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Hope Labor: The Role of Employment Prospects in Online Social Production

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Abstract

This research introduces 'hope labor' as a motivation for voluntary online social production, defined here as 'un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow'. Drawing from interviews with SB Nation sports bloggers and Yelp consumer reviewers, this research expands current understandings of the motivations behind online social production. Structurally, we distinguish hope labor from other forms of free labor by emphasizing the temporal relationship between present and future work—a relationship that shifts costs and risks onto the individual. Hope labor is naturalized and normalized through neoliberal ideologies. It is seen as an investment that pays off for individuals based on merit, despite its deleterious impact on employment prospects in desired industries. Our theorization of hope labor can be seen as a complement or corrective to celebratory accounts of meaning making, creativity, and community in online social production.

Introduction

With its capacity for large-scale volunteer collaboration, the social web holds promising, progressive potential as it simultaneously facilitates capital accumulation's expansion and intensification. The Internet's social dimensions have been long noted since the early days of bulletin board systems, MUDs, and amateur webzines; however, 'Web 2.0's' technological advancements and changes in the 'architectures of participation' have arguably expanded these opportunities by enhancing interactive, modifiable, user-centered collaboration and information-sharing (O'Reilly, 2005, para. 26). Most notably, recent so-called 'social media' platforms broaden the access and ease of production, inviting users to co-create content and value (Jenkins, 2006; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).[1] Sites such as Wikipedia, Linux, and Indymedia each illustrate the potency of online 'social production' (productive economic activity carried out primarily for social and psychological purposes rather than financial remuneration) for the free creation and distribution of socially useful products and services (Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2010). Given participants' willingness to freely contribute, however, private firms have (unsurprisingly) also looked to harness social production to serve their commercial ends. Facebook and YouTube (Google), for instance, have built their services on users' unpaid content production—activities that drive traffic and generate valuable marketing data (Ross, 2013). Major brands such as Nike and Doritos (Frito-Lays)

also tap the crowd to assist in product design and to create and circulate branded commercial messaging. Again, these contributions go largely uncompensated (Murdock, 2011; Turow, 2009). In either case, free labor arguably benefits the commercial firms that facilitate and harness it, rather than the users who create the underlying value (Ross, 2013).

Existing research points to "socially recognized self-realization" as participants' *primary* motivation for online social production (Arvidsson, 2008, p. 332). In other words, people collaborate, first-and-foremost, for the intrinsic pleasures of productive processes *and* for peer recognition of a job well done (Arvidsson, 2008; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). At the same time, research accounts of diverse social production communities, including video game 'modders', YouTube videographers, software coders, and apparel designers, have anecdotally noted what we see as a secondary set of motivations—the desire to better position one's self for future employment opportunities (Brabham, 2008; Deuze, 2007; Kücklich, 2005; Murdock, 2011; Postigo, 2007; Ross, 2013; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Here, the skills, visibility, and connections developed through social production are deemed a route to gainful employment. Or, as Deuze (2007) says, "people seem to be increasingly willing to participate voluntarily in the media making process to achieve what can be called a networked reputation" (p. 77). However, while future employment prospects seem to be a common factor in motivating social production, these processes remain under-examined and under-theorized. This research attempts to fill that void.

Without discounting participants' compelling desires for creativity and community, we argue here that online work's seduction as a future-oriented investment is an understated motivation for social production—and one that is increasingly incorporated into online business models. We describe these processes as 'hope labor' or un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow. Our understandings of hope labor emerged inductively from separate case studies of production conducted by each author at two successful web-based companies—the consumer evaluation site Yelp and the sports blog network SB Nation. We first document empirically the hopeful motivations of sports bloggers and 'Yelpers', then theorize hope labor's operation in online social production communities. Through empirical and theoretical investigation, we argue that hope labor is best understood as an ideological process. This research is thus guided by the following questions: What assumptions does a hope labor ideology build upon to allow participants to see it as a taken-for-granted pursuit? And how does this ideology mask and maintain digital capitalism's asymmetrical power relations? Ultimately, we argue that hope labor functions as a viable coping strategy for navigating the uncertainties of the contemporary labor economy, yet it does so without the risks associated with related processes, such as 'venture labor' (Neff, 2012). As such, hope labor is yet another means of valorizing leisure spaces that captures digital 'workers' in relations not unlike those defined by traditional labor arrangements.

The 'Free Labor' Debate

Some cultural theorists celebrate social production as emancipatory and empowering, with users talking back to, or entirely bypassing, commercial media's hierarchical organization (Jenkins, 2006; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Critical political economists challenge these democratizing claims. Foregrounding power asymmetries, they critique the harnessing of users' uncompensated productivity—their 'free labor, for the ends of capital accumulation' (Andrejevic, 2007; Arvidsson, 2008; Cohen, 2008; Terranova, 2004). However, free laborers readily report the pleasures

associated with such work as payment enough, raising the point that "[t]he fact that work is being performed for free in itself is not a sufficient objection" (Hesmondhalgh, 2010, p. 277). Heeding this point, we begin our critique of hope labor by asking what it means to 'labor' in the digital economy, and whether or not a Marxian understanding of these dynamics remains relevant to understanding contemporary modes of cultural production.

In *Capital* (1867), Marx famously articulated the laborer as one who enters into a two-part exploitative relationship with capitalists in the sale of their labor-power. First, as more and more of life's necessities were pulled into market relations (e.g., food, shelter), the laborer under capitalism had no other choice but to sell his labor (under asymmetrical terms) to those who owned the means of production. Second, through a range of strategies that manipulate the intensity and duration of work, the capitalist aimed to extract more labor from the worker than for that which the capitalist had paid. It is this 'surplus labor' (labor that the worker carries out for free) that is the source of the capitalist's profits.[2]

In this extraction of surplus labor, workers become alienated (or 'estranged') in four respects. They are objectively estranged from the productive process (which they have no control over), from the product created (which conceals their labor), from the other workers (who are put into competition with one another) and, ultimately, from the worker's own self (which one cannot fully 'realize'). Labor, in these terms, does not belong to the worker, but belongs to someone else. As described by Marx (1844/2009):

> labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind… [estranged labor] estranges from man his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual aspect, his human aspect. (p. 30)

From a Marxian standpoint, then, 'good work' is work free from alienation. Many digital free laborers describe the experience of social production as enjoyable, rewarding, or as activities that do not 'feel like' work. Similar to labor in the formal creative and cultural industries,[3] social production's affordances of relative creative autonomy, collaboration, and control over the product offer opportunities for work that seem to approach 'unalienated labor' (Cohen, 2012; Hesmondhalgh, 2010). This kind of labor allows one "to do what one does best according to one's own ideas and to realize oneself in one's very productive activity" (Arvidsson, 2008, p. 332). As Terranova (2000) argues, free labor is unpaid, but it is also free from the total control of capitalists who struggle to valorize relatively autonomous production processes. This dynamic is not unlike the cultural industries' 'art-capital' contradictions (Ryan, 1992). Much as capital's efforts to reduce artists to abstract (surplus) labor undermine the novelty or uniqueness (and, thus, the market value) of a cultural good (Ryan, 1992; see also Neff, 2012), so too do capital's efforts to control social production undermine the pleasures that make free work valuable in the first place. To the extent that digital and cultural labor provide "opportunities to engage in total human activity" (Cohen, 2012, p. 142), Marx's alienation thesis becomes arguably more complicated to sustain.

Capitalism's flexible, dynamic nature, however, has absorbed these challenges, rationalizing digital and cultural production's seeming a-rationality towards accumulative ends (Cohen, 2012; Ross, 2013; Ryan, 1992). How capital responds to these challenges varies by context. As other political economic analyses demonstrate, social media commodifies free labor through proprietary terms of service agreements that strip users of intellectual property rights (Cohen, 2008). Through

the surveillance of tastes and preferences, social media also convert user data into cybernetic commodities that are sold to third-party marketers (Andrejevic, 2007, 2011). Andrejevic (2011) also notes how online and offline 'work' collide as employers look to new hires' friendships and social networks as a source of value (see Gregg, 2011). This free labor has ultimately undercut professional wages and job availability, introducing new opportunities for exploiting workers' compensation needs even as corporations continue to report record profits.[4] 'Content farms', for instance, Taylorize creative and information production, with writers churning out volumes of unattributed, search-driven web content for a small penance per article (Ross, 2013).

Still, free laborers work for non-financial rewards (e.g., creativity, autonomy) or some kind of deferred compensation. For example, Hesmondhalgh (2010) explains that non-waged work experiences might command higher wages when learned skills are applied in later contexts. Here, Hesmondhalgh hints at future-oriented motivations as justification for engaging in un- or underpaid labor—a temporal dimension that, we argue, is both fundamental and often missing from free labor debates. Interestingly, this nudge towards future work is noted anecdotally across the free labor literature but not adequately explored. Both Postigo (2007) and Kücklich (2005), for instance, identified volunteer video game modders who successfully translated their 'celebrity status' into paid work opportunities. As one such modder explained, "The secret desire of every mod creator is to get recognition from the companies who are making the games" (Kücklich, 2005, para. 38). Deuze (2007) noted similar payoffs for Amazon book reviewers and YouTube actors and videographers. Brabham (2008) suggests that users willingly produce content for crowdsourcing firms like Threadless and iStockphoto in exchange for experience and exposure. These motivations have not gone unnoticed by firms seeking free labor. As Murdock (2011) explains:

> In the linked and very visible arenas of action created by the Internet, participants hoping for employment, or simply wanting to express themselves and earn the respect of their peers, are actively solicited by corporations bent on commandeering their skills and engagement. (p. 28)

Despite these inroads, most discussions of voluntary online content production attend exclusively to personal and social motivations for production rather than hopes of future employment. This essay brings hope labor from the margins of digital labor research to the center of analysis, legitimizing these dynamics as real, recognizable, and important motivations for voluntary online social production. Hope labor functions because it is largely *not* experienced as exploitation or alienation, despite the commodification processes inherent to digital and cultural production. After explaining our methodological orientation, we theorize hope labor's structural context and ideological function in an attempt to expand the free digital labor debate.

Methods

Our conceptualization of hope labor originated from separate case studies of production experiences at SB Nation (Corrigan, 2012) and Yelp (Kuehn, 2011)—two popular social web platforms that derive value from users' voluntary content production.[5] SB Nation is a network of over 320 commercial sports blogs produced by and for fans of specific US professional and college sports teams. As of March 2013, the network ranked 7th in traffic amongst online US sports properties with 20 million unique monthly visitors globally (SB Nation, 2013). Yelp is a consumer evaluation website where members rate and review local businesses and services. As of 2013, Yelp ranked as

one of the most popular online review communities with over 86 million unique monthly visitors (Yelp, 2013).

Each original study had a distinct primary focus: Corrigan (2012) examined SB Nation bloggers' work routines; and Kuehn (2011) critiqued consumer evaluation practices as a neoliberal form of consumer-citizenship. Each study required attention, though, to contributors' negotiation of the free labor dialectic. Using long, in-depth interviews, each researcher interrogated the motivations, practices, and perceptions that active contributors brought to their voluntary production.[6] In total, 18 Yelpers were interviewed (10 women, 8 men) and 9 SB Nation bloggers (all men). Interviews were transcribed, and each researcher generated themes using comparable methods of qualitative data analysis.

The findings here are a synthetic theorization of our respective interview data that pays particular attention to bloggers' and consumer reviewers' overlapping motivations for social production. While neither researcher originally set out to study hope labor, in personal conversations about our respective studies we both noted a recurring theme—interviewees hoped that their current contributions would translate into future work opportunities. We developed the term 'hope labor' because 'hope' emerged as a salient emic category in these interviews. In this research we advance the term as a theoretical construct based on hope's ontological and affective dimensions, its structural context, and its ideological functioning. In this context, the critical tradition emphasizes the dialectical movement between empirical observation and abstract theorizing (Bettig, 1996; Mosco, 1996). In developing hope labor here, we moved iteratively between our respective interview data, shared conversations and existing digital labor literature, constantly evaluating the 'fit' of an evolving 'hope labor' construct. The following is the product of those observations, conversations, and literature investigations.

SB Nation and Yelp: Socially Recognized Self-Realization as Primary Motivation

Empirical studies of digital social production highlight both *personal* and *social* motivations for users' contributions. On a personal level, social production presents opportunities for achieving self-realization through the autonomous pursuit of competency in a given area (Arvidsson, 2008; Shirky, 2010). SB Nation bloggers and Yelp consumer reviewers both noted the non-monetary, *personal* satisfaction derived through creative processes:

> Eric[7] (SB Nation blogger): A rewarding experience is just going back and seeing that I did do a good job on a story I published. There are times I write really quick, brief stuff. Other times I write heartfelt features on certain subjects—stuff that takes a while to get out. When I do that, and I go back and see what I had written and how that illustrated the point I wanted to make. That makes you feel real good.
>
> Josh (Yelp reviewer): It makes me a little sharper…I graduated a long time ago and I haven't had to write critically about anything or make recall so I think it made my brain a little sharper, to just think; and I like the writing and it's good to write even if it's just the most stupidest things, you know?

Social motivations tend to reinforce the personal motivations noted above (Arvidsson, 2008; Shirky, 2010). Arvidsson (2008) explains, "It is not enough for me to know that [I have done excellent work]. I need a community of people whom I recognize as my peers to recognize this fact,

in turn" (p. 332). He refers to these mutually reinforcing social and personal motivations as 'socially recognized self-realization'; study after study indicates that it is the primary impetus behind much of social production (p. 332). Active SB Nation and Yelp contributors also identify 'socially recognized self-realization' as a key motivator. For example:

> Mark (Yelp reviewer): I find Yelp to be surprisingly enriching … I don't think I've ever gotten more positive feedback from writing and expressing myself than I have anywhere else. You know, I like knowing that people like what I do, and that's one of the things that keeps me on Yelp is that people like what I do. And I don't want to disappoint them. And I'm helping people discover cool places and that's good enough for me.
>
> Tim (SB Nation blogger): I'll be frank with you … being appreciated for doing something you enjoy, on your own terms, you know, it never gets old … You know, I've been doing the same damn [day job] for three–three-and-a-half years ... So I can go home and spend several hours a day doing On The Prowl[8] for very little money, but because people appreciate it, and it's something I enjoy doing and enjoy discussing, you know, it's not work at all and I feel much better doing it.

SB Nation and Yelp: Hope Labor as Secondary Motivation

While socially recognized self-realization is typically understood as the most important motivation for free digital labor, it is not the *only* motivation. Both Yelp reviewers and SB Nation bloggers identified a recurring, secondary motivation: that their work would lead to personally satisfying future employment opportunities. In other words, some of the content production on these sites can be understood as hope labor. For bloggers, potential employment hopes included full-time roles within the SB Nation hierarchy, mainstream media positions as sports pundits or columnists, or employment with professional sports organizations. Similarly, consumer reviewers saw their written reviews, photographs and network as potential stepping-stones toward paid writing, photography jobs or other opportunities gained through their Yelp connections. In both cases, specific plans were rare; instead, most bloggers and consumer reviewers had vague occupational *hopes*:

> C.J. (SB Nation blogger): I mean sometimes it's dreaming, but I like to set goals, and I like to try to keep myself pushing that way, you know, hope–. Hoping that an avenue or a door might open, or an opportunity might open, you know, and maybe it'd be something that I could–will be beneficial to me.
>
> Tim (SB Nation blogger): [A]ctually I could still see myself still doing this five years from now. Who knows where it will take me, maybe it'll lead to a job, maybe it'll lead to a career … Maybe it'll get me on TV. I have no idea. I'll be frank … I don't know if I should be on TV, but it might [laughs]–it might get me there.
>
> Mark (Yelp reviewer): I guess I sort of have a very private, far-fetched wish that maybe somebody would see what I'm doing and maybe offer me a job. 'Hey, we really like your work, you should write for us.' … I guess in some ways I'm like somebody who's in a bar band playin' away thinking maybe somebody's gonna come in and see me.

A self-identified 'social planner', Ken had posted over 14,000 photographs and 1,900 reviews to Yelp. When asked why, Ken replied, "Advertising. Shameless advertising … Maybe a gig will

come out of it. Sometimes people will be like, "Do you want to take pictures of my restaurant? Or, take pictures at a baby shower?"

Bloggers and consumer reviewers who did not see their work as hope labor still pointed out that their peers did. As SB Nation blogger Mike explained, "I suspect most of the guys you're talking to want to have a career as a sports pundit. They want to make it their full-time job". Likewise, Yelp consumer reviewer Monica told stories of 'wannabe food critics' who utilized Yelp as a blogging platform in the pursuit of paid writing gigs. She also noted a friend who "totally uses Yelp to promote his band, has played at Yelp events, [and] 'friends' everyone" in the hope of expanding his audience.

Socially recognized self-realization is not an unimportant motivator for voluntary online content production; indeed, we acknowledge its primary role in motivating SB Nation and Yelp contributors. Our interviews indicate, though, that the pursuit of future employment opportunities should *also* be accounted for in explaining contributors' freely volunteered time and energy. One does not necessarily preclude the other. Hope labor then, can serve as one important motivator for free labor online, which, when commodified, reproduces the structural conditions which sustain digital capitalism.[9] To talk about motives, however, necessarily raises questions of values—questions of culture. We argue that a full understanding of hope labor's operations and implications requires attention to it as an ideology.

Ideology and Power

In his authoritative work on ideology, Thompson (2009) distinguishes between neutral and critical uses of the term. Neutral conceptions see ideology as general meaning systems, or as processes that any group can more or less effectively direct to their own ends. Alternatively, we follow Thompson in arguing for a critical conception of ideology—one that foregrounds culture's dialectical relationship to historically specific systems of domination. As Jhally (1989) puts it, "*ideology* is the form that *culture* takes under conditions of *hegemony*" (p. 153). The critical analyst's job, then, is to reveal the ways in which culture's meaningful symbolic forms—including hope laborers' practices, discussions, and texts—are both constituted by and constitutive of relations of domination (Thompson, 2009). How have the power asymmetries of work and life in digital capitalism given rise to hope labor? And how do hope laborers' actions, discussions, and products function, ideologically, to reproduce this system's power asymmetries?

Structural Contexts

In explaining hope labor's contemporary manifestation it is tempting to point, deterministically, at the role of digital technologies. Networked devices do not *cause* free or hope labor, though—they simply make it easier to engage in and extract value from these forms of work (Ross, 2013). Indeed, hope labor is not restricted to digital spaces. For instance, unpaid internships—all but unheard of before the 1980s—have boomed in recent years as prerequisites for entry in a range of industries (Perlin, 2012). Most reality TV participants are also paid pittances as they angle to parlay their 15 minutes of fame into aftermarket endorsements (Ross, 2013). In fact, the media industry's "star system" has long dangled "acclaim, reward, and recognition" in front of the large pool of dreamy-eyed cultural labor (Ursell, 2000, p. 818).

Broader trends in precarity and alienation offer more fruitful explanatory frameworks for hope labor's recent proliferation. Since the 1970s, new communication technologies, globalization, and

neoliberal policies all contributed to increasingly insecure labor conditions (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gregg, 2011; Harvey, 1990; McKercher & Mosco, 2008; Ross, 2009). Under structural pressures to cost-effectively produce and market an ever-changing menu of goods and services, Fordism's relatively stable labor relations and long-term contracts gave way to 'flexible accumulation's' short-term, temporary, and contractual work (Harvey, 1990). As 'free agents' in these casualized and precarious labor markets, postindustrial workers have had to re-orient themselves as laborers in order to individually navigate the future's 'radical uncertainty' (Ross, 2004; 2009). They have done this, in part, by embracing neoliberalism's entrepreneurial ethos of individualization and risk management–processes exemplified by information and cultural workers (Gregg, 2011; Neff, 2012; Ross, 2009). As Neff revealed, dot-com era Silicon Alley workers strategically deferred compensation, promoted company products off the clock, maintained the 'right' social networks, and learned new skills to diversify their employment qualifications. Neff's workers viewed these activities as requirements for successfully positioning themselves in a growing but competitive Internet industry—investments she describes as 'venture labor'.

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) economic precarity many of Neff's (2012) venture laborers actually embraced free agency and the entrepreneurial ethos; they framed these avenues as welcome alternatives to the large, alienating corporations of the postwar era, which stamped out creativity and thwarted self-realization. Like other 'New Economy' firms, Silicon Alley promoted a less alienating work culture of 'openness, cooperation, and self-management'—a culture that ostensibly promised satisfying, meaningful work (Ross, 2004, p. 9). However, as ethnographic studies of these new or reformed workplaces reveal, façades of autonomy and creativity often mask 'self-exploitation' and new disciplinary regimes (Casey, 1999; Ross, 2004). The important point is that in the absence of employment stability, contemporary workers are looking for meaningful, less alienating forms of work; employers, if only for competitive reasons, increasingly try to create these contexts.

In addition to alienating labor processes, creeping social alienation has left Americans "increasingly insecure, isolated, and lonely" (Turkle, 2012, p. 157). In *Bowling Alone* (2000) Putnam attributed much of our atomization to 'privatizing' or 'individualizing' technologies—specifically television; however, social alienation can also be seen as a product of consumer capitalism more generally. Consumer discourses privilege the material over the social, and most of the interactions we *do* have are with strangers with whom we build no ongoing relationship (Shirky, 2010). The Web can certainly serve as a space for further social disconnection (Turkle, 2011), and its commercialization has been sweeping (Fuchs, 2010). However, online communities also hold potential for the kinds of connections and collaboration that create bridges to people we would not normally interact with and deepen bonds with those we already do (Norris, 2002). Indeed, Andrejevic (2009) argues that Web 2.0 gains its appeal against the degradation of workplace and social life under capitalism.

We argue that these contexts of precarity and alienation have created ripe conditions for hope labor's proliferation. To understand why this is, though, 'hope' must first be explicated.

Hope

The existing literature on hope is abundant, including contributions from philosophy, psychology, sociology, and theology (Scioli & Biller, 2009). Here we highlight only the most relevant insights for the present discussion. Hope is premised on a dynamic ontology that sees the human condition

as a work-in-progress—we live and work in the hope of moving from a state of what the philosopher Josef Pieper called not-yet-being into a state of being-more or being-fulfilled (Schumacher, 2003). In this, hope is a 'historicotemporal' process (Schumacher, 2003). Temporally, hope involves the projection into the future of a better, more challenging, or different state of being—outcomes we perceived as desirable. These desirable, future-oriented projections are not produced out of whole cloth, though; they are historically specific in that they draw on some condition of the past or present—some experience or idea one would like to see realized (Bloch, 1986; Tillich, 1990). The hope laborers we talked to drew from attractive conditions of the present when projecting their desires into the future. The autonomy, mastery, and connectedness of socially recognized self-realization provided for compelling experiences, and marked their primary motivation for participating in social production; however, they hoped they could one day be compensated for the same or related work.

It is hard to fault people for wanting to make a living at activities, such as online social production, that bring them great personal and social satisfaction. So the saying goes, 'Choose a job you love, and you'll never work a day in your life'. The problem is that in precarious times, making a living at something you love is hardly a matter of choice, even for the most entrepreneurial among us. Here, the hope literature is also insightful. When we hope, it is for outcomes that have a high degree of uncertainty, such as parlaying online social production into paid employment; we do not hope for things that are likely or that can simply be planned for. We hope for outcomes that are difficult to obtain, for which realization is beyond our control, and that—ultimately—may not happen at all (Schumacher, 2003; Scioli & Biller, 2009).

It is this beyond-our-control uncertainty that distinguishes hope labor from Neff's (2012) related concept—venture labor. Neff situates venture labor in relation to risk—the probabilistic measurement of desirable or undesirable outcomes associated with any specific venture. When people venture labor, they plan and carry out strategies presumed to reduce their exposure to risk. When we hope labor we may also engage in these sorts of strategic actions, including the pursuit of experience and exposure, because difficult outcomes do not simply happen on their own; however, we ultimately know that the realization of our hopes is fundamentally beyond our control. We lack agency, so we hope.

Hope can be looked at, optimistically, as a necessary step toward emancipation. It is a fundamental resource for imagining and continually pursuing a better, albeit uncertain, life (Bloch, 1986; Scioli & Biller, 2009). However, hope can also be theorized ideologically—as a process that keeps people chasing illusory outcomes rather than engaging in struggles over which they may have a modicum of control (Nietzsche, 1996). We do not wish to imply any sort of 'false consciousness' on the part of hope laborers; but indeed, even the most enlightened hope laborers, well aware of uncertainties and inequities, may help to reproduce power asymmetries. Therefore, it is worth exploring the ways in which online social production has been socially constructed as a more or less reliable and fair way to advance employment opportunities. The following examines these processes.

Hope Labor's Ideological Operation

Thompson (1990) classifies "legitimation, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation, and reification" as five "general modes through which ideology can operate" (p. 60). While these modes are not exhaustive, they offer a useful toolkit for identifying and explaining the operation of

ideologies in the service of power. The discussion here focuses on the ideological legitimation of hope labor.

If an online contributor is to develop and sustain a hopeful outlook on future work opportunities, she is going to need to see hope labor as a legitimate (if always uncertain) process. One way this occurs is through 'rationalization' by arguing that hope labor is a legitimate avenue for securing future employment (Thompson, 2009). In a 2011 article titled, "How writing for free can launch your career", Jason Fry offers perhaps the most cogent rationalization of hope labor. He contends that writing for free can be a strategic career choice for aspiring journalists. Through self-publishing or unpaid writing, Fry (2011) argues that writers can find something "in it for [them]"—a byline, link, publication, or important social connection. More importantly, writing for free creates opportunities for acquiring the experience and exposure that journalists need to eventually secure paid work. In fact, Fry (2011) contends that these forms of remuneration should be top priorities for writers who are just starting out—even more so than money; "You should focus on getting experience, and getting known. The rest will come—think of what you'll be doing as an investment that will pay off down the road" (para. 8).

Fry (2011) may be right; building experience and exposure may well be the most reliable path to employment in contemporary journalism. But that does not mean that this process of legitimation-by-rationalization is not ideological. By framing hope labor in neoliberal discourses of risk and investment, Fry denies hope labor's fundamental uncertainty—whether investment "*will* pay off down the road" (para. 8). Further, by saying that "You *should* focus on getting experience" (para. 8), Fry implies a degree of agency on the part of the hope laborer that masks structural power asymmetries. To the extent that entry into professional journalism is beyond the writer's control—and increasingly so amid newsroom layoffs—the things one *should* do to secure employment are really externally imposed *musts.*

For those unwilling to accept Fry's (2011) rationalization as a matter of faith, he taps into another of ideology's legitimizing strategies—universalization. As Thompson (2009) explains, relations of dominance are represented, ideologically, as "beneficial to all" and "open in principle to anyone who has the ability and the inclination to succeed with them (p. 61)". Pulling from neoliberalism's meritocratic precepts, Fry (2011) suggests that hope labor will pay off for the best and the hardest working:

> The web is a meritocracy—a dizzying talent show anyone can enter. If you are good and if you work hard—really, really hard—your stuff will be found … you'll look back at the days you did write for free, and realize they were your digital-age apprenticeship—for which you were compensated after all. (2011, para. 7, 8)

Under this meritocratic framing, the failure to realize a return on one's investment can be explained away as an individual's lack of talent or hard work, or by simply not playing the hope labor game smartly enough or for long enough. Left unexplored are the digital content industry's power asymmetries, which vest the web's most trafficked firms with control over employment opportunities (Ross, 2013). Indeed, Fry implies that talented, hard-working people will not find desirable employment (or will be less likely to) if they do not hope labor first.

Consistent with this meritocratic framing, some interviewees made note of acquaintances that had secured paid work as a result of their hope labor. If they can do it, why shouldn't others be able to also? Interviewees implicitly acknowledged, though, that hope labor is not a "level playing field". Some companies (e.g., SB Nation, *Huffington Post*) thrive by offering writing opportunities

ideal for hope laborers' aspirations. SB Nation bloggers, for example, described the site's superior publishing tools, legitimacy, traffic, and distribution relationships as boons to their ambitions within the company or elsewhere:

> Mike (SB Nation blogger): [I]t's as legitimate as you can get while still being an independent blogger … They have a very powerful national, or maybe now international voice. I do think there's a lot of cache being with them … SB Nation, like, they don't pay you a lot, but they deliver you traffic numbers that no blogger could deliver on his or her own.

While Fry's (2011) recommendations to journalists are insightful for exposing hope labor's ideological assumptions, accounts of SB Nation and Yelp contributors point to an ideological twist among online social producers. Since their primary motivation is socially recognized self-realization, hope labor investments of time and effort are not seen as particularly risky—or even a risk at all. Even if one's hope labor does not translate into employment opportunities, the pleasures of social production still make the activity worthwhile:

> Tim (SB Nation blogger): You know, when I was mentioning papers and being on TV, getting on the radio and all that, you know, that's just all a side benefit. If that stuff doesn't happen that's perfectly fine … It's not like I ever set a plan to say, "I need to be here in five years, otherwise this has all been a waste of time"—not at all.

Some of the journalists Fry addressed will presumably give up on hope labor when their efforts no longer seem worth it—a point when the promises of investment and meritocracy lose their luster. For social producers like Tim, those frustrations need not be as demoralizing. Indeed, hope labor presumably has greater longevity in social production contexts where it is pursued as a secondary motivation. In either case, these processes of rationalization and universalization propel hope labor processes that ultimately sustain digital capitalism's power asymmetries. The following addresses the ways in which this reproductive process occurs.

Hope Labor's Sustenance of Digital Capitalism

The extraction of value from free labor, through one process or another is fundamental to the bottom lines of web firms and digital capitalism more generally (Andrejevic, 2007; Cohen, 2012; Fuchs, 2010; Ross, 2013; Terranova, 2000). As an ideological process that legitimizes the power asymmetries of digital free labor, hope labor is one contributor to the reproduction of digital capitalism. We argue, though, that attention to hope labor as a *temporal* process reveals novel processes for shifting the costs and risks of digital information production away from web firms and onto the hope laborer.

Two types of firms are implicated in these processes. On the one hand, social production platforms such as SB Nation and Yelp have built their business models around facilitating voluntary online content creation. For these firms, the costs associated with content production are offset by hopeful productivity. The second set of firms includes the very companies or organizations that hope laborers aspire to work for 'down the road'. While this second set of firms does not necessarily exclude digital media companies, their business models are typically not structured around voluntary content production; rather, they benefit from the training grounds that the former firms provide. Costs associated with training, professional development and the location of top talent are offset by the free pool of hope laborers competing for attention on the social web.

Accordingly, sites like SB Nation and Yelp work (if inadvertently) in consort with other firms by providing a labor pool of creative workers actively pursuing experience and exposure. In these dynamics, various sort-term costs and long-term risks are shifted onto the hope laborer.

Consider, for instance, the possibility of jumping from SB Nation blogger to ESPN's punditocracy, or from Yelp reviewer to a *New York Times* food critic. While these jumps may be a stretch, they are useful hypotheticals for illustrating hope labor's shift of costs and risk onto the hope laborer. By producing free content for Yelp and SB Nation, these companies obviously avoid costs associated with content producers' wages and benefits. Further, the hope laborer assumes other costs of production, including restaurant bills, event tickets, cable and Internet subscriptions, not to mention the opportunity costs of time that could be spent in some other useful way. In writing for SB Nation or Yelp, hope laborers also spare potential future employers the costs of locating talent, developing writers, nurturing audiences, and conducting market research. These costs, too, all shift onto the hope laborer. Further, the high risks commonly associated with creative innovation are reduced for future employers who can cherry-pick from developing trends; in turn, hope laborers take their own creative risks—many of which inevitably will not work out—in the hope of setting themselves apart from the crowd.

As more firms adopt and/or draw from the hope labor market, though, aspiring creators confront a difficult economic paradox: if you want the work, you must first be willing to do the job for little to no pay. In this, hope laborers undermine the very labor market that they aspire to enter by continually supplying it with individuals who are willing to work for nothing. Hope labor thus contributes, in part, to the precarity of contemporary work. To the extent that discussions of free labor ignore these temporal processes, they exclude the emerging ways in which digital capitalism's power asymmetries are sustained.

Directions for Future Research

In our view future research about hope labor should consider how the processes and practices evaluated here might take vertical (intensive) and horizontal (extensive) forms. While our analysis has centered on digital content production, hope labor stretches across the labor market. In fact, most academic readers need look no further than their daily work lives for relevant opportunities to interrogate hope labor. Research that reflexively engages higher education's role in institutionalizing hope labor as a 'resume builder' must inadvertently address the politics and ethics of the pedagogical tools that encourage such practices. Hope labor is an important logic—perhaps *the* guiding logic—behind the academic internship. It also encapsulates a set of ideas that may resonate with much of the educational labor force—particularly adjuncts and graduate students. Comparative analyses that attend to other industrial sectors employing free or under-compensated labor will be helpful in assessing whether there is anything special about hope labor's operation on the social web.

Just as the ability to manage risk is a highly stratified activity (Neff, 2012), so is the ability to undertake hope labor successfully. Social production is an investment of time, money, and other resources. Honing one's creative abilities or even establishing a respected profile requires digital and cultural literacy; it also requires regular access to media technologies and the Internet. As a result, some people are better able or equipped than others to hope labor at all. To what extent, therefore, does hope labor "amplif[y] already existing stratification regimes?" (Neff, 2012, p. 9). Such questions ought to be a driving force of digital media research in years to come.

Conclusion

In this article we have defined the notion of hope labor as un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present, often for experience or exposure, in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow. Hope labor's distinctiveness compared to other forms of free labor lies in the temporal relationship between present experience and future aspirations. This relationship shifts costs and risks onto the hope laborer. This concept can explain not only the motivations for digital content production, but also the increasing tendency of vast industries to employ the same dynamic as a requisite for securing future work. Structurally, hope labor emerges within a political economy that claims to redress the insecurities of contemporary workplaces. Thus, hope labor is ideologically positioned as a meritocratic investment in one's employment prospects. Whether social production leads to a future career or not, hope labor's work in the present is already done. Conducive to the new spirit of capitalism, social media firms have already effectively valorized this form of leisure—and hope—for the purposes of capital accumulation.

Endnotes

1. We use the term 'social media' to reference recent web-based applications that rely on social interactions for the generation and modification of content (Kaplan & Hanelein, 2010), including blogs, social network sites (Facebook, LinkedIn), content communities (Wikipedia, Flickr), virtual worlds (World of Warcraft, Second Life), fan labour (fan fiction), and other forms of 'playbour' (Kücklich, 2005).
2. Debates about the exploitative nature of digital labor lie outside the scope of this article, as we do not view our conceptualization of hope labor as inherently bound to exploitative social relations. However, this does not mean that hope labor is *never* exploitative, either. See Hesmondhalgh (2010) and Andrejevic (2011) for elaboration on these debates.
3. The free labor debate operates alongside contemporary celebrations of 'mental labor' as glamorous, interesting and desirable. Despite their relative instability, creative/cultural industries work enables a comparatively high degree of creative and workplace autonomy, self-expression, non-hierarchical organizational structures and 'playful' office environments where "excellence is valued and encouraged" (Hesmondhalgh, 2010, p. 282; see also Cohen, 2012; Gills, 2002; Neff, 2012; Ross, 2004).
4. Central to our own argument is that these voluntary forms of digital labor are characterized by their own set of labor relations as they increasingly serve as informal 'training grounds' for the creative and cultural industries.
5. While some of SB Nation's bloggers receive small monthly stipends for their work, the majority create content for free. Yelp reviewers are also unpaid, although the site's most active reviewers are promoted to 'Elite' status, gaining entry into regular social events.
6. Corrigan (2012) also employed a week of short, daily telephone interviews to better understand bloggers' work routines.
7. All interview participants have been issued a pseudonym as a means of maintaining confidentiality.
8. A pseudonym for Tim's blog.
9. Importantly, not all free labor is hope labor, and not all hope labor is necessarily performed for free.

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