

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



The Culture of Continuous Labor

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This forum serves as an opportunity to discuss the vectors of identity that inform the self-branded entrepreneurial subject analyzed by Neff. It provokes a series of questions. We are prompted to ask how the discourse and practice of entrepreneurship shape the entrepreneurial self, the branded self, and the outsourced self. Perhaps most importantly, we are invited to wonder how workers are led in flexible capitalism to believe that their paid work can serve as a source of happiness and an outlet for their passions.

Keywords: the good life, free agent, labor practices, vectors of identity

This discussion of what Gina Neff has called “venture labor” is a crucial contribution to understanding the increasingly complex labor practices that shape and structure technological industries, the profession of journalism in a digital age, and freelance work. In particular, the authors featured here offer varied perspectives on the politics and culture of labor in the information economy and media industries—the micropolitics as well as structural politics. As the authors point out, those who work in technology companies, journalists, and freelancers (only a handful of those laborers who have shifted their subjectivity as workers in the contemporary era) increasingly embrace the language and the practice of self-branding entrepreneurship. This subject position has been both created by and validated through contemporary flexible capitalism.

Within the world of venture labor, the elements that give definition to “labor” (as opposed to work) are those that validate and romanticize “venture”—a culture of risk, opportunity, romanticism, self-

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branding, and (micro)celebrity. As Schulz mentions, in the practice of contemporary technology companies (not to mention contemporary finance), the culture of risk has become an ideological talisman that serves to propel a host of financial and technological practices. While there are clear differences between the world of financial capitalism and technology industries, both are sustained by the culture of risk. This culture authorizes and normalizes the self-branded entrepreneur as the primary laboring subject. Indeed, as Neff points out in the conclusion to this discussion, the precariousness of contemporary labor is masked by the figure of the self-branding entrepreneur along with the romanticized "free agent."

The authors all comment on a particular sector of the information economy encompassing digital media environments, journalism, and freelance work. It is also important to think through the ways that the figure of the self-branded entrepreneur extends to other realms of daily life. As Marwick points out, maintaining a self-brand is a 24/7 activity; the ideal of constant accessibility increasingly holds sway. This continuous availability is its own form of labor.

Another consequence of this trend is what Arlie Hochschild (2012) has called the "outsourced self," where we have moved to relying on paid experts for the everyday labors of life: "Along the way, we've also created a market in emotional states. Ironically, one of the feelings the market can sell us is the feeling of being authentically out of the market" (p. 55). This is also true for the self-branded entrepreneur; as all the authors have pointed out, this kind of venture labor is increasingly practiced because it doesn't always feel like "work"; like the market in emotional states, venture labor feels as though we are "authentically out of the market."

The position of venture labor within neoliberal markets invites the question: What is the relationship between the branded self and the outsourced self? How does the discourse and practice of entrepreneurship shape both of these manifestations of the contemporary self? Although the authors focus primarily on professional contexts to examine venture labor—Silicon Valley, journalism, freelance, and so on—it would also be interesting to think more about other vectors of identity that inform the self-branded entrepreneurial subject. How are these assiduously maintained self-brands valued differently depending on different constituencies? In this moment of self-branding, who is authorized—or who has the privilege—to create a self-brand?

All the authors contribute in important ways to a discussion about labor, precarity, and the promises of the "good life." They question the seemingly natural association between passion and happiness with one's work, and the good life, thus revealing an effective technology of capitalism that seeks to convince laborers that work can be the place where one finds true meaning—but only if passion can be aligned with labor. This, of course, as all the authors point out, obfuscates the work itself as exploitative, precarious, and ephemeral. As Sara Ahmed (2010) has suggested in her work about the "promise of happiness," our beliefs in work and its rewards means that we rarely interrogate the facets of work that cause instability and dissatisfaction.

References

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