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Virtually absent: The gendered histories and economies of digital labour

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Digital labour refers to a range of tasks performed by humans on, in relation to, or in the aftermath of software and hardware platforms. On-demand logistics services like Uber and Deliveroo, micro-work venues such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, data transactions generated by social media channels and online retail portals devoted to one-click consumption all comprise digital labour. So do the male-dominated workplaces of high tech firms with long hours and oblique Human Resources policies in an era of #MeToo revelations. Digital labour is intrinsically bound to physical space and to hardware, even when it is classified as “immaterial” in nature (Fortunati, 2018). Very few workplaces now exist without dependency on the mobile devices, computer sensors and data servers upon which software operates.

Feminist scholars have successfully highlighted the role women play in the front line of technology assembly (Nakamura, 2014; Pun, 2015) as well as computer science and programming (Hicks, 2018). Underpaid female and migrant labour, some of it located in electronics assembly plants in East Asia and Eastern Europe, is the labour that powers the internet and its necessary hardware (Sacchetto and Andrijasevic, 2015). Inhumane working conditions and the pressure of untenable production speeds in manufacturing became visible in 2010 when fourteen workers at Foxconn, the main assembler for Apple located in mainland China, committed suicide. Since then, more workers at Foxconn have ‘jumped’ to their deaths and thousands of others protested their plight via work stoppages, wildcat strikes and organised mobilisations (Qiu, 2016).

Next to this vast army of underpaid offshore workers, “free labor” is the defining feature of the digital economy (Terranova, 2000). In the early days, volunteer moderators in the USA engaged by America Online spent thousands of hours making the internet “safe” by investigating complaints and grievances and keeping harassment and abuse in check (Postigo, 2009). Today such work continues, largely uncompensated, with women of colour, queer and trans people joining other minority activists to moderate online interactions and call out a constant stream of sexist and misogynist content (Nakamura, 2015; Roberts, 2019). Even workplaces that functionally rely on moderation work do so with the help of 3rd party contractors whose distance ameliorates the difficulties of maintaining an employment pool to edit clearly distressing material (Newton, 2019).

This hidden work of online community management fits a longer history of “unpaid reproductive labour” explained so well in this issue by Ursula Huws. A key aim of this themed collection is to expand the reach of such foundational feminist insights to appreciate how women, migrants, and people of colour have been central to the rise of the platform economy and the everyday work of digital capitalism. At a time when users of online platforms are themselves the products of the advertising deals delivering their experience, we are challenged to provide a fitting vocabulary for the forms of exploitation and exchange in which we find ourselves ambivalent participants. Without deliberate intervention, the extra burden of affective labour that is carried by minority populations is
likely to produce new categories of injury and harm that will have long term effects (Quinn, 2017).

In much of the literature arising in tandem with digital labour studies, a feminist perspective has not come naturally and has sometimes required active assertion by determined colleagues (Jarrett, 2015; reviewed in this issue). From initial discussions around social media services and the “free labor” of data extraction on proprietary platforms (Andrejevic, 2007; Scholz, 2013) to more recent studies of algorithmic management and the threat of automation arising with AI (Gray and Suri, 2019), feminists’ contributions to the literature on technology and work have often carried the burden of explaining the gendered history of hidden labour that otherwise appears to have little precedent (Crain et al, 2018). Learning how to delegate tasks to an intelligent smart home assistant is easier if the expectation of servitude is a feature of your class or gender background; little wonder that so many AI visions are subservient and female (Hester, 2016; Strengers, 2018).

The literature analyzing “virtual work” initially drew from some unhelpful foundations, such as the Marxist paradigm that risks situating the work of reproduction as inferior supplement (Dyer-Witheford 1999; Fuchs, 2014). Indeed, early distinctions between “virtual work” online and some more ostensibly material “real life” marketplace have been the scholarly aporia around which experiments in labour politics have atrophied. Writers in media and communication studies (Wark, 2004; Gillespie, 2018) and software and platform studies (Bratton, 2016; Srnicek, 2017) have offered sympathetic engagement with the materiality of their respective objects of analysis, providing more critical readings of technology than the comparatively industry-aligned STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) disciplines. These fields have been vital to investigating how the internet creates particular forms of labour arranged along new axes of production and new forms of gendering and racialisation (Gregg, 2011; Qiu, 2016). Yet the ongoing hegemony of male citation practices in communication fields (Mayer et al, 2018) only reinforces the difficulty of properly valuing feminist scholars’ consistent elaboration of more attentive and inclusive labour models (e.g. Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Essays in this collection have largely been excused from the thankless task of defensively reciting past feminist work. For the conversations on labour that are needed so urgently we choose Feminist Review purposefully so that we can take certain approaches for granted. We are also fortunate to include here an important overview essay by a pioneer of virtual labour studies, Ursula Huws. It is on her shoulders, and the formidable archive of methodologies from women’s labour theory over the past several decades, that the essays in this collection find support. Jarrett’s notion of the ‘digital housewife’ put feminist thinking at the centre of digital labour studies and its political economy underpinnings, highlighting the unique value produced by users in this new, data-dependent economy. Another concept, discussed by Emily Jones in our Open Space section, is ‘xenofeminism’, a form of feminist ethics for this technomaterial world. As editors, readers and activists, we seek more projects that build on this momentum. There is simply too much analytical work required to keep pace with technology innovation today for feminists to remain caught in futurists’ bibliographic black holes.
What is common among the many forms of digital labour currently gaining ascendance is an active celebration of worker flexibility, from the precarious workers concentrated in sectors of the Western labour market to the non-Western countries where vast swathes of online and “below the line” work happens (Mayer, 2011). As such, digital platforms supply an actual labour market with large numbers of individuals excluded from formal employment and consigned to permanently unstable working conditions. Digital labour is thus experienced predominantly as a modern version of on-demand piecework, even when the very same fortune is celebrated by gig work companies as liberating for individuals (Duffy, 2017; Ticona et al, 2018; Rosenblat, 2019). In addition, recent research shows that management practices typical of platform work are rapidly expanding to conventional forms of employment across Europe: the so-called ‘platformisation of work’ (Holts et al, 2019). We have further collaborations on this topic in preparation with colleagues studying these trends in different geographical settings (Steinberg, 2019; Chen, 2018).

As awareness of digital labour conditions grows, the following essays call attention to the gendered and racialized contours of a mutually dependent in/formal economy. Gig work is the flipside of the mythical white, male “programmer” or software developer enjoying the comforts and benefits of large multinational tech firms. Given the large proportion of marginal subjects such as women, urban poor and minorities taking up digital work - in the absence of other alternatives, which is a long labour history in itself (Hatton, 2011; Hyman, 2018) - more research is required to understand the structural elements of digital labour that made it possible for certain types of activity to remain outside the employment relations. It is now impossible to deny the extent to which the promise of constantly connected, intelligent technologies relies on a contingent workforce that has been a hallmark of post-Fordist capitalism, perhaps especially due to strong activist nostalgia for a return to a more secure waged future. In this issue, one of our aims is to identify the continuities that exist between women’s work in domestic and market economies over time, since digital environments create novel intersections between these never-quite-separate spheres (Hochschild, 2003; Cooper and Waldby, 2008). By doing this, we want to show how women’s particular experience of informal, repetitive, insecure, ignored and taken-for-granted work makes them unsurprised, even well prepared for a fate that appears to be becoming widespread for others (Morini, 2007; Gregg, 2008).

Digital labour studies have so far mostly focused on Europe and the USA. This issue contributes to correcting this bias and addressing digital labour in emerging economies. Hemangini Gupta’s article on technocapitalism in startup India shows not only the exploitative and hierarchical labour relations that are a product of outsourcing but also how unequal gender and class relations underpin the development of new technologies and what we call ‘innovation’ (see also Irani, 2019). A new research strand established in Science and Technology Studies conferences like 4S and facilitated by email lists like Winifred Poster’s Labor-Tech discussion group draws from media, labour and postcolonial studies to investigate the dynamics of marginalisation engendered by digital platforms. This includes the role of AI in perpetrating local and global inequalities along the axes of gender, race and class. One of the leading practitioners of this intersectional approach, Sareeta Amrute, shares here her essay, “Of Techno-ethics and Techno-affects,” which illustrates the political implications of new digital relationships that bind our involvement, willingly and unwillingly,
in complex landscapes of mobility, surveillance and control.

The platform economy is clearly geographically polarised with data and tasks being bought in the Global North and sold in the Global South (Lehdonvirta et al, 2014). This division of labour replicates historical patterns of economic domination. To convey the immorality of this asymmetrical organisation of labour and profit, media scholars like Jack Qiu (2016) denounce the emergence of digital “slavery” whereby high value activities (e.g. marketing, design and IP innovation) are separate but rely on cost reduction and crowdsourcing to cheaper regions where unfree and coerced labour abound. All the while, the weaponisation of User Experience (UX) design plays on anxieties of time management and belonging to make slaves of all of us beholden to the constant nudging of digital devices (Wajcman, 2019; Gregg, 2018). Kerry Mackereth’s article ‘Mechanical maids and family androids’ is an example of scholarship that works across disciplines to investigate the connection between productive and reproductive digital labour, old and new relations of domination, as well as resistance to these ingrained legacies. Our aim is therefore to both show and denounce how gender, race and class operate as key aspects of digital platform production (Nakamura, 2014) and make manifest location-specific systems of domination and exploitation.

The rise of an unregulated workforce with growing numbers of self-employed contractors raises policy questions regarding adequate welfare and subsistence to fit the needs of an at-will service class. These issues have only grown in prominence over the duration of this publishing project. In the US, where Melissa resides, some Presidential candidates are now advocating for a Universal Basic Income to protect the fluctuations of digital taskwork’s below minimum-wage incomes. In Rutvica’s UK home, mired in the quagmire of Brexit, immigrant workers are some of the most regular users of online employment platforms. Initiatives such as Oxford Internet Institute’s Fairwork Foundation (https://fair.work/about/) and ongoing reporting by the International Labor Organisation (https://www.ilo.org/) are welcome attempts to influence the operations of digital venues that thrive on an atomized user base but are ultimately beholden to mutually affirming rating systems.

Several essays in this collection responded to our call for more intersectional analysis of digital labour’s converging social and geopolitical forces. Helen Rand’s article on digital sex work discusses forms of vulnerability and exploitation experienced by sex workers on digital platforms in the UK. In the US, Alexander Tarr and Luis Alvarez León provide the most explicit reckoning with mobile devices as vessels for unchartered itineraries, showing how space is made habitable through the voluntary labour of self-appointed digital guides. In each case the terms of service makes the experience of the service purchaser markedly different to that of the service provider: both are “users” dependent on a platform but there is far from equal weighting involved in enabling certain features (maintaining user privacy, for example).

It would be remiss for an issue on digital labour to avoid mention of the ways that traditional workplaces are also under radical redefinition in the wake of technological change. Appraising recent trends in the male-dominated profession of architecture, Nicole Gardner shows how women’s time poverty arising from a persistently unequal division of labour contributes to deskilling in the market. With the constant demand to upgrade professional competencies with cutting-edge design tools and software, Gardner’s survey of
tech adoption in Sydney architecture firms points to a growing issue that even securely employed professionals face. This research prompts reflection on the reality that all of us face as job viability comes under pressure from algorithmically-defined targets.

Across the spectrum of high tech production and consumption, digital platforms are contributing to a broader process of destabilisation in labour as a source of coherent identity. Future research will be well poised to illustrate the relationship between well compensated, “creative”, “knowledge” professions and the less glamorous if ongoing maintenance work that ensures data gathering and storage devices continue to run without interruption (Cohn, 2016; Rosner et al, 2013; Russell and Vinsel, 2016). For too long, feminist thinking has been marginal to the ongoing march of technological evangelism emanating from the West Coast of the United States—although there are positive signs that this is changing (West et al, 2019). This issue delivers a set of essays that, taken collectively, offer a critical and cautious approach that suits the longer history of labour’s liberation by and through technology. We hope that readers find these articles an instructive and catalysing guide to traditions of feminist theory that are essential infrastructure to adequately account for the nuances of labour value today.

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