performance evaluation. Unlike its peers Facebook, Google, and Walmart, Amazon has no women on its leadership team. Among the story's more shocking anecdotes, one former employee who miscarried twins reported she was made to go on a business trip a day after her subsequent surgery. She told Kantor and Streitfeld her boss told her, "I'm sorry, the work is still going to need to get done. From where you are in life, trying to start a family, I don't know if this is the right place for you."

The story immediately spurred controversy among Amazon enthusiasts and detractors. The next day, for example, Nick Ciubotariu (2015), a current Amazon employee posted a long line-by-line rebuttal of the article on the LinkedIn website, systematically comparing his experience to the one featured in the article. CEO of Amazon Jeff Bezos also quickly responded with a company-wide memo, contending, "the article doesn't describe the Amazon I know or the

caring Amazonians I work with every day" (as cited in Cook, 2015) and offering his direct email to employees if they had these concerns. As Cook (2015) noted, Bezos and Amazon have been critiqued by the media before (e.g. McClelland, 2012; Soper, 2011), but this is one of the first articles to receive such a swift response from the company – a fact which signals its perception of the story's saliency for Amazon stakeholders.

That same day, *CBS This Morning*, a broadcast news program brought journalist Jodi Kantor and Jay Carney, Amazon's Senior Vice President for Global Corporate Affairs on the show to discuss the article. Carney echoed the points of Bezos's memo, repeating that he (Carney) did not recognize the Amazon described in the article. He argued that Amazon could not be a successful company, recruiting top talent if the events depicted in the article were true, and shared a contrasting story of the company helping an employee whose husband suffered from cancer. He made sure to emphasize Amazon's success at job creation, and argued that technology employees were in high-demand. If Amazon was truly terrible, Kantor argued, they could easily find work at plenty of other companies.

Perhaps this quick response was necessitated by the popularity of the article. Just 17 days after their cover story was published, Kantor and Streitfeld (2015b) reported that millions of people had viewed the article online and 5,800 comments were posted, an all-time record for the *Times*. This is particularly note-worthy considering that the *Times* comment section is moderated so that non-topical, and offensive posts are eliminated, as well as comments only featuring a link to different website on the topic (Sullivan, 2015). Even after that process, the article inspired nearly 6,000 comments, in addition to the hundreds of other print and online media commentaries on the subject (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015b).

The comments section on the original article closed several weeks after publication, but the conversation continued elsewhere. In October of 2015, Carney, sparred with the *Times* executive editor, Dean Baquet in a series of *Medium* articles over the veracity and the journalistic ethics of the article (Carney, 2015a; Carney, 2015b; Baquet, 2015). In April of 2016, Jeff Bezos, implicitly invoked the *Times* article while defending the company's corporate culture in a letter to investors (Kastrenakes, 2016). The letter didn't have to spend long defending the company to investors as Amazon posted its fourth straight profitable quarter (Alba, 2016). Although the company, founded in 1995, had been raking in record revenues for a long time, it had always struggled to make a profit, favoring growth and reinvestment instead. The trend of low profits and mediocre reports to Wall Street investors seemed to have ended, as Amazon had doubled its market capitalization to $360 billion in the last year and a half (Kim, 2016). Some economists are even predicting Amazon will soon be the first $1 trillion-dollar business (Kim). The Seattle-based company has thus come a long way from exclusively selling books online; they have slowly, but surely pioneered e-retail, disrupting traditional distribution and retail infrastructures in a growing number of industries (e.g., television and – most recently – grocery stores). Although Amazon had an official and direct response to the *Times* article, their unofficial reply to the controversy seems to be citing achievement of record high profits, more than at any time in the company's 19-year history as a public company, assuaging any doubt over the *financial* impact of the expose. While these financial successes may have been sufficient to make many investors forget once again about workplace culture at the company, it is not enough to turn scholarly inquiry away from the subject. Soaring profits in the face of workplace abuse controversy is yet another symptom of neoliberalism's exclusive valuing of profit over people,

and a further indication that Amazon is both a place of work and symbolic of larger social negotiations over the (lack of) significance of labor in the new economy.

A central debate through all this publicity has been whether the *Times* representation of Amazon was accurate. However, this purpose of this project is not to resolve this dispute. We may never obtain a singular, definitive truth about Amazon corporate conditions and working culture. From a postmodern standpoint, we presume that such certainty may not be either possible or desirable, in that it is difficult – if not impossible -- to arbitrate these contested claims and discover a definitive, ultimate truth. However, we can explore *how* this story spurred a "vigorous public debate" about "workload limits and whether greatness can be achieved on gentler terms" (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015b, para. 21). As Kantor (2015) told *CBS This Morning*:

Amazon, on the one hand, is singular. They call themselves peculiar. They pride themselves on being different. That's a consistent message inside the company. On the other hand, it does reflect the future of the workplace: more efficiency, more data, come and go relationships between employer and employees. The question is how far is too far? Are there limits on how hard employees can work?

Amazon thus offers organizational communication scholars a fascinating case study highlighting media's ability to rupture the predominant and cultural myth of a clean and efficient post-Fordist economy. This is more than a study of an individual company's organizational culture. Rather, it is an examination of a company as symbolic of a larger trend and an investigation of a contested event exposing tensions and cultural negotiations at the center of labor, neoliberalism, media, and technology. Subsequently, I will explore these concepts through the following research questions:

RQ1: How did media coverage of this story and Amazon's responses serve to depict labor precarity in relationship to the contemporary organization of high-technology work?

RQ2: What discursive strategies do corporations and external stakeholders practice in controversy, in order to establish the legitimacy and authority of their arguments concerning labor precarity and high-technology work?

I turn now to discuss the methodological framework I will use to explore these questions.

CHAPTER II

Organizational Rhetoric, Controversy And Methods

So far, we've examined the rise of labor precarity, with a particular interest in how these changes have manifested in the high-technology sector. While white-collar technology work is not often a priority of labor activists or scholars, this increasingly large section of the U.S. workforce, once thought to be a beacon of hope and prosperity for well-paying and plentiful domestic careers, deserves critical attention. We can examine labor precarity in high-technology organizations through a rhetorical lens, focusing on a case involving the country's largest retailer, Amazon. To accomplish this rhetorical analysis, I'll first review relevant literature on organizational rhetoric and controversy. Next, I will survey my primary texts of analysis, including a comprehensive summary of the Kantor and Streitfield (2015a) article at the center of this project, and detail my methods of analysis. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by previewing the following chapters in this project.

Organizational Rhetoric

For centuries, rhetoric was known informally as the study of "great men giving great speeches." It was the study of influencers persuading audiences through public oratory. However, as society evolved, the most influential rhetors of the time changed from individuals to organizations (Conrad, 2011). As Heath (2007) has argued, "organizations have replaced individuals as the key figures in society" (p.42). Aided in part by the 'cultural turn' of rhetoric, organizational scholars, no longer constrained by the tactic to study individual rhetors and speeches, began studying the rhetoric of organizations. This area of study moves beyond individual moments, speeches, and people and addresses larger societal trends. As Conrad (2011) explained "studying organizational rhetoric involves analyzing fundamental issues about the

nature of society and of the systems that comprise it" (p. 31). The study of organizational

rhetoric does not only reveal information about individual organizations; it also exposes,

entrenches, or changes larger "structures and assumptions" of the American system of

organizations (Conrad, p.33).

Many organizational rhetoric studies are focused on the perception of organizations. On

this topic, Conrad (2011) defined three essential concepts:

"an organization's *identity* is projected into the future; its *image(s)* is (are) constructed

and enacted in the present; and its "reputation" is composed of memories—the symbolic

recreations of relevant past experiences that audiences bring with them to their literal

encounter with the organization and its rhetoric." (p.174).

Often, organizational rhetoric scholars study identity *crises*, which "occur when external events,

or organizational actions threaten to damage, or otherwise alter, an organization's identity"

(Conrad, 2011, p.169). Studies often examine how organizational rhetors respond to a crisis

using various strategies such as the ever-popular *denial*, or the not-so-surprisingly rare, *apology*

(Conrad). Studies that focus on organizational crisis through a rhetorical lens often examine

organizational responses and their effectiveness at quelling the predicament. For example, Crable

and Vibbert (1983) studied Mobil Oil Company's communicative response to a slew of bad press

and oil shortages, and Elsbach (1994) studied how the California cattle industry responded to

reports of damaging the environment and endangering workers' health by subtlety constructing

the government as a scapegoat of all their problems in their communication with the public.

Conrad (2011) has suggested that scholars might also study how audience members *resist*

organizational identity rhetoric. This area of study is particularly interesting because

organizations and organizational opponents often draw on the same rhetorical resources, calling

upon widely accepted "values of justice, fairness, human dignity, and social responsibility" to reach different rhetorical ends (Conrad, 2011, p.195). The stakes are always high in organizational resistance rhetoric because as Conrad explained "taking on a multinational corporation is simply not a rational act" (p.195).

Heath (2011) offered a conceptual mechanism to continue to expand organizational rhetoric beyond organizational rhetors. He suggested considering *stakeholder narratives*, "including the environment (as in environmental rhetoric), market, cultural, and sociopolitical narratives" as a part of organizational and crisis communication (p.430). Analyzing rhetoric external to the organization allows for a more complex understanding of the organization and exigency (i.e., the set of contributing causes) of the rhetorical event. Palenchar argued that a move toward external organizational rhetoric must include "a movement away from agentic/agency focus on a singular rhetor to one that addresses a more complex, constantly evolving cultural, social, and political complexity as dialogue" (p.573).

This expanded perspective is also interesting because it calls into question the nature of organizations and boundaries. It requires scholars to question the limits of the organization and what is considered "external" communication. Mumby's (1988) definition of organization is a helpful framing to begin questioning organizational boundaries:

> Organizations are not stable, fully integrated structures. Rather, they are the product of various groups with competing goals and interests. An organization services a group's interests to the extent that it is able to produce, maintain, and reproduce those organizational practices that sustain that group's needs. (p. 166)

This perspective on organizations, particularly the dismissal of "stable, fully integrated structures," opens space for scholars to consider many different perspectives of rhetoric in, near, or about organizations.

Heath (2011) argued that external organizational rhetoric allows scholars, "to better understand how organizations engage in discourse to co-create reality with external publics needed to align interests rather than suffer disabling friction" (p. 417). In the foundational study of organizational rhetoric, Cheney (1983) famously analyzed management attempts to get "internal" organizational members (i.e., management and staff) to align their interests with the organization. However, the study of external organizational rhetoric seeks to understand the process of persuasion and aligning interests, often by engaging a broader scope of perspectives from outside the organization. This expansion is important because organizations and members of organizations don't exist in a vacuum. As Heath explains, "organizational leaders broker the goodness of fit between what happens inside of an organization and how that organization enacts itself in its political economy" (p.416). Relevant actors here include government regulators, industry competitors, customers, shareholders, activist movements, and the news media. Studying external organizational rhetoric thus offers a mechanism to explore this relationship between organization and society.

Heath's (1990) study on the asbestos industry offers an example of how we might approach external organizational rhetoric. Heath studied organizational records from companies that produced asbestos as they listened to and interpreted medical reports warning of the immense health risks caused by asbestos. Heath argues that these companies had created a culture so reticent to change that they brushed away the possibility of the dangers of the product they made millions on selling. Heath tracked how external publications about asbestos were

discussed within companies, weaving between organizational and non-organizational rhetors and communication in board meetings and public discourse. The study positions the organization as a listener more than a rhetor, in contrast to many works in which management is positioned as meaning-makers, rather than interpreters.

Other examples of how to use external organizational rhetoric in research include Taylor's (2011) study examining interactions between organizations in Jordan and its effect on creating a more robust civil society in the country, and Ihlen's (2011) case study of the restraints and possibilities created by relevant publics (i.e., "politicians, authorities, the media, environmental organizations, and the public at large") for Norwegian oil companies, and which influenced their response to climate change (p.463). Boyd and Waymer (2011) encouraged scholars interested in this work and answering Heath's (2011) call to use external rhetoric to examine how organizations can make society better to retain a critical eye toward the ways in which organizational messages can represent a colonizing corporate interest and support the hegemony of some identities over others (on the basis of race, class, gender, and/or ability, etc).

Organizational Rhetoric and Controversy

The ancient Greek sophist, Protagoras, it is commonly believed, was the first to make the claim that on any issue there are two opposing sides (Billig, 1987). This belief, often explained as logic and antilogic or *dissoi logi*, meant that "if there are always two sides to an issue then any single opinion or 'individual argument' is actually, or potentially, controversial" (Billig, p.44). For Protagoras, neither side represented an ultimate or infallible truth; every argument could and should be debated and would constantly evolve through ongoing synthesis and invention. He set up rehearsed pro-con discussions on a variety of topics and started public competitive debates. Protagoras's existential philosophy was that there were two opposing sides to every issue and he

sought to enact that philosophy and prove this claim through these public debates and dialogue, which involved "placing opposing positions in conflict with each other," (Billig, p. 45). The roots of controversy come from eschewing the idea of an ultimate truth and instead embracing a reality of pluralistic and contending truths, creating discursive space for the rise of controversy.

Although Protagoras's simple, yet controversial statement that on every issue there are (at least) two sides, occurred over 2500 years ago, it is still the underpinning of modern understandings of controversy, particularly in organizational rhetoric. We may view controversy as an unresolvable tension between truths that can be publicly debated and explored through language. In public controversy, organizational rhetors take advantage of this plurality of truth by discursively emphasizing their perspective and interests, which is one reason by the controversy frame is especially helpful examining organizational rhetoric.

Controversy is significant because it calls into question what is important and what is acceptable in conventional definitions of problems and their solutions. Through communication, controversy calls into question the normal order of acceptability and can begin to set new norms for defining and deliberating problems. As Phillips (1999) explained, "the overlapping of subjectivities and the fluidity of social meanings and institutions suggests that controversies be thought less as 'oppositions' to some order and more as moments where a multiplicity of orders come into open conflict" (p.507). We can thus explore how organizational rhetors alternately resist and defend what is considered acceptable and desirable in society through discourse.

The case of the controversy at Amazon that I will analyze has been addressed once before by the management scholar, Jeffrey Pfeffer (2015). He studied the *Times* exposé of Amazon, focusing on how's Amazon's sustained financial success allows its customers and shareholders to rationalize oppressive workplace conditions. He argued that because the general public

currently values innovation and disruption over labor rights, people can relatively easily ignore what they know about Amazon and continue ordering rapidly shipped items guilt free. Pfeffer continued that organizational studies scholars have also valued profit over all else, ignoring other measures of organizational success, such as the quality of life of employees. Pfeffer's relatively short essay focuses on the central argument of the *Times* article. It avoids, however, detailed analysis of the article, the response by Amazon, or resulting discussion conducted across various media platforms. The current project adds a communication perspective to take up that work of close discursive analysis of the public controversy that ruptured the clean and innovative narrative of Amazon's corporate culture and history.

Identification of Justification of Texts

The primary texts that will provide the bulk of analysis in this project are the initial *Times* exposè, Amazon's response and other publically available organizational texts explaining their identity and workplace culture, and media texts discussing and adding to the controversy about Amazon. The first two categories are very easily defined and have a tangible and limited amount of texts. Because the final category of media texts that added to the controversy could include thousands of texts, I've had to do some limiting work.

Broadly, the Amazon story of workplace culture has, so far, created three news cycles. The first started on August 15th, 2015 when Kantor and Streitfeld's (2015a) article was published and lasted for a couple weeks. The second began in October 2015 when Carney (2015a, 2015b) and Baquet (2015) quarreled about the veracity of Kantor and Streitfeld's (2015a) and lasted about a week. Finally, the news cycle began again with Jeff Bezos's comments to shareholders (Kastrenakes, 2016). I selected two articles from the *Times* that provided background to the story and aftermath, about a dozen articles commenting on different aspects of Amazon's workplace culture, and seven letters to the editor published in the *Times,* and a selection of comments left on the story to inform my analysis. I found these articles by conducting a Google News using restricted date parameters. I used the search terms "Amazon" "Culture and "*New York Times*" to find articles published in the month after Kantor and Streitfeld. I looked for articles from varied sources and leanings and that commented directly on Amazon. I read dozens of stories that primarily repeated and summarized the *Times* story. Although these articles highlight the spread and importance of the article, they did not add any original or new perspective of external stakeholders so they did not become part of the final analysis. In some of these articles, authors linked to other interesting and original content. For example, several articles linked Facebook co-

founder Dustin Moscovitz's (2015) response to the story. In this case, I included the original

Moscovitz article rather than the summary provided in a secondary source. I looked for articles

that referenced the original *Times* story and added the perspective of the author. I also included

relevant updates to the story including one named source's elaboration on her quote to the *Times*

in a personal blog (Vaccari, 2015).

In the next section, I closely summarize the Kantor and Streitfeld (2015a) article as it is

central to the rest of the analysis and is the exigence for this project.

TLDR: The *Times* Story

Kantor and Streitfeld (2015a) begin their article at the start of an Amazon employee's

tenure: orientation. There they are taught 14 leadership principles, which they are later quizzed

on and given a laminated card. The next paragraph describes several features at the company

encouraging a culture of criticism at the company including that "The internal phone directory

instructs colleagues on how to send secret feedback to one another's bosses" (Kantor and

Streitfeld, 2015a, para. 3). The authors continue that few fall in the middle of this culture.

Instead, winners "accrue small fortunes in soaring stock. Losers leave or are fired in annual

cullings of the staff" (para. 4). The authors introduce the term-quoted from a former Amazon

employee-"purposeful Darwinism" to describe the company, which is a phrase many others

summarizing and reporting the story will use frequently. Kantor and Streitfeld then summarize

one of the main arguments of the story that Amazon is conducting a little-known experiment in

how far it can push white-collar workers, redrawing the boundaries of what is acceptable" (para.

5). Soon after, Kantor and Streitfeld cite Bo Olson, a former Amazon employee, who said

"Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk" (para 7). This quote both circulated

heavily after the article was published and became a key point of contention in Amazon's

responses, which will be detailed in full in chapter three. Kantor and Streitfeld talked to more than 100 current and former employees, despite the strict confidentiality agreements even low level Amazon employees sign. An overall theme emerged: "they tried to reconcile the sometimes-punishing aspects of their workplace with what many called its thrilling power to create [innovation]" (para. 10). Amazon is not unique in this culture, according to Kantor and Streitfeld, as increasingly organizations feature: "data that allows individual performance to be measured continuously, come-and-go relationships between employers and employees, and global competition in which empires rise and fall overnight" (para 14).

Kantor and Streitfeld (2015a) also provided in their story a short biography of Amazon founder and CEO Jeff Bezos, pointing out his love for data from an early age. Early on in the company, Bezos codified his leadership principles: customer obsession, ownership, invent and simplify, are right, a lot, learn and be curious, hire and develop the best, insist on the highest standards, think big, bias for action, frugality, earn trust, dive deep, have backbone; disagree and commit, and deliver results ("Our Leadership"). While the company is like other high-tech giants such as Google and Facebook in some ways, it doesn't offer the same plush benefits like free lunch or in-office gyms, instead practicing Bezos' leadership principle number nine—frugality. Also central to Bezos management philosophy, according to Kantor and Streitfeld, is the idea that "harmony is overvalued in the workplace" (para. 30) and a belief that blunt feedback can be personally painful but ultimately lead to the best innovations.

To illustrate the seeming paradox of being overworked, exhausted and simultaneously elated, Kantor and Streifeld (2015a) share the anecdote of Stephanie Landry, an Amazon employee who pioneered the development of its Prime Now accelerated customer service program, and "sounded exhilarated" as she shared the tale of delivering an Elsa doll to a

customer in New York 23 minutes after they placed the order. Kantor and Streitfeld suggest that part of this excitement stems from the company's development of an impressive and expansive set of data, providing it with "rigorous, continuing feedback on [employee] performance" (para. 40). When things are going well, this feedback is encouraging. When problems arise, the constant performance reviews can lead some employees to work outrageous hours such as Dina Vaccari who reportedly didn't sleep for four days straight. Her quote later became a point of contention for Carney in his responses to the story, as will be discussed in chapters three and four.

As part of the massive system of employee surveillance, there is also the Anytime Feedback Tool, which allows any employee to leave a review of a peer or boss. Kantor and Streitfeld reported the story of Elizabeth Willet, who had worked out a schedule with her boss to come in early everyday so that she could leave in time to pick up her child from school. Peers, who reportedly did not see how early she was arriving to work and only witnessing her daily early leave time, used the Anytime Feedback Tool to report her lack of work ethic to their boss. According to Willet, the boss then told her "I can't stand here and defend you if your peers are saying you're not doing your work" (para. 56). Similar technologies are quickly spreading to many other organizations.

While Amazon is on the forefront of some management technologies and strategies, it also uses a classic management tactic that has recently been eliminated by many large organizations because it is often ineffective and quite cruel. The practice is to yearly "rank" employees and eliminate (a.k.a., "yank") those at the bottom, no matter how competent those employees might be. If they aren't evaluated as being better than their peers, their time at Amazon is limited. Many women interviewed by Kantor and Streitfeld reported this system

being a contributing factor toward the existing gender gap at the company, which does not have a single woman on its top leadership team.

Molly Jay, a former employee at Amazon told Kantor and Streitfeld, "When you're not able to give your absolute all, 80 hours a week, they see it as a major weakness" (para. 74). The authors offer several examples to illustrate this point. Here's one that stood out: "A woman who had breast cancer was told that she was put on a 'performance improvement plan'—Amazon code for 'you're in danger of being fired'"—because 'difficulties' in her 'personal life' had interfered with fulfilling her work goals" (para. 75).

Amazon thus relies for its economic success on a constant churn of hiring and firing employees. As one former employee who was with Amazon for seven years told Kantor and Streitfeld "Amazon is O.K. with moving through a lot of people to identify and retain superstars….it's like panning for gold" (para. 90). The company continues to grow economically and physically (and will soon finish construction of a massive Seattle headquarters fit for 50,000 employees). Watching this success, former and current employees aren't holding out hope for Amazon changing the way it treats employees. Liz Pearce, a former Amazonian, told reporters, "It will only change if the data says it must—when the entire way of hiring and working and firing stops making economic sense" (para. 97).

Procedures of Analysis

In conducting this study, I carefully read through each text performing an inductive examination and thematic analysis. I began by closely reading the texts, guided by my research questions, and looking particularly for how ideas that appeared to be intense, recurring and frequent. Because of the focus of the project and the research questions, I particularly looked for representations of labor precarity. I used the framework of organizational rhetoric to help

develop this investigation. When examining the texts for evidence of labor precarity I also looked for implicit and explicit discussion of organizational identity, image and reputation. I looked for common tropes of organizational responses to crisis, such as denial (Conrad, 2011). I also examined how the rhetors inside and outside of Amazon called upon rhetorical resources they believed to be universally valued. I also looked for examples of how rhetors positioned the organization's fit with larger societal trends and values. Finally, I looked for how labor precarity was discussed as a controversy and how rhetors resisted and defended these common labor practices as the traditional order of standard working conditions in high-technology organizations was thrown up for debate. These guiding frames helped me comprehensively address my research questions, which ask how labor precarity is depicted in high-technology work, and the discursive strategies rhetors use to establish these arguments about labor precarity as legitimate.

Chapter Previews

High-technology organizations are both a site of work and a place of symbolic meaning for cultural negotiations of desirable work practices. For a long time, high-technology work represented the ultimate goal for many in the job market. They set the cultural standards for what the 'good life' of work could look like – high compensation, free food, even work from bean bags! However, this vision of the utopian technology sector is now being contested, often through journalistic efforts to uncover the humble and often uncomfortable realities of working in high-technology. So far, I've reviewed how labor precarity has embedded itself in the fabric of high-technology organizations, a highly visible and contentious case study, and some helpful methodological frames for studying this case, namely organizational rhetoric and controversy.

The next two chapters shift focus from a broad overview of the case and literature reviews to the hearty work of analyzing the relevant discourse in this controversy.

Chapter Three takes a fairly traditional approach to the topic and at its surface asks a fairly simple question: How did Amazon respond to the *Times* story? Though Amazon's responses were fairly limited in scope and quantity, they revealed fascinating underlying ideological beliefs at the core of the organization. When confronted with the reality that his company culture relied on labor precarity, CEO Jeff Bezos doubled down on his belief in the legitimacy of incredibly difficult work backed by little security and high stress. He, along with Jay Carney, denied all specific allegations of mistreatment while implicitly and eagerly endorsing the *advantages* of labor precarity for shareholders. The neoliberal ideology of the disposability of individuals and priority of the market was evident throughout their responses. After an overview of all of Amazon's responses to the story, the next section of the chapter focuses on the rhetorical devices and phrases Bezos and Carney use to defend and praise a culture of precarity. The chapter then pivots to consider how Carney establishes the controversy as a *battle between organizations* (Amazon and the *New York Times)* instead of between Amazon and its employees. Carney expertly positions the legitimacy and authority of Amazon as superior to the *Times* and any of the sources of the story. His choice of medium to accomplish these rhetorical ends, a blog on the open-to-anyone website *Medium,* also raises implications for understanding future organizational rhetoric, and highlights the increasing primacy and importance of online organizational rhetoric as a practice and as a study.

While Chapter Three performs something of a traditional organizational-rhetorical inquiry, examining communication from official Amazon rhetors to the public, Chapter Four explores the case study from a more innovative perspective by questioning how members of the

general public and other external stakeholders respond to the story and discuss Amazon. Specifically, the *Times* story inspired many to reflect on their personal experience with labor precarity, in high-technology and other sectors. The conditions at Amazon were entirely familiar to many who read the story. Many others pointed toward the political and economic structural conditions that allowed for the rise of companies like Amazon to continuously succeed in the market, but fail in their obligations to employees. Precarity was, in many of these comments, criticized but written off as inevitable because of how entrenched the practice has become in many organizations and larger economic structures. Some rhetors expressed political agency in trying to stifle labor precarity by conceptualizing and enacting solutions, either by creating organizations themselves that gave employees more security, freedom and allowance for lives outside of work, or by stopping supporting notoriously precarious workplaces, namely Amazon. The final section of the chapter addresses the controversy concerning the role of technology in labor practices in the high-technology sector. Technology is at the heart of this industry. It is also the material underpinning of what has allowed precarity to spread across industries. Smartphones and email make employees accessible at all times. Employees are watched and tracked at every move through data management technologies. Employees are also being replaced by and compared to technologies. The chapter ends with a discussion of how external stakeholders highlighted the contested uses of technology in labor practices and wrestled with their complicity in this system of exploitative technologies.

CHAPTER III

A Clash of Titans: Amazon Responds to the *New York Times*

Overview of Amazon's Responses

Although the *Times* story was not the first media criticism of Amazon (e.g., Nolan, 2014, Stone, 2013), it was significant because of the response from both Amazon and other interested stakeholders. In this chapter, I'll explore the discursive strategies used by Amazon in their responses to the article with keen attention toward how those responses represent and negotiate the significance of labor precarity. I'll begin by reviewing the official responses to the story from Amazon officials and summarizing the overall trends in their topics, themes, and strategies. Next, I will take a closer look at these responses, explaining how Amazon discursively defends a culture of precarity, and how that defense created implications for organizational rhetoric in the age of new media.

The day after the story was published, Amazon had two immediate responses. Initially, Jeff Bezos sent out a company-wide memo (Cook, 2015). It is rather short message, about 500 words, and has three main parts. The first section links to the *Times* article and encourages employees to read it, as well as linking to the response from current Amazonian Nick Ciubotariu (2015) published on LinkedIn. The next section of the memo aims to solve, or give the appearance of solving, any immediate HR problems as Bezos encourages employees, "if you know of any stories like those reported, I want you to escalate to HR. You can also email me directly at jeff@amazon.com" (para. 5). In the final part of the memo, Bezos hyperbolically summarizes the article as, "It claims that our intentional approach is to create a soulless, dystopian workplace where no fun is had and no laughter heard" and responds by saying "I don't recognize this Amazon" (para 6.). Further, Bezos contests that it is impossible for this kind of

company to thrive in "today's competitive tech hiring market…You are recruited every day by other world-class companies, and you can work anywhere you want" (para. 6). The memo was immediately leaked to press and became public information. The same day Jay Carney appeared on the CBS Morning Show via video conference alongside one the of *Times* authors, Jodi Kantor to respond and refute the article. *CBS Morning News* anchors cite and quote the memo and it is acknowledged by Carney in his interview as public information. Thus, we can read this memo both as a message to the Amazon employees and the public. The news show featured Kantor and Amazon spokesperson Carney along with three news anchors. Kantor is measured in her answers, suggesting that there are troubling as well as impressive parts of work at Amazon. She remarks, "we were moved also by the strengths of the company…and it's very clear that on some level what they are doing is working very well." She also makes sure to broaden the significance of the story by suggesting it is not only about Amazon, but the future of work expectations across the board.

Those are the only responses from Amazon until two months later in October of 2015 when Carney posted two articles on the website *Medium* refuting the *Times* journalistic integrity and the accuracy of the story. This response was particularly interesting and perplexing because, a full two months later, the story had largely faded from news cycles and public discourse. I will address some of the reasons Amazon may have reinvigorated the news story later in the chapter. Carney's first *Medium* article contests three named sources in the *Times* article and the trustworthiness of the article and the newspaper as a whole. Dean Baquet, Executive Editor of the *New York Times*, defended the article and ethics later that day in Medium. Carney made a short response later in the day, again on *Medium*, which Kurtz (2015) summarized as "altogether shorter and less about arguing facts—Baquet seemed more than able to parry those

accusations—and more about cementing Carney's desired thread: that the *Times* was unprofessional" (para. 3). Amazon's final response came from CEO Jeff Bezos in his April 2016 letter to stockholders, where although he does not mention the *Times* by name, spends a good deal of time across the letter indirectly defending the organizational culture of Amazon and listing employee benefit programs. Amazon's responses, through limited, are instructive examples of how organizations discursively respond to maintain legitimacy and authority in the wake of bad press.

These responses, overall, tack an interesting line between hyper-specific refutations and very broad defenses of their culture. Carney's *Medium* articles primarily contest specific anecdotes and named story sources. Rather than address the overall argument of the story, Carney assassinates the character of both story sources, and the *New York Times* itself His strategy is to pick apart the ethos and credibility of the story piece by piece so that he never has to address the larger questions of ethical work requirements in the high-technology sector; the audience is left to question the article's conclusions themselves. On the other end of the spectrum of Amazon's responses, both Bezos and Carney on the *CBS Morning Show* respond as broadly as possible. They reject the article wholesale and rely on the talking point, "if it was that bad, people would leave." They don't address the fact that, as pointed out in the article, people do leave Amazon quite often after a short tenure there. They also don't address the larger dilemma-- what if the picture painted by the *Times* story is just like the rest of the high-tech sector? As one of the *Times* authors, Jodi Kantor, wrote in an email to Amazon as she was writing the story, "this article is more of an inquiry into the nature of work" (as cited in Carney, 2015b). Amazon, however, addressed this article as entirely false and exclusively about Amazon.

Defending a Culture of Precarity

My first research question asks how Amazon's responses depict labor precarity in relationship to the contemporary organization of high-technology work. In this case, I found that Amazon defends labor precarity in the technology field and discursively frames this precarity positively. Bezos and Carney, Amazon's appointed rhetors to respond to the *Times,* never refer to the term "precarity" but they do refer to and praise organizational and industry practices that labor advocates and scholars would likely immediately recognize as precarity.

One way Amazon rhetors emphasize and defend precarity is by comparing themselves to a start-up company. Carney said in his interview that Amazon "is old in some ways for a tech company but it has the feel of a start-up." This is supposed to be a defense of Amazon, but instead highlights Amazon's similarities to one of the most precarious labor field – high-technology start-ups. Bezos's letter to stockholders is also filled with rebuffs of large organizations and comparisons of Amazon to a start-up. Bezos wrote, "We want to be a large company that's also an invention machine. We want to combine the extraordinary customer-serving capabilities that are enabled by size with the speed of movement, nimbleness, and risk-acceptance mentality normally associated with entrepreneurial start-ups." Framed a different way, these adjectives also create precarious labor conditions where stability, job security and stable work conditions are discarded. Bezos also calls for the organization to be a *machine*, which both plays into the rhetoric of the *Times* article calling the organization Darwinian and unempathetic and suggests the disposability of humans in the machine of the organization. If a cog is broken or slowing a machine, you can easily and swiftly replace that piece and keep the machine running. Not much – if any -- thought is put toward the discarded cog. However, Amazon, despite how much Jeff Bezos might like to, is not working with machine parts; the company employs human beings with needs, families, shortcomings, and lives outside of work.

There may be increasing mechanization and the hope for automated drone delivery in the future for Amazon, but their organization will always at some level be run by people. For Bezos, being a large organization is a liability rather than an advantage for stability and the ethical operations expected and desired from large organizations are constraining. His goal is to avoid "large organization maladies" and instead maintain the work mentality that the company could go under at any moment. Cultivating this sense of permanent emergency is apparently central to Bezos's mission at Amazon and the entrenchment of precarity in the business model. It arguably leads employees to believe that there will never be a right time to expect more and better. This is what Amazon is, the official rhetoric suggests, no matter how large and wealthy the company grows.

Further, Bezos refutes the article and defends the company by touting competitive job market in the industry. In his memo to employees, he says:

> I don't think any company adopting the approach portrayed could survive, much less thrive, in today's highly competitive tech hiring market. The people we hire here are the best of the best. You are recruited every day by other world-class companies, and you can work anywhere you want.

There are a few important assumptions in Bezos's statement. The first is that other technology companies aren't equally as cutthroat and demanding. This may be the case, but we also know that other Seattle tech giant, Microsoft, has been the subject of much academic study on precarity as highlighted in chapter one. Even if employees could leave Amazon, they would likely not find stability or better conditions anywhere else in the high-technology sector because as Brophy (2006) wrote, this industry is filled with "increasingly precarious" occupations. (p.623). The other assumption in Bezos's statement is that being recruited by other companies everyday is a positive thing, when in fact always having an option to leave and constantly being recruited to

move to new jobs/locations plays into the precarious nature of the technology industry. Bezos created an image of being in a perpetual state of (potential) motion between entities, hardly a picture of the "friction-free" capitalism invoked by Bill Gates. In a stunning inversion of conventional ethical connotations, in other words, precarity here is reframed as a positive and beneficial condition of "freedom" and choice. This suggests how institutions practicing neo-liberal ideology get to conflate two principles: "We are abandoning you. Don't expect any security here" and "We are liberating you. You're welcome."

Additionally, the ability to leave doesn't mean employees will want to leave even if the work requirements are overbearing. Kantor and Streitfield (2015a) stress in their article that one of the most interesting parts of the Amazon work culture is how enthusiastic and willing people are to working themselves to unhealthy levels. Kantor and Streitfeld wrote that many story sources, such as Dana Vaccari, who reportedly didn't sleep for four days straight and paid out of pocket to outsource some of her data entry work to a freelancer in India, "had no shortage of career options but said they had internalized Amazon's priorities" (para. 43). Another employee worked so hard, while on vacation, she got an ulcer. Part of Carney's response to the story in the *Medium* articles is that employees were never directly, explicitly *told* to work this hard, which is a point Kantor and Streitfeld make as well. They are partly counting on the principle of cognitive dissonance – in which we are increasingly unable to detach ourselves from activities characterized by high degrees of sunk costs because we defend against the realization of our mistake by attributing high value and deferred gains to our continued participation – working in their favor. Carney's defense of this mentality brings up many follow up questions: Do high-tech employees have any other choice in such a fast-paced and demanding industry? If an organizational culture, rather than a policy, demands regularly working until exhaustion, can an

organization say that it is not required? And more generally, does employee internalization of abusive corporate norms leading to extreme self-disciplining mean that the organization is not responsible for promoting those norms?

Finally, in his stockholder letter Bezos boasts about how much work a small team does over a small period of time, which simultaneously affirms the thesis of the *Times* story and frames precarity positively, as it benefits customers and stockholders. Bezos is referring specifically to the launching of Prime Now, which was developed by a "small team" just "111 days after it was dreamed up" and just "in time for the holidays." Fifteen months later the service, which offers one-hour delivery, was available in 30 cities around the world. Bezos chooses to emphasize that the team that launched this massive service was small and they did it unbelievably fast. To stockholders, these facts are impressive. Bezos is working to curb costs and consistently launching new popular services. However, thinking about these same facts provided by Bezos from the employee perspective, immediately raises concerns about overwork and highly stressful situations. A small team means long hours for likely salaried employees, not being compensated for extra time. Bezos boasts that the app was launched just in time for the holidays, which likely created an added stress of a very early deadline for a very large and logistically difficult service. There is, however, also pride from employees on how quickly they were able to launch this service. Kantor and Streitfeld (2015a) actually reference the start of Prime Now, quoting Stephanie Landry, who was in charge of starting the service in Brooklyn and felt immense pride over delivering "'Frozen' dolls in record time." While some may feel immense pride at the end of a demanding project, this organizational culture has other consequences. Kantor and Streitfeld summarized:

> Many others said the culture stoked their willingness to erode work-life boundaries, castigate themselves for shortcomings (being "vocally self-critical" is included in the description of the leadership principles) and try to impress a company that can often feel like an insatiable taskmaster"

In this way, Bezos' rhetoric suggests that he has little interest in refuting this point. Indeed, he appears to avoid and distort what might otherwise be considered indefensible. It's almost as if – perversely – he resents the company for having become successful, which requires growth – a condition which inevitably creates both complexity and expense for any enterprise. This culture of intensely hard work is what he built the company on. Bezos's first letter to stockholders, in 1997, which he has attached to every subsequent letter includes a strong and clear message about the kind of work ethic (and exploitation) to expect at Amazon:

> It's not easy to work here (when I interview people I tell them, "You can work long, hard, or smart, but at Amazon.com you can't choose two out of three"), but we are working to build something important, something that matters to our customers, something that we can all tell our grandchildren about. Such things aren't meant to be easy. We are incredibly fortunate to have this group of dedicated employees whose sacrifices and passion build Amazon.com.

In terms of labor philosophy, it seems that not much has changed in 20 years at the company. Employees are still expected to put the organization before themselves and their families despite a tiny percent of them accumulating any of the fortunes being raked in by the corporation. Amazon was and still is built on the sacrifices by employees, which they are told are in exchange for something larger and intangible, like telling grandchildren the stories of working around the clock to launch an Amazon innovation. This promise, of course, assumes employees will have

enough time to start a family and spend quality time with them so that the stories of Amazon matter. It also assumes that if an Amazonian starts to spend time with their family, they won't be put on the near the bottom of the employee rankings and managed out of the company for not giving it their all. It seems then, that there's a reason Bezos includes this letter every year; the company still runs on the same principles it did when it was a fraction of the size it is now. Despite incredible growth and access to a vast pool of resources, employees are still told they are sacrificing to build something, in exchange for a story they may or may not get to tell others after they retire from a work schedule that no doubt compromised their mental and physical well-being.

In his 2016 letter to stockholders, Bezos remarked, "We never claim that our approach is the right one – just that it's ours – and over the last two decades, we've collected a large group of like-minded people. Folks who find our approach energizing and meaningful." This statement is incredibly important. It implies that proprietary corporate rights – and the solidarity of an exclusive culture -- outweigh any corporate accountability to any external societal ethics. Bezos doesn't deny that the culture at Amazon is demanding and doesn't contest the *Times* version of the culture. He simply says that it is only for those that fit. It is amoral instrumentalism at its best, and some may hear in this rhetoric the faint echoes of a horrifying historical precedent: *Albeit macht frei*.

Organizational Rhetoric and Journalism in the Age of New Media

My second research question asks how organizational rhetors discursively (re)establish corporate legitimacy and authority in responding to public criticism of labor precarity and high-technology work. In this case, Carney's articles in *Medium* do the most work to defend and

establish legitimacy for Amazon and his choice of venue for these responses also raise larger implications for the future of organizational rhetoric.

Carney's ultimate strategy is to poke holes in the integrity of the authors of the story and the *Times* as a whole. He does this by providing new discrediting information about some of the named interviewees for the story. The most serious of these attacks is the information provided about Bo Olson, who in the original story is credited with the line, "nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk." Carney argued that the *Times* did not provide the full context for Olson's reason for leaving the company. According to Carney, "his brief tenure at Amazon ended after an investigation revealed he had attempted to defraud vendors and conceal it by falsifying business records. When confronted with the evidence, he admitted it and resigned immediately" (para. 2). Carney also contests three other sources for the *Times* story, though with less contentious and damaging information. For example, he provides unverifiable information about some the employee reviews mentioned in the story and suggested the Anytime Feedback Tool was rarely used.

Carney's posts also call out the *Times* story authors for lack of journalistic integrity. He wrote, "Journalism 101 instructs that facts should be checked and sources should be vetted. When there are two sides of a story, a reader deserves to know them both. Why did the *Times* choose not to follow standard practice here?" Carney is leveraging his experience in journalism as White House Press Secretary against Kantor and Streitfeld. He continues later in the paragraph to implicate the organization as a whole. He continued "it's worth noting that they've now twice in less than a year been called out by their own public editor for bias and hype in their coverage of Amazon" (Carney, 2015a, para. 8). He is referring to articles by Public Editor

Margaret Sullivan[1], the first of which argued that a series of articles defending the traditional

book publishing industry could have represented Amazon better (Sullivan, 2014). The second

article Carney is referring to is Sullivan's (2015) critique of the Kantor and Streitfeld (2015a)

article. Sullivan's main critique is that the article was based on anecdote rather than data, which

is an odd criticism for journalism, which is primarily based on qualitative rather than quantitative

research. Executive Editor of the *New York Times* Dean Baquet wholly disagreed with Sullivan's

criticism remarking, "I reject the notion that you can report a story like this in any way other than

with anecdotes. You talk to as many people as possible and you draw conclusions. That's the

only way to approach it" (As cited in Sullivan, 2015, para. 25). Carney establishes the authority

of legitimacy of Amazon here by discrediting the organization he perceives to be attacking it. He

doesn't describe the articles in detail, but uses ambiguity to get readers to assume the worst,

citing which Sullivan articles he is referring to but not even linking to the stories. Carney goes as

far as telling the audience to question all future stories they read from the *Times:*

> The next time you see a sensationalistic quote in the *Times* like "nearly every person I
>
> worked with, I saw cry at their desk", you might wonder whether there's a crucial piece
>
> of context or backstory missing—like admission of fraud—and whether the *Times*
>
> somehow decided it just wasn't important to check" (Carney, 2015, para. 15).

Interestingly, Carney is able to leverage the standards of traditional journalism, while posting to

a non-traditional site, with little to no posting standards. Vera (2015) explained, "his knack for

coming across as transparent and concerned with the truth, even as he bypasses traditional

journalism operations by using Internet platforms that allow him to put forth his own narrative"

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[1] In a fascinating turn of events that may or may not be a coincidence, shortly after her two articles criticizing her own paper and defending Amazon*,* Margaret Sullivan was hired by the Jeff Bezos owned *Washington Post* (Sandoval, 2016).

(para. 7). *Medium* is a public journalism website where anyone can publish and stories not subject to an organizational editor. Carney is contesting the editor of the *Times*, while not making his piece subject to an external fact-checking eye. This may be concerning because, as Vera explained, "while Carney, in this case, employs the rhetoric of journalism—the proliferation of facts, the readable tone—he is acting as a corporate spokesman, not a journalist." His tone is disarming and confident in his company, potentially eschewing audience concerns with who is tasked with fact-checking Carney's claims and whether he can ever represent the truth if he is beholden to the organization's concerns and image.

In explaining why he decided to post his story to *Medium*, Carney wrote "we presented the *Times* with our findings several weeks ago, hoping they might take action to correct the record. They haven't, which is why we decided to write about it ourselves" (para 14). This move marks a significant change for organizational rhetors. As Vera (2015) explained, "Not long ago, companies that felt they had been wronged by a news outlet could do little in response, besides requesting a correction, penning a letter to the editor, or, in extreme cases, taking out an ad" (para. 8). Organizations now have more opportunities to influence public audiences. Although we can't say how many people were convinced of Carney's claims, we do know it was quickly read and shared. Vera reported Carney's post, "went viral, becoming, within hours, one of the most-shared posts on *Medium*" (para 7). It also changed what the public saw when entering the situation into Google. Vera explained that shortly after the story was published, entering the terms "Amazon" and "*New York Times*" in a Google search, featured Carney's post and several articles about the response all on the first results page. Anyone trying to Google the *Times* story, then was also immediately confronted with the response. Sites like *Medium* and *Twitter* quickly rise in search algorithms because of how much they are shared overall (Vera, 2015) -- and also

perhaps due to how friendly the technology industry is with each other (someone may someday investigate the possibility of collusion between Amazon and Google in this instance). Organizational rhetors have already been gaining access and influence to the public, but the ability to publish without barriers and easily gain an audience through new forms of media will likely only increase this influence.

Finally, Carney's post is significant because of its message to Amazon dissenters. One of the big questions is why Carney chose to pick this fight with the *Times* two months after the article was published. Perhaps they were having recruitment issues or perhaps this was to preempt any complaints from stockholders before the quarterly reports. One possibility is that, as Kurtz (2015) wrote, "Carney's post could also be seen as more inward-facing than out—a lesson that vocal dissenters will have their characters assassinated in public by a guy who used to work in the White House" (para. 11). Particularly for Bo Olson, who was accused by Amazon of fraud, a claim which he denied, Amazon held nothing back against story informants to clear the organization's name. There is no way to externally fact-check the Olson claim because, according to Amazon, when he was confronted he resigned and they kept the incident internal rather than escalate the situation to authorities. Instead, we just have to take (or not) Amazon's word for it. Either way, Kurtz continued, "whatever the truth of the matter, Olson's personal brand is in rough shape as of this week" (para. 11).

Conclusion

Faced with a viral story from the *New York Times,* condemning its organizational culture and treatment of white-collar workers, Amazon rhetors, Jeff Bezos and Jay Carney were quickly deployed to maintain the legitimacy and authority of their company. Despite frequent attempts from Jodi Kantor to explain the purpose of the article as larger than Amazon and about the future

of expectations and data management at work (in the article, in an email to Amazon, and morning news interview), Carney and Bezos never addressed the larger concerns of the story. They considered Kantor and Streitfeld's article a personal attack on the company born out of bias, inaccuracy and a need for clicks on the article. However, even though Bezos and Carney refused to explicitly address any of the larger claims of the story about labor precarity and corporate control, their responses implicitly entrenched and defended this system of neoliberal labor practices that benefit the stockholders and top leadership of the organization at every possible chance. Bezos defends these logics by reframing precarity and insecurity as the freedom of choice. He appeals to the audience's infatuation with wealth, growth and jobs and ignores refuting that these successes are built on a cutthroat and exploitative culture. He doesn't need to defend or change the culture of the company as long as Amazon keeps raking in record high profits. Instead, he chalks up the culture to being peculiar and stable. Ironically, in the fast-paced world of technology, one of the only unwavering elements of Amazon is that employees will be constant state of insecurity and the organization is likely manufacturing a permanent state of emergency.

This chapter focused on analyzing all of Amazon's responses to the *Times* story, with a particular eye on how the organizational rhetors establish authority and legitimacy as they depict labor precarity. Through this analysis, I discovered Amazon's impressive – even if lamentable-- ability to reframe insecurity as freedom and precarity as positive. The organization leverages their success in the technology world and track record of innovations to justify this behavior and establish authority on the labor practices to be economically successful. Although Amazon is primarily a technology and retailing company, when they perceive the *New York Times* is attacking them, they also work to discursively establish authority over best practices in

journalism as well. They are no doubt facilitated in this process by Jay Carney's professional experience as the White House Press Secretary, and Jeff Bezos' 2013 purchase of the *Washington Post* (Kelly, 2016). While this complex issue of new/old media ownership did not explicitly emerge in the controversy, it nonetheless hovers over it by potentially shoring up Bezos' persona with audiences concerned about his criticism of the *Times*. Could someone with that record of really be engaged in illegitimate criticism of the press?

Bezos and Carney's depiction and defense of precarity-- while establishing authority and legitimacy over technology, labor, organizational culture, and journalism -- is instructive. Its outcome is arguably encouraging for organizational rhetors, leading them to value the cultivation and exercise of power in responding to criticism across a wide variety of mediums (i.e., as opposed to engaging in dialogue concerned with the achievement of mutual understanding). However, their responses also cast an ominous cloud over the potential for labor changes in the technology sector to make more equitable, just and stable labor conditions and expectations.

CHAPTER IV

External Stakeholders Weigh in on the Controversy of Labor Precarity

Amazon's responses to the *New York Times* story showed a great deal of confidence in the existing culture and practices of the company – and also in their ability to weather a storm of controversy. Before and after the story, Amazon expressed pride in itself by adopting the mantra of being "peculiar," indicating that even if the *Times* depiction was accurate, at least the company was uniquely successful. In the previous chapter, I examined the rhetorical strategies Amazon rhetors used to establish authority while endorsing precarity as a successful business strategy. In this chapter, I continue to focus on how precarity is framed and the discursive strategies used to make arguments about precarity in relationship to the high-technology sector, but pivot now to focus on rhetors outside the organization.

External stakeholders commenting on this situation had different perspective of the uniqueness of Amazon's workplace culture and its expectations for employee performance than Amazon rhetors. Many outside commenters found the story strikingly familiar with their experience in the larger high-tech industry. Like Amazon rhetors, these external stakeholders also depict labor precarity in particular ways. However, instead of framing precarity as positive, they often depicted precarity as equally concerning and inevitable. They recognized the practice as commonplace and potentially dangerous, but often expressed more questions than answers in imagining a technology industry that did not rely on precarity, perhaps because their rhetorical resources to imagine such a world have been continuously limited by the current hegemonic discourse that delegitimizes just economic systems.

The first section of this chapter elaborates how external stakeholders of the Amazon controversy depict labor precarity in the high-technology industry, with a particular focus on

how they frame conditions at Amazon as familiar, and how precarity is described both as a personal and structural reality. Next, I will discuss how external stakeholders address alternatives to labor precarity in the high-technology industry. Finally, I will review how rhetors frame technology and big data as controversial in contributing to labor precarity in the high-technology sector.

Labor precarity as personal and structural

Many external commenters were not shocked by the revelations of the *Times* story on Amazon. Ingram (2015), a Toronto-based media and technology writer for *Fortune*, looking to explain why this story inspired almost 6,000 comments on the *Times* website and slew of other responses on other mediums suggested:

> I think it's because the article tapped into a deep-seated, almost existential fear that runs through many of our lives -- not just in the technology world, but elsewhere too: Namely, the fear that the ways we work now are harming and/or killing us. (para 2).

In other words, the story might not have only described conditions at Amazon, but something more deeply familiar with many in the contemporary American workforce. Daum (2015) furthered:

> In a way, we all work for Amazon now, even if it's not literally the case. Americans are putting in longer hours than ever. A lot of us answer work-related emails in the middle of the night. We spend our vacations on our laptops rather than on the beach. (para 8).

These conditions were deeply familiar to Facebook co-founder Dustin Moskovitz (2015) who published a response to the *Times* story in *Medium*. He recounted his long days at Facebook, which eventually took a serious toll on his home life and health, remarking "this is a familiar part of tech culture: at high performing companies, employees work extremely hard, to an extent that

is unsustainable for most people" (para 5). Moskovitz has since left Facebook and started a new technology endeavor, Asana, with the hope of creating a less taxing and precarious culture. From his perspective, this industry-level culture is both hurting companies and employees noting, "my intellectual conclusion is that these companies are both destroying the personal lives of their employees and getting nothing in return" (para 8). Of course, the recorded wealth of companies like Facebook, Amazon and Google makes the argument that companies are "getting nothing in return" somewhat dubious, but perhaps points to a rising concern over the sustainability of such a system for the common American technology organization.

Commenters are pointing to conditions of labor precarity and increasingly exhausting and unstable work. They speak of these conditions as a deeply personal and familiar issue. Nocera (2015) speaks directly to the changing nature of work into increasingly precarious occupations:

> A previous generation of Americans could count on a social compact; if you stuck loyally by a company, it would stick by you, providing you with a good job and a decent retirement. Long ago, loyalty fell by the wayside, and longtime employees learned that their loyalty meant nothing when companies "downsized." (para 13).

Employees cannot count on the loyalty of companies and companies no longer expect that long-term devotion to a company from employees either. These conditions of labor precarity presented in the *Times* article and Amazon responses resonated deeply with the public. Although employees and employers may be dealing with a similar loss of loyalty from each other, companies have nonetheless found a way to profit and exploit this situation. Nocera concluded that the contemporary archetype of doing business looks like this: "bring people in, shape them in the Amazon style of confrontation and workaholism, and cast them aside when they have outlived their usefulness" (para 14).

Amazon's primary response was to suggest the story was inaccurate, a position which was difficult to maintain when the story resonated with the workforce experience of so many readers. Ingram (2015) continued that Amazon likely isn't very different from other technology companies or "Wall Street or sports or the military," but "that doesn't mean it's good, it just means that it has become increasingly common" (para 4). Amazon and many external stakeholders had fundamentally different approaches in responding to this story. Amazon continually tried to limit the stories' implications and scope. For Amazon, it was a story about workplace conditions and culture at Amazon. It was a question of (inaccurate) facts. For many of the external commenters, the facts of the case at Amazon were less important because it was something they had experienced themselves. It was a question of values rather than facts. As M. Cohen (2015) explained "Amazon may or may not be a terrible company to work for (and plenty of Amazon workers have pushed back on the story), but the American workplace has increasingly become a terrible place for workers" (para 2).

Even though these work expectations are familiar, they are also concerning. Dana Vaccari (2015), who was quoted in the *Times* story with an anecdote about not sleeping for four days wrote a public post on her LinkedIn page to further elaborate on her story of working at Amazon. She wrote that it was ultimately her choice to work those long hours and that there were also personal reasons she wasn't sleeping or spending much time at home, but that there was something about the culture at Amazon that encouraged that kind of work and made her excited to do it. She also described the eventual psychological effects of precarity:

> When humans are expected to deliver huge results again and again and again, and they
> are aware that elimination is the consequence of failure to do so, they do what humans
> have always done - they do whatever they can to survive. When operating from a place of

fear and acute stress that their survival is threatened, humans can do ugly things. (para

21).

As Ingram (2015) wrote the expectations made by Amazon and other similar workplaces are

often lethal, but less easy to detect because "when people die, their obituary says things like heart

disease or stroke or suicide" (para 3). When the a series of exposés by Pennsylvania's *The

Morning Call* (Soper, 2011) revealed that ambulances would wait outside of Amazon fulfillment

centers, anticipating that employees would need heat stroke treatment because there was no air

conditioning in the factory, the stakes of Amazon's mistreatment was highly visible. Amazon

quickly ameliorated the situation by installing air conditioning soon after the articles were

published. The stakes of white-collar exploitation are more difficult to spot and empathize with,

however, because many of these employees are receiving high compensation and stock options.

The consequences are, however, very serious. At the most basic level, high-tech employees no

longer have a choice whether to take a high-pressure and stress job. As M. Cohen (2015) wrote:

> "Certainly those who want to prioritize their job over all else should be able to do so. The
>
> problem is for those American workers who don't. For them, happiness in the workplace,
>
> economic security, and finding the proper balance between work and home life no longer
>
> exists. (para 9).

This lack of choice can lead to deadly consequences. Ingram's assessment (2015) was eerily

prescient when discussing desperate responses to the common conditions at exploitative white-

collar work places. In November of 2016 an Amazon employee, recently put on a performance

improvement plan, which gives the employee a set period to improve or be let go, sent a

company-wide email upset with his inability to transfer departments before jumping off a 12-

story building at Amazon's Seattle headquarters in an attempted suicide (Soper, 2016). Certainly,

this incident was more complex than being exclusively caused by harsh workplace conditions. But it is worth noting that many media outlets were making a connection between the *Times* story and this event (e.g., Levy, 2016, Arria, 2016), which occurred a year later. At the very least there is an association created discursively between the organizational culture at Amazon and this employee's attempted suicide--raising the stakes for the controversy around labor precarity at high-technology organizations.

From the workplace experiences to the loss of a life outside of work and the sometimes dangerous consequences of working for a contemporary high-technology organization, labor precarity is clearly a very personal issue. However, it is also a situation caused by larger structural precursors and in discussing the problems of labor precarity, external stakeholders often bring these underlying conditions to light. M. Cohen (2015) argued:

> four decades of government policies that tilt the work balance in favor of companies over workers and an environment in which workplace benefits go to those who work the longest hours and leave those who can't keep up on the outside looking in has taken a disastrous toll. (para 8).

Amazon's official responses treat the article and potential problem as solely organizational, but many outside spectators are quick to place Amazon within a larger macro-economic and political history. Sadowski (2015) writing for *Al Jazeera America* and responding to the *Times* story explicitly drew links between the claims about Amazon and the hyper-capitalist economy that allows for and encourages this kind of workplace. Sadowski argued "labor control has always played an important role in capitalist economies. It's not just about monitoring and managing the workforce but also about creating a certain type of worker" (para 5). This particular type of worker is so overworked, according to Sadowski, they have little time or energy to resist the

exploitative system. Companies don't have to worry about burning through employees because there is always a fresh pool of labor excited to take over a back breaking role in the organization. Employees are formed to buy-in to the system and believe that they are working for something greater than money. Daum (2015) called this culture a kind of "addictive substance" (para 5). However, as Sadowski explained, "In reality, this is a logic that solely benefits shareholders, who enjoy the value created, regardless of who creates it" (para 10). For Sadowski and many other commenters, the article raised questions much larger than the conditions at one Seattle-based organization. It raised questions over increasingly common workplace practices and cultures in the American system of organizations and the structural conditions that encouraged this kind of behavior. Nocera (2015) summarized, "The real issue Amazon's work culture raises — for blue- and white-collar employees alike — is: How disposable are people?" (para 12).

A World Beyond Precarity?

The picture of work at Amazon seemed to resonate deeply with many external stakeholders. It was not hard to imagine what this kind of workplace was like because many had experienced it themselves. Further, many commenters were able to connect these workplace practices to larger structural economic conditions. However, public commenters were less able to imagine a world beyond precarity, especially ones that addressed the structural causes of precarity. Many asked questions about what a more humane and empathetic high-technology sector would look like. For example, Ingram (2015) questioned "Is there a way out of this cycle? Can we somehow have all the productivity and efficiency gains that we think come along with this kind of workplace lifestyle, but at less personal cost?" (para 13). Former Amazon employee Vaccari (2015) wondered "Could an organization with this hypothetical culture also enable each person to contribute to a company's success while achieving a sense of personal fulfillment and

happiness? What happens when you give the tin man a heart?" (para 25). She later suggested that

this type of organization is possible and a worthy endeavor, but maintained ambiguity about how

these changes might come about. Others reported individual attempts to create better technology

companies such as Dustin Moskovitz (2015), who said about his newest venture, "We've worked

hard to build a culture at Asana where people don't work too hard…. We get to encourage a

healthy work-life balance in the cold, hard pursuit of profit" (para 9). Moskovitz's endeavor

might be a worthy one, but is ultimately limited in that Asana is still a tiny speck on the high-

technology industry map. Concerning a more ethical way to run technology organizations, M.

Cohen (2015) surmised, "workplace frustration would perhaps be more manageable if workers

were well-compensated and able have a balance between family and work" (para 4). Changes at

the organizational level may prove helpful for some technology employees in creating more

options in their approach to work and life. But if the structural causes of labor precarity

discussed by many commenters, including Cohen, persist, these individual solutions might

always be subsumed by the successful technology giants who pride themselves on a culture of

precarity.

For many in the comments section of the article, the solution to this problem was to stop

supporting Amazon. One user, Katie, commented that as a result of reading the article she was

canceling her Audible membership (Amazon's audiobook service), deleting her Kindle app, and

stopping all shopping with the company. Her comment received almost 5,000 "likes," one of the

most popular *New York Times* comments ever, according the Community Moderator that

responded to her post. Similarly, others reported wanting to resist and protest Amazon's

workplace practices. For example, Douglas Binder wrote in a letter to the editor, "I would be

O.K. with getting my packages in three days instead of two, and getting my Kindle books in five

minutes instead of one. But please take better care of your employees!" (as cited in "A Look

Inside," 2015). Sirota (2015) also struggled with her complicity in the culture of Amazon

employees. Responding to Binder's letter, Sirota wrote in the *Huffington Post Canada* "I, too,

would gladly accept a somewhat less stellar level of customer service from Amazon, if I knew

that its employees would have a better quality work life, as a result" (para. 15). Customers

struggled with their complicity in the exploitative and exhaustive workplace practices from

Amazon. In response, they expressed rhetorical agency by stating their ending of support for the

company or public condemnation of these practices. This expression of agency to perform

activism and resistance against Amazon is noble, but limited. These individual solutions are

unlikely to overcome the weighty structures continuously supporting and encouraging a system

of labor precarity. It is possible that the common response of individual protest of Amazon is all

the agency individual rhetors feel they have in this situation, expressing their understanding of

their potential for influence in the development of federal or state policy that could address these

abusive labor conditions.

As another clear expression of rhetorical agency, there are some external commenters

who hint at greater labor action to address the problems of Amazon. For example, the user

"Union" not-so-surprisingly commented on the original story that unionizing could stop the

culture of 80-hour-work weeks, or at least ensure employees were compensated for that time.

Times commenter Debbie wrote,

> I foresee a return to mass employee strikes and riots at some point with a return to unions
>
> since there is little legal recourse right now for employees facing these types of
>
> workplaces as career options and well, many in these situations truly are only a few pay
>
> checks away from being homeless as a result of these limited options" (para 2).

Few, if any commenters, brought up one of the only high-technology unions, WASHTEC, located right down the road from Amazon at Seattle-based Microsoft, or the attitudinal and structural barriers to creating unions in such as industry. More often those commenting on the story or writing longer responses on other websites rarely mention larger scale solutions and alternatives to labor precarity, despite frequently commenting on how commonplace these conditions are and admonishing these practices. It's possible that the ideology of neoliberalism has worked to eliminate alternative possibilities from the public's rhetorical resources. A more just economic system, particularly labor practices, has been stigmatized as impossible and illegitimate by the prevailing and hegemonic economic logics, and as a result gets lost from the public imaginary and rhetorical potentials. The result is these discussions and comments, where the public is faced with clear evidence of the toll and iniquities created by this economic system and is outraged, but is blinded by the rhetorical possibilities of the current prevailing political-economy and perhaps their own workplace exploitation leaving them unable to imagine a world beyond this exploitation.

Implicating the Role of Technology

One theme that continuously emerged as external stakeholders commented on the story and work in high-technology organizations was the role of technology in creating these conditions of precarity. Ingram (2015) listed all of the technologies and apps that leave employees across industries accountable to working at all hours of the day:

> They have a cellphone that allows them to be contacted in a variety of different ways --
> phone call, email, text message, Slack chat room, Google Hangout, Twitter DM, etc. And
> since that technology is widely available, everyone in a certain type of job is expected to
> have it, and as a result they are expected to be available at all times." (para 10).

Ironically, high-tech companies who are notorious for collapsing boundaries between home and work life also create the technologies that spread these practices to other industries. Overworked employees working across industries then play into the system of customer convenience at the cost of their exploitation by companies like Amazon. As Daum (2015) reflected "maybe working 12 hours a day isn't so bad if we can buy groceries online in one click and then return to the work that enables us to pay the delivery fee" (para 9).

Technology is also implicated in this system of precarity because of the ease with which companies can track employees on every possible job performance metric. Nocera (2015) explained, "For a data-driven executive like Bezos, this kind of culture is appealing, because it maximizes the amount of work a company can wring from fundamentally fungible human beings" (para 15). Sadowski (2015) believes Amazon is not only a heavy user of technologies to track employees but has also been part of making the practice an industry standard:

> These organizational structures, corporate cultures and surveillance systems are essentially technologies of exploitation. Amazon is not the only company putting them to use, but it has been a pioneer in instituting them widely, thoroughly and lucratively. We are surrounded by technologies that reinforce (at least) three features of modern capitalism: competition ethic, labor control and profit accumulation. They pull us into exploitative environments that have become standard, almost expected and at times unnoticed." (para 4).

Finally, technology also represents a threat in the future as companies replace humans with machines. This threat is particularly acute for blue-collar workers. Daum (2015) reflected on her Internet purchasing habits as a result of her taxing work expectations. Discussing the delivery drivers, who often come late at night or on weekends very quickly after pressing a button on the

web, Daum said, "The catch is, the harder I work, the harder he works. And no matter how hard

he works, the drones are coming" (para 12). The threat of automation exists at all levels of

organizations and when competing against a machine, human "flaws" like families, exhaustion,

and mistakes are amplified. High-technology companies are often at the forefront of creating

technologies that can replace humans in the workforce, as Amazon is for delivery drones, and the

mentality that machines are king can seep into a workplace culture enacted by and lived in by

humans.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I've examined how rhetors located outside of Amazon responded to the

Times story, with a particular interest in how those outsiders viewed the precarious nature of

work at Amazon and connected it to their own experiences in the workforce. These external

voices provided a much different perspective on precarity than Amazon rhetors. Precarity was

often framed as familiar, dangerous and, yet, inevitable. These rhetors also exposed the fear

associated with and embedded in labor precarity. In a precarious labor market, there are plenty of

things to be scared of including but not limited to: being outperformed, fired, or replaced by a

machine. This analysis also revealed how external stakeholders express agency through

resistance against precarity. For some, like Dustin Moskovitz, resistance meant leaving his job at

Facebook to start a more humane technology effort as Asana. Others expressed resistance by

announcing their dismay and condemnation of the company and its labor practice. Some

announced action by (reporting to) end their monetary support of Amazon by being a customer.

However admirable, these efforts all seemed to lack the kind of institutional action that might be

required to combat labor precarity. Disappointed external rhetors expressed their individual

agency, but perhaps what was more interesting (at least for this analysis) is what was absent from

these expressions of authority. Many external rhetors seemed to be constrained in their responses, perhaps by a lack of rhetorical resources to imagine a world outside of precarity and labor exploitation, leaving them with worthy, but altogether limited possibilities for labor activism. Finally, this analysis was helpful in revealing and implicating the role of technology in labor precarity in relationship to high-technology organizations. If technology is central to this form of labor exploitation, it makes sense that the high-tech industry has been the laboratory and propagator of many of these practices.

This thesis sought to explore the issue of labor precarity, specifically as it is practiced, defended and contested in high-tech organizations. Analyzing comments from external rhetors involved in a variety of industries, it's clear that labor precarity and technologies that enable precarity may have started in the high-tech sector, but certainly does not end there. It's worth noting here, I believe, that many of the comments and articles featured in this chapter were from the perspective of freelance and full-time journalists. They often spoke to the resonance they felt in the story and the guilt they felt from ordering from Amazon because they were overworked and exhausted at their jobs, which in turn supported a company that vigorously defends and exacerbates that very practice. Kantor and Streitfeld (2015a) may have been pointing to the increasingly precarious conditions at Amazon and in the technology industry as much as they were implicating their own media industry, which increasingly relies on freelance work without any stability of income without production. N. Cohen (2015) observed that in the age of wildly precarious arrangements for a growing group of freelance journalists, rhetorical moves to reframe the practice as "entrepreneurial journalism" foreclosed imagining alternative and more just labor relationships in journalism. This affirms my observation of a similar occurrence in public discourse on labor precarity in the high-technology sector and hints toward future

possibilities to create more robust labor discussions and solutions, as will be discussed along

with other contributions of the thesis in the next and final chapter.

CHAPTER V

The Tin Man Still Doesn't Have a Heart: Concluding Thoughts on Precarity, Public Debate

and the Amazon-*New York Times* Controversy

When I first read Kantor and Streitfeld's (2015a) article on the cover *New York Times* on a Sunday afternoon just before I started grad school, I was fascinated, dismayed and conflicted. Like many of my generation, I had become reliant on Amazon's convenient shipping and services on everything from textbooks to groceries to instant-download audiobooks. I was an early member of Prime and nearly addicted to the free two-day shipping and continuous expansion of membership benefits (Prime Video and heavily discounted digital memberships to the *Washington Post*, for example). These purchases always came with a tinge of guilt, wondering if I should instead be going to a traditional brick-and-mortar store (bonus points if its locally owned). But convenience and consumerism kept me a frequent user of the retailing giant. Kantor and Streitfeld's article contributed to these conflicted feelings about purchasing from Amazon.

Since reading the article and beginning this project, I've renewed my Prime membership twice. The convenience (and excellent entertainment options) kept me with the service. Jeff Bezos wrote in his 2016 letter to stockholders that he wants, "Prime to be such a good value, you'd be irresponsible not to be a member." It's hard not to buy in to such ambitions. After settling (or pushing them out for personal convenience) feelings of complicity, I had a lingering disenchantment with high-technology jobs. Silicon Valley and the rest of the high-technology sector was supposed to represent the good life in the working world. Kantor and Streitfeld's (2015a) article exposes, however, that the good life for Amazon employees is a relaxing 70-hour work week and that it likely isn't much better at other technology companies. In a world of labor

precarity, even a delicious lunchroom cafeteria filled with free food provided by Google or the like is not uncomplicated—an invention to keep you at work for longer hours and erode any semblance of a normal home life.

Kantor and Streitfeld's article (2015a) offered the faint hope that some of these practices might change as a result of negative publicity. Perhaps given enough public pressure stemming from a viral article, Amazon and other technology companies would have to change their ways. However, despite the number of clicks, shares, and comments, almost two years after the article was published, life at Amazon seemingly returned to business as usual. They made a couple of superficial changes and a launched some new employee benefit programs, which I will highlight later in the chapter, but maintained their core values of retaining the brightest employees with the most endurance and limited life obligations.

The current project revealed many rhetorical strategies speakers use to explain, resist and defend labor precarity. Public discourses revealed how labor precarity is experienced by employees and, alternatively, understood and implemented by employers. Ultimately, the public discourse surrounding the Kantor and Streitfeld's (2015a) article did very little to move the needle away from labor precarity as the predominant labor ideology in the high-technology sector. However, this study offers contributions for how public discourse might improve in the future to include more alternatives to labor precarity and highlights possibilities for studying rhetors from within and outside organizations.

Co-construction of Organizational Identity

For a long time Amazon worked to maintain a great deal of secrecy about their Seattle office. They wanted to be known to customers solely by the exceptional service they provided. Except the public's personal experience with Amazon, often glowing review of how fast a

product arrived at their door, the company's reputation was fairly shallow. Some customers may have heard about the poor warehouse working conditions or the over reliance on temporary labor, but these stories often fell from the news cycle as quickly as they rose and failed to affect the organization's identity moving forward. Unless you were actively seeking it out, there wasn't much easily accessible, public information to be had at all about Amazon's Seattle headquarters. Because of the silence around the company, life there seemed to be "friction-free." However, Kantor and Streitfeld's (2015a) article ruptured part of this myth, not only for Amazon but other companies that prided themselves on the same "we hire the best (read: and fire the competent) and are passionate about what we do (read: implicitly require employees put in unreasonable hours at work)" mentality. Although being featured on the front page of the Sunday *Times* already indicated some significance, what made this story so remarkable was the public reaction it inspired. This story would likely have faded into obscurity much faster if so many members of the public did not engage with it. In fact, the high number of commenters and letters to the editor became a part of the story itself. Ingram's (2015) article was dedicated to discovering why people cared and engaged so much with the story. The *Times* ran a whole separate story to report on the number of comments on the story (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015b). The *Times* laid the framework for this event, but the public fascination with the story transformed the moment into a cultural controversy that threatened Amazon's organizational image.

Amazon's rhetors, particularly Carney, tried to frame this incident as an inter-organizational battle, between an unprofessional newspaper and an innovation machine. However, this formulation left out essential members of the controversy that played significant role in the construction of the event. If I played into Carney's frame of an organizational battle and focused solely on the organizational rhetoric from Amazon and the *New York Times*, this

thesis too might have missed what made this event so special, and to steal some language from Amazon, "peculiar." The public had an instrumental role in creating the clicks, shares, comments and likes that made this story rise to prominence and that forced a response from Amazon. External organizational rhetoric offers an excellent frame here to examine these perspectives, which even though are central to the rise and perpetuation of the story, might be ignored by solely internal rhetorical focus.

If we viewed this controversy, as Carney did, as one between organizations, we might be able to say that Amazon retained its legitimacy and authority over the *New York Times*. Carney's responses were clever, adept and seemingly honest but unverifiable. The *Times,* however, suffered from organizational inconsistency. Kantor and Streitfeld (2015a) were called out by their own Public Editor, Margaret Sullivan (2015), for relying on anecdotes to make conclusions. The Executive Editor, Dean Baquet, wholly supported the story, anecdotes and all, but his arguments were constrained by his position as Executive Editor of the *New York Times* and the need to maintain an appearance of fairness. Any other approach might have hurt the image of his organization and played directly into Carney's framing that this was simply a witch-hunt by the newspaper against Amazon. Responses from the public, including customers, other members of Silicon Valley, and journalists, provided the necessary antidote to this incomplete discourse and external organizational rhetoric, which examines official organizational rhetors along with other socio-political narratives from external stakeholders, provided a helpful methodological tool to study this discourse. This lens allowed the thesis to move beyond organizational image, as how the organization constructed it themselves, and consider how publics were a part of co-constructing that image and longer lasting, identity.

The public reaction to the *Times* story was the lynchpin to creating this controversy, but ultimately it seems that Amazon's identity escaped much injury from the event. As Heath (2011) has argued, external organizational communication is helpful in examining the fit and/or friction between the organization and larger society. In this case, Amazon seemed to fit fairly well within the larger context of high-technology organizations, many of which have similar labor philosophies. Their practices were upsetting to some, but not unusual. In fact, they seem downright standard. Further, Amazon appealed to values generally lauded by the larger society— innovation and growth. This was not only an effective strategy for Amazon with stockholders who want the value of their holdings to increase, but the post-recession public who may find it difficult to cast aside a company who employs 25,0000 people in Seattle alone, and over 340,000 globally (which is up more than 110,00 in the last year) (Bishop, 2017). Even if there was some lasting discontent with Amazon's behavior affecting their identity, and therefore client base, because Amazon is so similar to the companies around it, there often aren't many companies dissenters can turn to for guilt-free purchases. With Amazon's incredible convenience, especially for frequent shoppers, and likely marginal improvements at any other retailer or technology company, the impediment to resistance is high. Change, however, often comes slowly. At the very least, there seems some lingering image of Amazon as cutthroat that is affecting their identity. For some customers that cutthroat culture is admirable. For others, it's regrettable and given another feasible option, they might move their business elsewhere. This, I believe, is also the case with employees. Amazon's system of labor only works if there is constantly a fresh pool of labor with bright eyes and bushy tales willing to put the company before themselves for little to no security in return. I personally know someone who recently turned down a job at Amazon because of its reputation of exploitation. She was fortunate enough to have competing offers at

companies where (she believed) labor expectations were more reasonable. Given the choice, I think many people would do the same, but in the current economic climate and technology industry, this is not often possible. Amazon's responses and earnings in the next quarter might have us believe that the *Times* story had no impact on their identity or reputation, however, a closer analysis of the lingering resentment combined with strong resignation present in the discourse of external stakeholders suggests that though their identity has been altered for many of the public, we've yet to see the physical or economic manifestation of that change.

Lessons Learned on Resisting Precarity

Although Kantor and Streitfeld's (2015a) article widely exposed many controversial labor practices at Amazon and many members of the public were outraged at the revelations, very little lasting changes came out of the incident, so far. Amazon implemented and publicized a few new employee programs, but they were largely superficial fixes to a practice engrained in the company since its inception. In this section, I'll review these announced changes and explain why they are inadequate to stymy the precarity endemic to the culture of the company. Next, I'll highlight how this thesis revealed ways that precarity might have been more effectively resisted in this controversy and how journalists were structurally limited in their ability to act as labor activists.

In Jeff Bezos's 2016 letter to stockholders he announced three recently launched programs for employees: Career Choice, which helps pay for "courses that teach in-demand skills," Leave Share, which allows Amazon employees that are new parents to share their paid leave with non-Amazon employed spouses and Ramp Back, which allows new mothers to come back to work at a personally chosen pace (Bezos, 2016). Further, Amazon announced a year after the *Times* article they were testing a 30-hour work week for select employees, who would

receive the same benefits as full-time employees and 75 percent of their full-time salary (Weller, 2016). These programs may appear to be positive changes and they very well might benefit some employees. However, it's hard to imagine a world where any employee taking advantage of these programs, particularly Ramp Back and the 30-hour work week, would be successful for very long at the company. Amazon employees regularly work 80 hours a week, a fact reported again and again to Kantor and Streitfeld (2015a) and that went uncontested in Amazon's responses. Putting in these extra hours is not compensated, nor is it required by contract, but if an Amazon employee hopes to advance in the organization or simply keep their job (and not be put on the bottom of the yearly employee rankings), more work and hours seem to be functionally required. It's difficult to imagine that new mothers taking more time off and slowly returning to work through the Ramp Back program would be rewarded at work. Even before this program Amazon did not have any women on its top leadership team. Leave Share may be the only program that might benefit Amazon employees in the long run because it literally allows employees to give away their time off to non-Amazon employees so that they take the time off instead of the Amazonian. Still, Amazon has no paternity leave but now there is a program so new fathers can work even more by giving their time off to their spouse. Work at Amazon isn't supposed to be easy. Jeff Bezos has been consistent in this message since his first letter to stockholders. These new programs may offer brief alleviation of stress and the veneer of just labor practices, but make no mistake, Amazon has no intentions on becoming a place for relaxation. They will continue to reward the employees willing to sacrifice themselves for the company.

Although Kantor and Streitfeld's (2015a) article is raising awareness about Amazon's previously secretive labor policies and practices, they were limited in their ability to take a stand against Amazon and precarity because of their role as journalists, who traditionally have served

to and are expected to inform and report rather than make judgments. Amazon's responses capitalized on this conception of journalism. Carney (2015a, 2015b) accused the *Times* of being unprofessional, biased and not following the traditional standards of journalism. Carney had the freedom to be an enthusiastic advocate of and for Amazon. *Times* spokespeople Kantor, Streitfeld, and Baquet could not take the same approach in being clear advocates for a particular action or against Amazon. This clash of titans was, in many ways, an unfair fight. Amazon got to be an ardent self-advocate and the *Times* advocated only that they accurately represented the interviews and performed the standards of journalism. When questioned on the *CBS Morning Show* Kantor spoke only to Amazon's attributes and larger work trends, presumably to avoid a perception of bias against Amazon. Carney had no such limitations on his ability to persuade the audience of Amazon's success and benevolence. Consider the setup of the *CBS Morning News* interview, Carney represented Amazon's perspective, Kantor represented the story, but there was no one to actually advocate for labor rights. Kantor and Streitfeld (2015a) may have unleashed a series of questions about Amazon, but their delivery was ultimately descriptive. Public discourse might have improved if Amazon's perspective was met with someone prepared to advocate for labor rights, in addition to Kantor, whose role as a journalist places her in the center of the controversy rather than as an advocate. Perhaps this opening of discourse to organizations *and* activists would better facilitate a broader range of rhetorical resources for the wider public discussion. As N. Cohen (2015) argued, the crisis of precarity in journalism offers an opportunity to rethink labor relationships altogether and imagine (and perhaps one day implement) sustainable and structural solutions, such as a wider-social safety net through a universal basic income and restoring rights for collective bargaining. This is also true of the high-technology sector, which is particularly important in this resistance because of its role in creating the

technologies and spreading the ideologies that enable precarity. We know from Mayer (2013) that technology companies are as much connected to their region as they are their industry and that a larger "hub" company's culture often inflects itself on the "spoke" technology organizations in the area. This connectedness offers a glimmer of hope for those pushing for greater conditions and labor relationships in technology. Despite the scale of the problem, individual efforts such as Moskovitz's (2015) determination to create a technology company with healthy work expectations at Asana may prove useful in spreading these trends to spoke companies and provide a proof of concept for those looking for the rhetorical resources to imagine a world after precarity. The tin man probably doesn't have a heart, but just like in the *Wizard of Oz*, that doesn't mean we can't go looking for it.

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