Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary[1]

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Making Media Work:
Turning to Labor Management in Communication Studies

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This essay discusses a work in progress that explores how new media technologies promised to manage labor. From the film technologies of the early 20th century to today's smart mobile devices and algorithmic software, new media have been allied with emergent forms of labor management. Although such media, when first introduced, were clunky and unpredictable, they became key instruments in new labor management practices. Thus, this essay and the larger project it discusses contribute to the "turn to labor" in communication studies, a vibrant research area that foregrounds labor as the practice of work at both individual and social levels.

Keywords: labor, work, management, new media, productivity, scientific management

From film technologies of the early 20th century to smart mobile devices and algorithmic software of the 21st century, new forms of media have been allied with emergent forms of labor management. Although such media, when they were new, were clunky and unpredictable, they became key instruments in the formation of new labor management theories and practices. Frank Gilbreth, famous

for his time-motion films of bricklayers and typists in the 1910s and 1920s, used a hand-cranked camera that—because it was hand cranked—could not represent actions in real time. To compensate, Gilbreth placed a microchronometer (a clock that measures small intervals of time, that he devised) in the shot. Gilbreth's "micromotion" studies contributed to scientific management, a school of labor management that emphasized efficient movements to boost workers' productivity by speeding up work (*speed up* refers to speeding up work on the line, an old expression still used today to describe moves that intensify and hasten the pace of production). Some historians have found evidence that casting workers in Gilbreth's micromotion films glamorized the work by allowing them to imagine themselves as "undiscovered Mary Pickfords" (Lindstrom, 2000, p. 745).

By the 20th century's end, early personal computers featured prominently in labor management theory "reengineering" that Michael Hammer (1990) touted. Computers played this prominent role despite their inability to boost workers' productivity (especially in white collar and service work). Reengineering called for downsizing and reorganizing workplaces into still more efficient, productive teams. Into the 21st century, labor management discourse has sought to intensify work and boost workers' productivity amid layoffs by promoting a "flexible workplace" enabled by smartphones, wireless Internet technologies, and algorithmic "just-in-time" scheduling. Promotional discourse around the turn of the 21st century glamorized flexible arrangements for empowering workers and boosting their entrepreneurial potential. Counter to such promise, reengineering and later waves of management efficiency helped produce a bifurcated labor market in which workers experience massive layoffs, "winner-take-all jobs," working more hours for less pay and no pay, and rising productivity measured in output per hour even during recessions. Thus, despite their technological limitations when they were new, media technologies have figured centrally as means to speed up and intensify work. They help justify, in the words of one reengineering mantra, "doing more with less."

Situating relationships among labor, management, and new media historically promises to be a fruitful vein for communication scholarship. Such work contributes to the "turn to labor" in communication studies, a vibrant research area that foregrounds labor as the *practice of work* at an individual and social level and as a *class of people* who seek employment for their livelihood. Media scholars who have analyzed labor over the past decade and a half have integrated political economic analysis with ethnographic methods including interviews and participant observation. Exemplary books in the field include C. W. Anderson's (2013) analysis of the fall and rise of local journalism; John Caldwell's (2008) study of film and television production workers; Dana Cloud's (2011) exploration of "democratic unionism and dissent"; Mark Deuze's (2007) discussion of "liquid media work"; Melissa Gregg's (2011) examination of "work's intimacy" among knowledge workers; David Hesmondhalgh's (2012) analysis of "the cultural industries"; Vicki Mayer's (2011) investigation of "below the line" television production; Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks, and John Caldwell's (2009) edited volume on "production studies"; Alice Marwick's (2013) study of the production of "status updates"; Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco's (2007) edited volume on "knowledge workers in the information society" and their coauthored work on knowledge workers' labor movement (Mosco & McKercher, 2008); Gina Neff's (2012) discussion of dot-com entrepreneurs embracing risk through "venture labor"; and Janet Wasko's (2003) study of "how Hollywood works."

I hope to contribute to the turn to labor through a cultural history of new media technologies envisioned to manage labor. My work in progress, *Making Media Work: A Cultural History of New Media and Management*, explores the promise and practice of labor management beginning with film for time-motion studies when film was a "new medium" at the turn of the 20th century. *Making Media Work* brings this exploration through the present by analyzing the role of mobile communication technologies and algorithmic software in producing what I call "anytime-anywhere work," wherein workers are expected to be available around the clock.

In keeping with the sophisticated theories and methods that the turn to labor in communication studies has mobilized, *Making Media Work* tells a complex story. I listen to workers and managers tell the story in archival materials from the early 1900s and from contemporary texts and interviews. As I listen, I attend to how work, new media, gender, and race are constructed in labor management discourses and practices and in media technologies themselves. This project takes seriously Carolyn Marvin's (1988) classic argument that the most socially significant aspect of new communications technologies is the "drama" that surrounds them. I also recognize David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch's (2012) observation that how we work today has a history in the formation of management theory as a means to "control" labor through the production of racial and gendered "wisdom" about people as workers. My research is informed by critical-cultural, feminist, and new media studies of communications. In the spirit of such studies, I examine *speed up*'s enabling discourses and technologies, and I approach workers and managers as cocreators of such narratives. This cultural history is a drama, indeed.

As I research and write this book, I look forward to working with the coauthors of this forum and with other communication scholars who are turning to labor. I would also like to provoke communication scholars working in other areas to turn to labor, to question the practice of work at individual and social levels, and to attend to the class of people who seek employment for their livelihood. In addition, it is important that we, as academics, attend to the work we do and to our status as workers, as stable and precarious as both may be. Faculty and students are being exploited as anytime-anywhere workers, and we should do what we can in our research, teaching, and service to stop such exploitation.

Thus, I want to provoke scholars who turn to labor to make work more sustainable and sustaining. As educators, we engage in public service that obligates us to push for a more sustainable and sustaining work system for our students and ourselves. We may learn from Canadian Broadcasting Corporation workers who have argued that their working conditions determine the extent to which they can serve the public (Mosco & McKercher, 2008). The public service mandate for broadcasters, in other words, extends beyond content production into labor relations. Similarly, labor justice should become a focal point for communication scholarship and activism. As we turn to labor in communication studies, I hope that scholars will push for labor justice in the industries we study and the campuses where we work.

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