

Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary¹



Foreword to Critical Commentary on *Venture Labor*

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At the International Communication Association's 2014 conference in Seattle, Washington, along with other panelists, Laura Robinson, Jeremy Schulz, Alice E. Marwick, Nicole S. Cohen, C. W. Anderson, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Enda Brophy, and Gina Neff presented their work across two panels, respectively entitled "Venture Labor: Work and 'The Good Life'" and "Laboring for the 'Good (Part of Your) Life.'" After the conference, panelists synthesized their conclusions. Critical commentary was invited from a range of prominent international scholars: Paul Hirsch, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Ofer Sharone, Barry Wellman, Dimitrina Dimitrova, Tsahi Hayat, Guang Ying Mo, Beverly Wellman, and Antonio Casilli.

Keywords: labor, freelance, professionals, free agent, click workers, invisible labor, networked work, unemployment, self-help discourses, hiring, individualism

As indicated in the introduction to this collaborative research, the previous section comprises research originally presented at the International Communication Association's 2014 conference. Along with other panelists, Laura Robinson, Jeremy Schulz, Alice E. Marwick, Nicole S. Cohen, C. W. Anderson, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Enda Brophy, and Gina Neff presented their work across two panels, respectively entitled "Venture Labor: Work and 'The Good Life'" and "Laboring for the 'Good (Part of Your)

¹ This selection is part of the forum entitled *Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary*, edited by Laura Robinson, Gina Neff, and Jeremy Schulz. All contributions and critiques to the forum should be read and cited as an interlocking dialogue created jointly by Laura Robinson, Jeremy Schulz, Alice E. Marwick, Nicole S. Cohen, C. W. Anderson, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Enda Brophy, Gina Neff, Paul Hirsch, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Ofer Sharone, Barry Wellman, Dimitrina Dimitrova, Tsahi Hayat, Guang Ying Mo, Beverly Wellman, and Antonio Casilli.

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Agendas for the Field

This Special Section offers their critical commentary, emphasizing some additional facets of the issues raised in the foregoing discussion of *Venture Labor*. These themes include the mutual constitution of labor and technology, the reshaping of the self under conditions of neoliberal entrepreneurialism, the effects of the self-help discourse on unemployed professionals, the confluence of entrepreneurialism and social networks, and the connection between value extraction and underpaid digital labor. These contributions flesh out these important and elusive topics, enriching the discussion.

Paul Hirsch discusses the double-edged character of freelancing and the long odds of success, particularly in media industries, where professionals do not have much bargaining power vis-à-vis clients and employers. His discussion points out that these creative professionals also have to fight to retain control over their intellectual property, an additional burden that many other free agent professionals do not have to tackle.

Following up on this discussion, Sarah Banet-Weiser muses on the paradoxical nature of work in an entrepreneurial culture where work is simultaneously degraded and seen as a form of leisure and a source of self-fulfillment to be pursued day and night, blurring the boundaries between work and leisure. She also explores the phenomenon of self-branding and how it relates to the culture of venture labor in the workplace.

Next, we hear from Ofer Sharone, who dwells on the opposite side of this divide: creative professionals who cannot find work and engage in “self-blame” for their undesired circumstances. As Sharone notes, professionals who cannot secure work neglect to scrutinize the employment landscape for the cause of their difficulties. Instead, they look within to what they perceive as deficiencies in themselves. Just as the complex relationships between work overinvestment and the self garner attention in this Special Section, so does the tie between work and social relationships.

Barry Wellman, Dimitrina Dimitrova, Tsahi Hayat, Guang Ying Mo, and Beverly Wellman explain the dynamics of what we might call *networked* entrepreneurialism. They draw from an original study on networked scholars in Canada. These scholarly networks provided opportunities for association and collaboration for scholars who could become isolated in insular disciplines and self-referential institutions. The entrepreneurial scholars in the networks under study used a variety of means to keep in contact with one another, and networks tended toward self-perpetuation, with important network actors maintaining their roles over time.

Finally, Antonio Casilli adds an important dimension to the discussion by shifting attention to the typically overlooked digital laborers who toil to make the 21st-century platform economy run. These

anonymous click workers often earn a pittance, even as they do the typically tedious work that is indispensable to the performance of these platforms.

These five contributions highlight aspects of venture labor that deserve further scrutiny and open doors for more research into its future trajectories. They raise questions about what happens when the venture labor ethic insinuates itself into diverse social groups that have a more tenuous relationship to the world of work than the creative professionals featured in Neff's book—people such as the unemployed professionals interviewed by Sharone and the click workers discussed by Casilli. At the same time, these contributions shed light on the interplay of this entrepreneurialism with social networks and cultural environments—external factors that impinge on this complex and multifaceted phenomenon.