

# THE UNWANTED LABOUR OF SOCIAL MEDIA: WOMEN OF COLOUR CALL OUT CULTURE AS VENTURE COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

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**Abstract** Social media platforms generate huge profits from free user data. Twitter and other social media sites benefit additionally from the labour of volunteer community managers whose efforts to moderate misogyny and sexism online are often unwanted, punished, and viewed as censorship, uncivil behaviour, or themselves forms of sexism. Hashtag movements like #ThisTweetCalledMyBack reveal a growing labour consciousness on the part of these volunteers and an awareness of their role as an emergent formation within this ‘new economy’.

**Keywords** digital labour, free labour, misogyny, reproductive labour

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As Ursula Huws has written, digital labour is ‘difficult to conceptualise’ because the internet creates new styles of labour: it not only traffics far more in the immaterial, it is also arrayed along new axes of production, new forms of compensation, and new forms of gendering and racialisation.<sup>1</sup> It is this kind of labour that interests me. I am specifically interested in the hidden and often-stigmatised and dangerous labour performed by women of colour, queer and trans people, and racial minorities who call out, educate, protest, and design around toxic social environments in digital media. Social media platforms benefit from the crowd-sourced labour of internet users who, with varying degrees of gentleness or force, intervene in racist and sexist discourse online. This labour is uncompensated by wages, paid instead by affective currencies such as ‘likes’, followers, and occasionally, acknowledgement or praise from the industry.

Cheap female labour is the engine that powers the internet. Some of this labour occurs in the fabrication laboratories and electronic assembly plants in East Asia where almost all of the world’s chips and digital devices are produced. Women of colour are the majority of this workforce, as has been the case since the industry’s early days. Over a thousand indigenous Navajo worked at a state of the art plant on the reservation in Shiprock, New Mexico producing chips from 1965-1975, receiving less than U.S. minimum wage.<sup>2</sup> Labour *must* be cheap in order for digital culture to exist. Though Moore’s Law, which dictates that processor speed doubles every eighteen months, has been credited for the vast gains in computing power and miniaturisation that has enabled the transition to digital mobile sociality, offshore workers who

1. Ursula Huws, *Labour in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age*. New York: Monthly Review Press, New York 2014, p151. Hereafter *Labour in the Global Digital Economy*.

2. Lisa Nakamura ‘Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture.’ *American Quarterly* 66 (4) (2014), pp919–41. <http://doi.org/8zc>

make the devices at a competitive price are a crucial part of the economics of this shift. Digital labourers became newly visible in 2010 when eighteen workers, unable to continue working in untenable conditions, attempted suicide, resulting in fourteen deaths in one year at the massive Foxconn plant in Shenzhen, China.<sup>3</sup>

The idea of 'digital labour' is often associated with more highly paid, white, and male workers in the global North. As Gina Neff writes, however, these digital jobs are defined by precarity: 'YOYO' (you're on your own) economics, and the need for individuals to accept high levels of risk.<sup>4</sup> The software developers and workers she studied at start-up companies in Silicon Alley were expected to add their cheap or free labour to their paid labour by talking up their companies at key social events and trade shows, thereby blurring the line between paid work and play. She terms this 'venture labour' - workers willingly took up this burden because firstly, it didn't seem like a burden; self-interest was at the core of the motivation for contributing this kind of digital labour. As she writes, 'there is clearly a great degree of work involved in building and maintaining these regional economies, and this work is disproportionately done after hours by people who have the time, ability, and social capital to navigate such events (p160).' Neff shows that the business of software production is not only 'knowledge work,' but affective work as well.

Clearly there are sharp differences between overworked female labourers in an electronics plant, precariously employed as software and game developers, and social media users who 'call out' and critique racism and misogyny online. They may all be labouring in the digital economy, but just as they are gendered and racialised differently, they are rewarded differently and under different conditions. David Hesmondhalgh says as much when he asks, 'are we really meant to see creating code or writing about favourite shows online as 'exploited' in the same way as those who endure appalling conditions and pay in Indonesian sweatshops?'<sup>5</sup> Many of the 'venture labourers' that Neff writes about were white, male, and from middle class backgrounds, giving them a leg-up in the fend-for yourself-economy of software development work, while the mostly-female Asian assembly workers at Foxconn labour with no jackpot in sight.

I am interested in internet users who share characteristics of both poorly paid electronics workers and software's 'venture labourers'. Women of colour and sexual minorities who post, tweet, re-post, and comment in public and semi-public social media spaces in order to respond to and remediate racism and misogyny online are, like venture labourers in the software business, knowledge workers. The #misogynyalert and #youOKsis hashtags on Twitter crowd-source responses to misogyny and offer support for victims. Randi Harper's ggautoblocker project helps Twitter users screen out misogynist speech about women in gaming so that they never need to see it. The FatUglyorSlutty.com website gathers together evidence of hate

3. Jack Linchuan Qui, Melissa Gregg, and Kate Crawford, 'Circuits of Labour: A Labour Theory of the iPhone Era.' *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 12 (2) (2014), pp564-81, p9.

4. Gina Neff, *Venture Labour: Work and the Burden of Risk in Innovative Industries (Acting with Technology)*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2012, p159. Hereafter *Venture Labour*.

5. David Hesmondhalgh, 'User-Generated Content, Free Labour and the Cultural Industries,' *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, 10 (3/4) (2010), pp267-84, p271.

speech in gaming environments and shares it with the public, engendering a community of feminist and anti-racist counter speech. These are unpaid and collectively produced passion projects, all of which have received some positive recognition as well as much negative blowback.

Though this kind of activity may not fit into traditional definitions of what labour is, some of its practitioners define it this way. A Twitter hashtag called #This Tweet Called My Back, authored by a collective of woman of colour social media activists, makes reference to the iconic woman of colour anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* because it makes a similar claim: that the labour of educating white men and women about racism and sexism is difficult, valuable, and unappreciated. The fact that this labour occurs via Twitter and Tumblr doesn't detract from its value or difficulty, according to these authors, who write:

We are your unwaged labour in our little corner of the internet that feeds a movement. Hours of teach-ins, hashtags, Twitter chats, video chats and phone calls to create a sustainable narrative and conversation around decolonization and antiblackness. As an online collective of Black, Afro-Indigenous, and NDN women, we have created an entire framework with which to understand gender violence and racial hierarchy in a global and U.S. context.<sup>6</sup>

6. @girlinterruptd, @chiefelk, @bad\_dominicana, @aurabogado, @blackamazon, and @thetrudz. 2015. "This Tweet Called My Back." *Model View Culture*. Accessed July 14. <https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/thistweetcalledmyback>.

Though the act of communicating with the public about racism, sexism, homophobia, and other social justice issues is unpaid, and often results in the poster being harassed, trolled, and threatened on these fora, these authors claim this content adds traffic and value to these platforms by attracting readers and followers. The human labour required to make platforms fun, easy, and safe to use - the provision of free advice, the documentation and dissemination of behaviour and speech that creates unsafe conditions for specific groups, and the openness towards forming new relationships with strangers who want or need them - has been treated in much the same way as reproductive labour, and therefore feminised, devalued, ultimately offshored for pay, and borne by volunteers.

The continuum of users performing this labour ranges from social justice content producers who self-identify as such and may even support themselves in this way, to anonymous users on websites like 4chan or Reddit who intervene in misogynist or racist speech or behaviour they see on these sites. Gamer Gate has brought this reality into sharp focus in the last year, as female independent game developers and journalists were viciously attacked on social media. It is crucial to note, however, that no one was physically attacked, though many threats were made. The damages suffered were really to the 'climate' for women and people of colour in gaming culture, a culture that congregates online at least as much as it does in embodied form.

Users who tweet and post responses to misogyny and racism online are

in effect venture community managers, and many of them define themselves as workers. Their interventions are intended to create better conditions for women and minority in social media and gaming, and though their reception has not always been warm, their labour mirrors some of the internet's earliest volunteer community managers and content moderators. However, in contrast to civility labourers from that earlier period, contemporary social justice social media users are not employed by platforms, they often make overt reference to woman of colour feminism, they have a pedagogical mission and practice, they are overt about their own lived and bodily identities, and they are often stigmatised as 'pc'. Their position as gendered *and* racialised minorities create an identity that is new, and that is a feature of post-Fordism usually overlooked in Marxist feminist readings of digital labour.

Tiziana Terranova's classic and generative critique of 'free labour' starts out with an iconic story about a platform's exploitation of free and volunteer digital labour.<sup>7</sup> As she writes, in the early days of the popular internet America Online employed the services of its users to enforce the Terms of Service agreements that users, then as now, clicked on without reading. If the commodity that internet service providers sold then, as now, was the social life that comes of conversation, that commodity could only be protected by active and laborious management of the ways that users treated each other: in short, the application of human intelligence to resolve discursive abuse. AOL moderators spent thousands of hours investigating user complaints and grievances, filing bug reports, helping student members with homework, and promoting what we would now call 'safe' space, still activities that cannot be automated, though they can be (and have since been) outsourced to other, cheaper countries. These workers kept harassment and abuse in check by tracking it, reporting it, and ultimately banning repeat offenders.

On June 8, 2009, AOL worker-volunteers were 'released' from work, or fired. As Hector Postigo explains in his study of the origins of volunteer labour as a defining feature of the internet economy, the way that this was done resulted in workers feeling angry and betrayed.<sup>8</sup>

Their labour keeping forum conversations civil, productive, on-topic, useful, and free from hate speech and misogyny was very valuable to AOL, but was neither compensated with money (some workers were paid with free AOL hours) nor resulted in permanent jobs at the company, an outcome that many hoped for. The 14,000 men, women and children who served as AOL moderators who had loved the community and helped the company to grow often left with a bitter taste in their mouths, and some successfully sued the company for back wages.

Importantly, Postigo's richly nuanced account ends with discussion of women's labour history and how AOL moderation became 'pastoralised' or feminised, and thus devalued, in similar ways. In 2003, when AOL employees were still 'working' for the company, he wrote that their only hope was to re-gender it as male: 'In the case of community making, community as a

7. Tiziana Terranova, 'Free Labour: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,' *Social Text* 18 (63): (2000), pp33-58. <http://doi.org/fp8tzv>

8. Postigo, Hector. 2003. "Emerging Sources of Labor on the Internet: The Case of America Online Volunteers." *International Review of Social History* 48 (Supplement S11), pp205-223. <http://doi.org/b3phc8>

commodity requires a degree of de-pastoralisation. AOL volunteers must force a reconceptualisation of community making as no longer altruistic or an act of familial responsibility, but rather as a commercial service. They must also force a reconceptualisation of the relations between the service providers and recipients.<sup>9</sup>

AOL community leaders were able to assert some of their rights in court because they were well organised and had a strong group identity, indeed, they fit the criteria that Ursula Huws identifies as the only formation that can possibly challenge the exploitation of digital labourers: though they were not paid, they were at ‘the point of production: the point where workers have the power to challenge capital: the centre of the knot (*Labour in the Global Digital Economy* p178). As Postigo writes, the ‘labour consciousness’ that AOL CLs acquired as a result of working together under a common job classification made it impossible for their exploitation as a ‘free distributed workforce’ to continue unchanged. The AOL workers *knew* that their reproductive labour had value.

For them, community management was ‘passionate work’ that contained within it the seeds of what we now take for granted as why we engage with social media: it is creative, it can produce valuable forms of affect, it can provide recognition and responsibility, and for some, though salary and advancement are secondary as they were for AOL volunteers, the possibility of entry to a paying position within the platform’s workforce or in some related industry is a carrot or incentive to labour.

Similarly, social media/social justice activists assert the value of their labour in combatting racism and misogyny online. Because contemporary social media has so many more users than AOL did, managers and moderators are scarce on the ground; these communities are monitored, but not well. And they need to be. Users who engage in ‘call out culture’ by protesting hateful speech are doing some of this monitoring, but they are also doing what they might normally do in everyday speech. So is it work?

Huws is correct to assert that social media use is not really labour in the same way that programming, device manufacturing, bug fixing, and community management are.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, social media/social justice activism falls outside of the realm of ‘the point of production,’ and ‘outside the knot’ of collective resistance: as she writes, ‘to the extent that it is carried out for the purposes of self-expression, unpaid artistic work, such as blogging or posting one’s photograph, music, or videos on the Internet, comes straightforwardly into Marx’s category of ‘unproductive labour,’ which I would prefer to regard as unpaid reproductive labour, producing social use values. (*Labour in the Global Digital Economy*, p171).’

Though they do not have the power to challenge capital since their labour is outside the ‘point of production,’ an excerpt from the manifesto under the #This Tweet Called My Back’ hashtag published in *Model View Culture* asserts that their social justice content production and direct engagement with racism

9. ‘Community management’ is an industry term of art that includes content moderation, but also many other activities that enhance the user experience.

and sexism online fall under Huws' category of 'unpaid reproductive labour.' An excerpt reads, 'The way we are moving now, it's simply not sustainable. What is the sustainability of a movement that leaves women behind and unsupported once the teach-ins and video chats end? Will we be a movement that only allows marginalised women to perform a lifetime of unwaged labour, only to be abused, and have to crowd fund their heating bills in middle age? No.'<sup>10</sup>

Reproductive labour has always been a spanner in the works of Marxist theory. As Silvia Federici writes:

Had Marx recognised that capitalism must rely on both an immense amount of unpaid domestic labour for the reproduction of the workforce, and the devaluation of these reproductive activities in order to cut the cost of labour power, he may have been less inclined to consider capitalist development as inevitable and progressive.<sup>11</sup>

Sal Humphreys, Karen Orr Vered, and Kylie Jarrett trace how social media use and women's work are both immaterial and reproductive. As Humphreys and Vered write:

Discussions of immaterial labour in the online realms have been extensive and yet many of them have failed to pick up on all the work done by feminists in understanding the role of women's work under capitalism and the very useful frameworks feminists have generated already for thinking about immaterial labour.<sup>12</sup>

I entitled this essay 'Unwanted Labour' because I wanted to acknowledge how often efforts by feminists and social justice advocates to reduce misogyny and sexism online are unwanted, punished, and viewed as censorship, uncivil behaviour, or themselves forms of sexism. Social justice venture labourers are often accused of 'policing' social media, of lacking a sense of humour, and of imposing 'pc' values on other users by protesting misogyny, racism, and homophobia when they see it.

Feminist speech in digital spaces benefits everyone, including, of course, the digital industries. As Jarrett writes, women's reproductive labour in digital space may really be *too* advantageous for them: the strong feelings of fellowship, mutual support, and community that arise within social justice communities online may be an 'indirect input into regimes of accumulation' that directs yet more free venture content moderation towards digital media companies. She ends on an optimistic note however, claiming that there is a possibility that women's work 'may produce alternative dispositions, orientations, and social relations *within capital*, thereby transforming the nature of capitalist accumulation itself'.<sup>13</sup>

Woman of colour critical counter speech is outside of capital. Though the emotional labour of moderating an overwhelmingly toxic digital environment

10. @girlinterruptd, @chiefelk, @bad\_dominicana, @aurabogado, @blackamazon, and @thetrudz. 2015. 'This Tweet Called My Back.' *Model View Culture*. Accessed July 14. <https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/thistweetcalledmyback>.

11. Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. PM Press, New York 2012. Hereafter *Revolution at Point Zero*.

12. Sal Humphreys, and Karen Orr Vered, 'Reflecting on Gender and Digital Networked Media.' *Television & New Media* 15 (1) (2014): pp3–13, p10.

13. Kylie Jarrett, 'The Relevance of 'Women's Work': Social Reproduction and Immaterial Labour in Digital Media.' *Television and New Media* 15 (1) (2014): pp14–29, p25.

ultimately benefits platform owners as well as users, the work itself matters partly because of who is performing it, and why. It is possible that the 'knot' that divides labour from non-labour in the digital divide is coming undone as a result of the work of woman of colour venture community managers.

As Federici argues 'starting with the Mexican and Chinese Revolution, the most anti-systematic struggles of the last century have not been fought only or primarily by waged workers, Marx's projected revolutionary subjects, but have been fought by rural, indigenous, anticolonial, antiapartheid, feminist movements (*Revolution at Point Zero*, p92)'. Labour consciousness is an emergent formation among these venture community managers online, and it is growing as digital platforms continue to profit from our free data. Though the dream of an egalitarian Internet has been dashed enough times to make even technological utopianists wary, the labour of woman of colour feminists on social media has created an vital and resurgent space for new styles of community.

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