

## Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary<sup>1</sup>



### Entrepreneurialing the Good Life?

#### *Introduction*

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Drawing on Gina Neff’s concept of venture labor as the “explicit expression of entrepreneurial values by non-entrepreneurs,” this research brings together voices from multiple social science perspectives including communication, sociology, and media studies. Together, the contributors grapple with how the work of media making is changing with the introduction of new media technologies, the economic ideologies that support the work of the production of popular communication, and the precarity of media work in a digital media landscape. The authors ask, What are the risks and rewards of tying an increasingly insecure form of work to economic risks, opportunities, and rewards, on the one hand, and the good life, on the other hand?

*Keywords: self-branding, entrepreneurship, work, labor, e-journalism, new media industries, venture labor*

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### **Background and Context**

This collaborative work represents the fruit of an ongoing conversation surrounding the deep changes taking place in labor and work, particularly as they relate to media and digital production. Our collaboration began with Gina Neff's book *Venture Labor*. The term *venture labor* characterizes individuals' investments in their work in terms of time, energy, personal resources, and emotional attachment—in terms of entrepreneurialism. This behavior is analyzed as part of a broader shift in society in which the risks and rewards of work are becoming increasingly individualized. Thus, Neff's chronicle of the dot-com boom in New York points toward a more generalizable set of developments affecting the nature and character of work and the workplace. In this brave new world, workers shoulder more risk as the price of becoming self-driven entrepreneurs, responsible for their occupational and economic fates. Furthermore, as work becomes a locus for creative self-fulfillment, these veritable "canaries in a coal mine" are compelled to look to their work to realize their vision of the good life.

Two panels at the International Communication Association's (ICA's) 2014 conference in Seattle, Washington, probed the causes and consequences of venture labor in a rapidly digitizing economy. The panels were respectively entitled "Venture Labor: Work and 'The Good Life'" and "Laboring for the 'Good (Part of Your) Life.'" After ICA, panelists synthesized their conclusions, and critical commentary was invited from a range of prominent international scholars. In this way, the essays bring together voices from multiple social science perspectives including communication, sociology, and media studies. Together, the contributors grapple with how the landscape of media making is changing with the introduction of new media technologies, the economic ideologies that support the work of the production of popular communication, and the increasing precarity of media work in a digital media landscape. Together, these scholars of work, media, and communication examine changes in media work and propose avenues for theorizing labor, work, value, and happiness itself.

### **Entrepreneuring the Good Life?**

Venture laborers' experiences exemplify the IT-driven transformations that are fundamentally changing the labor market for all workers. Venture laborers stand on the front lines of the transformation of work practices brought about by the incorporation of emergent technologies in the contemporary workplace. These emergent communication technologies "allow" individuals to be "at work" 24/7 regardless of physical location. At the same time, these new communication opportunities to be at work 24/7 have dramatically changed both the opportunities and the costs of engaging in paid and unpaid work.

Drawing on Gina Neff's concept of venture labor as the explicit expression of entrepreneurial values by non-entrepreneurs (Neff, 2012), this research examines these emergent and dramatic processes, as they impinge on several segments of the labor market. "Dot-com'ers," journalists, and freelancers increasingly define themselves as self-branding entrepreneurs rather than employees. In these ways, work and labor markets are being profoundly reconfigured by the societal shifts associated with digital technologies.

Jeremy Schulz's contribution underscores the increasing propensity of employers to treat mere labor power as inconsequential, even in creative industries. Taking his cue from *Venture Labor* (Neff, 2012), Schulz argues that professionals are expected to act more like entrepreneurs than employees. Schulz illuminates how this entrepreneurial turn is confronting these workers with a volatile cocktail of economic risk and opportunity. While many work scholars have rightfully targeted the plight of laborers with lower wages, Schulz describes how the professionals in Neff's study increasingly risk falling into the precariat in a winner-take-all world. Despite the stakes of failure, many of these entrepreneurial professionals approach risk in terms of opportunities to improve their chances of achieving the good life, whether defined in terms of economic security or self-fulfillment at work. Some emphasize getting a large economic payday, allowing them to join the rentier class and achieve permanent economic security. Others see self-fulfillment as an acceptable trade-off for economic security.

Alice Marwick's contribution reveals that entrepreneurial subjectivity has become the widespread norm throughout professional labor markets. As Marwick tells us, the 1990s venture labor practices identified by Neff became even more salient a decade later during the Web 2.0 bubble. Social media unleashed a tsunami of self-promotion and self-branding channels that forever changed professionals' normative presentation of self as means of selling the self as a commodity to potential employers. Marwick cautions that self-branding carries heavy costs in terms of self-censorship in "safe for work" online expression, the inevitable creep of professional agendas into social media presence, the heightened blurring of private and professional realms, and the inability to unplug from work faced with a 24/7 digital public eye. Furthermore, Marwick warns that this nonstop entrepreneurial subjectivity is rapidly becoming the new normal, in which professional self-branding is mandatory for all members of the professional classes.

Nicole Cohen's contribution on freelancing sheds light on the costs and benefits of emerging models of journalism and how journalists make sense of these trade-offs. Like Schulz and Marwick, Cohen reveals how those in the labor market contend with competing imperatives of opportunity seeking, risk management, and self-fulfillment. On the one hand, freelance journalism offers opportunities for flexibility, work-life balance, and professional autonomy. On the other hand, these opportunities are accompanied by risk in the form of income instability, low wages, and few social protections. According to Cohen, the realities of freelance journalism are marked by greater risk rather than opportunity due to employers' practices of labor exploitation, such as unpaid work and coerced loss of copyright benefits. In light of the costs of entrepreneurial freelancing, Cohen's piece closes with a call for collective action to diminish the risks and recapture the opportunities promised by freelance journalism.

C. W. Anderson's timely contribution applies the idea of venture labor to the emergence of entrepreneurial journalism education. Anderson shows how this shift in educational objectives demands that journalists master a battery of entrepreneurial skills. Like Schulz, Anderson finds that entrepreneurial journalism demands that journalists create their own jobs rather than relying on stable employment. Anderson shows how entrepreneurial journalism requires that journalists engage in the personal branding described by Marwick. Entrepreneurial journalism demands acceptance of the low wages and poor working conditions described by Cohen. While Anderson's work demonstrates that the plight of journalism is significant in and of itself, it also presents journalism as a revealing case shedding light on economic and

educational issues. Namely, Anderson's contribution points to the larger disconnect between today's precarious labor market and educational institutions' preparation of graduates for a world of stable careers that is rapidly disappearing.

Michelle Rodino-Colocino's contribution provides a panoramic view of media and productivity. Tracing the history of film technologies of the early 20th century to the mobile devices pioneered a century later, this research demonstrates how new media figures in labor management theories that seek to make workers more productive and efficient. Before the self-branding wave that Marwick studies, new media was being pressed into the work of making hard work seem glamorous. By putting entrepreneurial new media labor of the late 20th and early 21st centuries into dialogue with forms of labor from previous waves of media technologies, Rodino-Colocino is able to focus on the movement toward "anytime-anywhere work." Thus, this work reveals the destructive nature of enabling discourses that demand more from workers in less time and for less pay. These insights call for critique of normative expectations for entrepreneurial work to bleed into all spheres of private life, and, like Cohen's contribution, call for critical reexamination of exploitative practices.

Enda Brophy's contribution continues the call for solidarity along every link of the labor chain. This insightful discussion reminds us that new media industries continue to rely on a spectrum of workers, all of whom are at risk of exploitative labor practices. We are asked to consider the interlinked yet transnational workforce necessary for the global production of smartphones and the networks to use them: Congolese diggers using preindustrial techniques, Chinese proletarianized factory workers, entrepreneurial software engineers from the Global North, precariously employed Philippina call center workers, and Ghanaian e-waste workers. Brophy thus links the plight of freelancers—overeducated, underemployed workers who face declining material conditions and economic uncertainty—with more traditional concerns about unsafe or even inhuman labor practices. Making these connections across physical space and economic class, Brophy unmasks the siren song of entrepreneurial self-actualization to show its roots in neoliberal ideology.

Neff's conclusion further underscores the radical shifts undermining the social contracts governing the relations among worker, employer, entrepreneur, and audience. She also writes of the need for new theories to address these changes. While these shifts are clear among professionals in the creative classes, as canaries in the coal mine, they alert us of impending changes across the labor market. Communication scholars should play a greater role in documenting and challenging these changes.

Collectively, research such as that presented here contributes to scholarship on work in the information society by shedding light on the entrepreneurial turn in the labor market. The contributors' insights reveal the inroads made by entrepreneurial Darwinism within professional sectors of the labor market. In the high-stakes game of the new entrepreneurialism, a few winners take all the spoils. Venture laborers who win, win big—their passport to the good life is assured. However, for venture laborers who lose, their losses are equally staggering, sweeping away their fingernail hold on the good life. Across the contributions, we see the Janus-faced nature of venture labor and the good life—a topic of considerable importance for all.

**Reference**

Neff, G. (2012). *Venture labor: Work and the burden of risk in innovative industries*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.