**Free Playbor?**

When the 2011 Arab Spring was in full force, many pundits dubbed it the “Twitter Revolution,” suggesting that the microblogging platform was the impetus for the resulting changes. Many commentators opined that such dramatic change would not have been possible without Twitter. Others, like Evgeny Morozov, have been warning users of the dark sides of social media. In Morozov’s most recent book, *To Save Everything, Click Here*, he suggests a major shift that’s occurring in Silicon Valley, moving from their inspirational tagline “innovate or die” into the somewhat apathetic “ameliorate or die” (x). Such a paradigm shift is important, especially when it occurs within increasingly unavoidable corporations, like Google and Facebook. When using these tools, users often neglect (or are simply unaware) of the huge profits they are making for the company itself, largely from the free labor. Liking a product is now akin to punching a clock. In fact, a study released in 2012 noted that each Facebook user amounts to $4.84 per year (Gross). While it sounds like small potatoes, once you consider that as of December 2012 there were over one billion active Facebook accounts, that number takes on a new meaning. For the purposes of this talk, I’m interested in how we conceptualize labor today—many of us (especially at this conference) don’t actually punch a clock anymore. On the flip side, we’re accessible constantly—we often check our phones in the middle of the night out of curiosity, boredom, or when we just can’t fall back to sleep. I’m interested in how we are blinded by the idea that we’re playing and not actually making money—we’re caught up in some neo-capitalist pyramid scheme. For the rest of this talk, I’ll be discussing how we’re fooled to think we’re not working, and our passivity in these schemes only create more wealth for those on the backend. As digital citizens, saying ‘we don’t want to participate’ isn’t enough—sometimes even that refusal generates more information that rolls itself into more cash.

But before I jump into the digital side of things, I want to kick it old school for a bit. E.P. Thompson examines the proliferation of personal time as exact and uniform in accordance with others in the essay, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism.” Thompson’s essay discusses the use of clocks, and the eventual personal ownership of watches, illuminating the time-work duality in specific reference to economic productivity. It is no surprise, then, when Thompson notes that, “a general diffusion of clocks and watches is occurring at the exact moment when the industrial revolution demanded a greater synchronization of labor” (368). Thompson’s time, unlike what we experience today on Facebook, is commodifiable through its matierialization. It’s a result of the increasing ubiquity of clocks and watches. To begin understanding Thompson’s essay, it is crucial to define the relations of time and work, work and money, and money and time. These three pairs illustrate the regulation of the individual’s own time ultimately subsumed into the larger economy as a whole. Clocks-turned-watches merely provided the illusion of personal time, and this literal ownership of time-keeping forced the individual into the intensifying capitalistic goals of their surrounding economy. What we have are “important changes in the apprehension of time” (Thompson 352). Time is no longer a ‘useless’ indication of marking passing moments within the individual, but now belongs collectively to the larger sphere of work. When time becomes associated with work, the value of the internal – or, personal – time is negated. Work time becomes the only important sense of time, lending itself to “an uncommonly well-regulated economy” (Thompson 355). However, even though the regulation of clocked-work provides the structure for mandating effectivity, what complexifies the time-work relation is the “task-oriented” system of productivity. Thompson notes that task-oriented work often commingles personal time with work time, whereas clock-time labor easily differentiates the two, precisely because once the time has expired, one’s work is then complete (358).

Unlike task-oriented work where one could simply complete unfinished tasks during any time, clocked work-time allows for neither neglect nor laziness. All work must be completed within the standardized block of work-time. While ‘on the clock,’ one’s understanding of work-time is easily recognized—the determination of work comes not from the *individual* completion of tasks, but from an outside agent controlling the productivity of *all* the workers.

The strengthening of the economy is similarly grounded on progressive work. Therefore, time is not the issue when dealing with work-progress. Instead, the crucial issue is the successful completion of one workday leading into the next—here, the workday as a whole becomes the substitute for time. Even though work-time does not show progress in itself – it is merely a repeated event – it forwards the economy through its recurring use of the same-time. For the purposes of this essay, I am using the idea of ‘same-time’ to indicate groups of employees commencing and completing the workday within the same block of clocked-time each day.

The repeated action of same-time work is the exact point where time becomes insignificant. The repetition of this same-time indicates that time is no longer forward, and one must instead view money and productivity as the determinant progressive forces. Work-time only then becomes synonymous with producing money: “the employer must *use* the time of his labor, and see it is not wasted: not the task but the value of time when reduced to money is dominant. Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent” (Thompson 359).

The work-money dualism is a successful (i.e. forward moving) time paradigm only if one does not retard the other. The worker’s value is then materialized through the regular distribution of pay, and Thompson notes that increased wealth or social status was often, and perhaps not coincidentally, marked by “the acquisition of time-pieces” (370). This materialization of time in the form of a watch provides the employee with the illusion of individual time, or at least control of one’s own time. Contrarily, ownership of a timepiece indicates two interdependent methods of control: 1) by purchasing a watch, this demonstrates an employee’s affluence, an individual representation of wealth – or, at least minor success at one’s occupation – of which can be maintained only through constant productivity for one’s employer and 2) “we are concerned simultaneously with time-sense in its technological conditioning, and with time-measurement as a means of labour exploitation” (Thompson 382). One’s ability to purchase personal items, such as watches, not only forces the individual back to same-time each workday, but by looking at one’s watch, one is reminded *exactly* to whom time belongs—not the individual, but a larger force. Now, the susceptible individual is involuntarily unable to escape from an accelerating economy, its progress noted not through time, but constant productivity.

Such constant productivity takes a playful turn in our current conception of it. In the new collection *Digital Labor*, each author’s piece interrogates that seedy underbelly of digital tools, like Facebook, and strongly emphasizes how these tools are using you for major profits. Trebor Scholz, the editor of this fine collection, has compiled several smart and timely essays, especially when the need for pure, realistic criticism of our online habits is intensifying. Each of the fourteen chapters are divvied up amongst four major themes: the shifting sites of labor markets, interrogating modes of digital labor, the violence of participation, and organized networks in an age of vulnerable publics. Scholtz opens by questioning what it means to be a digital worker today. The larger concern for Scholtz is the distribution of what he calls “cognitive capitalism,” a term that piggybacks on Clay Shirky’s term “cognitive surplus”, whereby even a small shift in way we distribute our time from consuming media to producing it (10). In *Digital Labor*, each of the contributors takes a less optimistic approach to our participation in digital spaces.For Schultz in particular, cognitive surplus is clever term used to disguise the “act of being a speaker within communication systems. It doesn’t feel, look, or smell like labor at all” (2). For Schultz and the other contributors, the ‘not feeling like labor’ is a major issue—we’re fooled into thinking we’re merely watching a trailer for an upcoming film, liking our favorite television show on Facebook, or saving time by purchasing dog food on Amazon. Schultz strongly suggests that, “we, the ‘users,’ are sold as the product. The loss of our privacy […] buys us the convenience of ‘free,’ innovative services” (2). Because we enjoy socializing on Facebook, we are eager digital laborers; however, the large majority of users are probably unaware of the exploitation that occurs from their seemingly harmless “liking” and “sharing.”

As mentioned previously, we’re often blinded by our passivity, and users of social media and other web-based platforms, rarely (if ever) understand the importance of their participation. In the essay “In Search of the Lost Paycheck,” Andrew Ross refers to the term “playbor” (a portmanteau of “play” and “labor”) which suggests that users, especially those under forty, are “the arbiters of their own exploitation” (27). In other words, all of our online interactions are **monetizable**—and we’re willingly working for free. Sean Cubitt’s “The Political Economy of Cosmopolis” interrogates the ubiquity of such unpaid labor and centers on the issue of colonialism by questioning how our online interactions masquerade playful activities for profits. Cubitt expresses concern over capital’s ability to easily colonize digital spaces and exploit workers by spreading into what we believe are personal spaces; however they are instead personalized forms of exploitation. Exploitation, too, takes on a familiar role in McKenzie Wark’s, “Considerations on a Hacker Manifesto,” in which he expands on some of his theories from his earlier book *Hacker Manifesto*. In the latter, Wark argues, “While we create these new worlds, we do not possess them. That which we create is mortgaged to others, and to the interests of others, to states and corporations who monopolize the means for making worlds we alone discover. WE do not own what we produce—it owns us” (004). In this current collection, Wark adds that, “anyone who labors for someone else producing so-called intellectual property is a hacker” (71). Even though the characterization of a hacker is much different from the anti-establishment stereotype, one most recently identified in the hacktivist group, Anonymous, Wark brings to light one of the most important ideas in the text—no matter our participation, we are the commodities.

But not all “playbor” is purely digital. In “Fandom as Free Labor”, Abigail De Kosnik argues that fandom extends the original product beyond its intended usage. Fandom refers to groups of people with excessive enthusiasm, the most well known example likely being the *Star Trek* Trekkies. De Kosnik suggests a dependency between the original product (like the *Star Trek* series) and the fandoms (the Trekkies themselves) that consume the product. Fandoms often see themselves as a subculture, going against the popular interpretations of the product and favoring a more arcane, or even imagined, interpretation of it. Even though fandoms perceive they are cultivating a separate product, the original-producer benefits *even more* from these new additions to the product line. To explain the process, De Kosnik leans on Dick Hebidge’s *Subculture*: “Objects are made to mean and mean again as ‘style’ in subculture […] But it ends in the construction of a style, in a gesture of defiance or contempt, in a smile or a sneer. It signals a Refusal” (100).To ‘mean and mean again’ suggests that we are not being taken advantage of just one time, but at multiple junctures and times.

Overall, the idea of digital labor isn’t terribly new, yet we need to actively recognize what our digital citizenry is doing, paying, and funding. The one downside (if I’m pressed to find one) is the inability of any of the contributors to actually suggest a feasible alternative. If one decides to quit social media altogether, s/he becomes outcast, literally disconnected, and left behind. For the time being aware of our own exploitation is realization enough.

Thanks!