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Rethinking digital labour: A renewed critique moving beyond the exploitation paradigm

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Bingqing Xia (iD)
East China Normal University, China

Abstract

A number of important topics, themes and concepts frequently recur in studies of digital labour over the past decade, such as exploitation, precarity, unpaid labour, gig economy and platform labour. The first generation of the critique has drawn on a variety of Marxist, post-structuralist and Weberian sources to question prevailing neo-liberal and centrist models centred on values of efficiency and the supposed empowerment of workers and users. While these topics, themes and concepts have been beneficial in establishing a basis for critique, there is a danger that they may become rather familiar and potentially even a little stale. Therefore, this article suggests a need to renew the critique of digital labour, as the digital realm stabilises around a set of key global players and platforms and as labour activists continue to face serious obstacles to success in an era of authoritarian populism. Here, I concentrate on introducing our themed collection surrounding a renewed critique moving beyond a dichotomy of exploitation and labour agency. I also encourage different disciplines to enrich and renew studies of digital labour.

Keywords

Autonomist Marxism, digital labour, exploitation paradigm, gig economy, platform labour

Corresponding author:
Bingqing Xia, School of Communication, East China Normal University, Shanghai, China.
Emails: yummexia@163.com; bqxia@comm.ecnu.edu.cn

Introduction

The emergence of digital labour in the past two decades is the most prominent transformation in the world of work (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2019). The increased number of workers on digital platforms is significant. For example, the number of worldwide registered platform workers had risen to 45 million by 2015 (Codagnone et al., 2016). In this time, the percentage of workers engaging in platform work in the United States had grown to 15.8% of the entire workforce (Katz and Krueger, 2016). In the United Kingdom, the proportion had risen to 4%, with 1.3 million workers engaging in gig work (Taylor et al., 2017). Between 2018 and 2021, the ILO (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021) published several reports focusing on digital labour and the future of work. These reports were aimed at encouraging policy improvement from platforms, clients and governments to ensure decent work in the online world. The 2018 report focused on 3500 self-employed crowd workers on five English-speaking microtask platforms in 75 countries between 2015 and 2017. It examined working conditions, including pay, work intensity and availability, communication, social protection and the types of work performed. The 2021 report highlighted the expansion in platform-based work, such as transport and delivery work, as a result of COVID-19. However, this expansion has seen work quality undermined, due to increased labour supply. For example, certain freelancing platforms allow platform workers to set their own fees, resulting in competition that has lowered hourly earnings.

Echoing the ILO's concerns, academic research on digital labour has emerged in the past decade. However, Gandini (2021) recently criticised digital labour research for becoming 'a sort of umbrella term that is increasingly delinked from its origins as a critical Marxist stance on labour and value' (p. 370). He points out that current digital labour research has extended to all exploitative forms of digital-related production, such as platform labour, hackers (Wark, 2013) and creative labour (Ross, 2012). Platform labour includes online users doing unpaid activities on social media platforms (Postigo, 2016), labour involved in the datafication process for advertising (Arvidsson, 2005; Manzerolle, 2010), on-demand paid labour enabled by a digital platform (van Doorn, 2017), workers doing on-demand microwork mediated by a digital platform such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Aytes, 2013), and labour in the gig economy (Graham and Woodcock, 2019). This generic definition of digital labour suggests 'the presence of a digital component in a context of work (or a work-related activity)' (Gandini, 2021: 373). This however has 'significantly weakened the critical dimension that originally belonged to the concept as it comes from the Marxist tradition, notwithstanding its highly contested nature' (Gandini, 2021a: 373).

Gandini's criticism may have its limitations by backdating digital labour research to the unpaid and leisure-based activities of online users, a critical proposition developed from Smythe's audience commodification theory, according to Fuchs (2012). However, Gandini's reflexivity addresses the importance of rethinking digital labour research, by reviewing its history and surrounding debates. In this introduction to our themed collection, I first discuss the concept of digital labour and the most important associated debates, such as that around autonomist Marxism and creative labour. I then introduce Fuchs' work and its importance in the current digital labour debate. In particular, I

introduce his framework for exploring digital labour and the new international division of labour, which has been widely applied in current digital labour research. I then review the current research on digital labour, which falls into a paradigm of exploitation of various forms of digital labour. Building on this renewed critique of digital labour, I finally introduce the aims of our themed collection and how our contributors explore issues that may contribute to this renewed debate. I conclude with a call to engage in digital labour research from the perspective of different disciplines, such as economics, critical management, sociology of work, organisation studies, labour relations and policy studies.

The surrounding conceptual and theoretical debates: Gift economy, creative labour, precarity and autonomist Marxism

Concepts such as the gift economy and free labour feed into the digital labour research centring on the autonomist Marxist approach. Barbrook (2005 (1998)) suggests the coexistence of commodities and gifts on the net, highlighting Internet users' propensities for free sharing and creating information online. He emphasises the emerging revolutionary power of the gift economy, which is criticised by some autonomist Marxists, such as Terranova. While Terranova (2004) agrees with Barbrook about the democratic tendencies afforded by the Internet, she argues that the gift economy works as a force within the reproduction of the labour force in capitalism and that it misdirects the critique of the digital economy by undermining 'free labour'. However, inspired by French and Italian theoretical traditions, including both the Foucault/Deleuze/Guattari axis and autonomist Marxism, she argues that the Internet is itself a mutation of a cultural and economic logic, and is intrinsic to late capitalism. More importantly, through the lens of Terranova (2004), 'free labour' takes on a double meaning; on one hand, it explains why Internet use is 'simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited' in activities such as 'building web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists and building virtual spaces' (p. 74), on the other hand, this work also indicates a probable free labour that cannot be controlled by capital, because of the latter's problematic reliance on it (van den Broek, 2010).

Despite their differences, Barbrook and Terranova both make a valuable contribution to the debate on how applying Marx's labour theory of value helps us understand the appropriation of Internet users' online activities by addressing the concept of immaterial labour and through a consequent discussion on precarity. Building on ideas of the 'social factory' (Tronti, 1966), 'firms without factories' and 'firms without walls' (Negri, 1989), Hardt and Negri (2000) were among the first to define immaterial labour as that which 'produces immaterial goods such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication' (p. 292). This conceptualisation emphasises that labour increasingly relies on computer-related skills and involves new activities regarded as 'work', such as defining and fixing artistic and cultural rules, consumer norms and public opinion (Lazzarato, 1996: 133). Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004, 2009) gradually developed the concept of 'immaterial labour' by anticipating that these workers' use of technology would exceed the control of capital by means of exploring their subjectivity, at a time when the concept was under serious attack from other Italian autonomists (notably Caffentzis, 1998). Hardt

and Negri's conceptualisation was critiqued for ignoring gender issues and failing to recognise the high incidence of material forms of exploitation, such as the renaissance of slavery in the production of computers. In response, Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) developed the concept of affective labour, involving heavily gendered work, including caring, health work and service work.

Notwithstanding criticism, the autonomist Marxist perspective on immaterial labour is welcomed by many scholars involved in precarity politics, including autonomists themselves. Precarity is a commonly shared experience among people aged in their 20s and 30s, who face risk and insecurity in their working lives. Precarity politics also encompasses various groups and minorities, including the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) community, women and migrants. To some scholars, precarity is 'an economic category addressing new forms of occupation and labour relations, to a more open instrument of struggle, enabling resistance and the reimagination of contemporary politics, lives and subjectivities' (Andall et al., 2007: 4).

The main debates surrounding precarity are as follows: (a) Who can best exemplify the experience of precarity? (b) Is it possible to achieve solidarity across different experiences of precarity? (c) To what extent is the nation or state able to attenuate the worst experiences of post-Fordist capitalism, as a response to precarity politics? Standing (2011) characterised the precariat as an emerging class suffering chronic uncertainty and insecurity. It consists of communities and families that have dropped out of or are excluded from the old working-class, such as migrants, minorities and bohemians. Compared to the proletariat class of industrial workers, the precariat needs to undertake extensive unremunerated activities to access jobs, such as unpaid activities relating to job search. Standing regards the precariat as a 'dangerous class' in the sense of emphasising its social transformative power.

Gill and Pratt (2008: 15–20) discuss precarity by comparing research on cultural or creative labour to immaterial labour. For them, both scholars in cultural or creative labour (Banks, 2007; Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Caves, 2000; Christopherson, 2002, 2003; Gill, 2002, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2002, 2007; Kennedy, 2009; McRobbie, 1999, 2002, 2003; Neff et al., 2005; Ross, 2003; Ursell, 2000) and the Italian autonomists share common concerns towards *affect, temporality, subjectivity* and *solidarity*. In terms of affect, Gill and Pratt (2008: 15–16) question affective labour, a concept developed from immaterial labour as stated earlier, for too broadly conceptualising different kinds of work and experience. On one hand, affective labour only speaks to emotions, feelings and relationships that are put to work in post-Fordist capitalism, while ignoring the negative feelings involved in cultural work, such as exhaustion, frustration, competitiveness, unpleasurable socialising, anxiety and insecurity. On the other hand, the concept of affective labour fails to address how affect sustains cultural work exemplifying precarious experiences. As an alternative, research on cultural or creative labour successfully conceptualises precarious experiences in terms of the concept of self-exploitation (Banks, 2007; McRobbie, 1999, 2002; Ross, 2003; Ursell, 2000). McRobbie (1999) believes that managers and firms control cultural or creative workers through authorising certain degrees of creative freedom and spaces. Banks (2007) agrees that the discourse of authorising the autonomy afforded to creative workers aims to 'override any misgivings, constraints or disadvantages that might emerge in the everyday reproduction of this

highly competitive and uncertain domain' (p. 55). Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009: 421) appreciate the concept of self-exploitation as it usefully questions the difficult working conditions in cultural production. The concept of 'temporality' (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 17–18) helpfully addresses the blurring of work and non-work time. Autonomists argue that the temporality of life is governed by work, while those engaged in cultural or creative labour use words such as 'crunch times'. Gill and Pratt (2008: 18–19) suggest that the emphasis, which autonomists place on emergent subjectivities, fails to fully understanding the meanings that cultural or creative workers give to their experience. However, Gill and Pratt do appreciate the contribution that autonomists make to imagining the possibility of change in the processes of precarisation and individualisation which may create new forms of solidarity.

Fuchs and Sandoval (2014) track back to Raymond Williams' work on cultural materialism in order to recognise culture as 'a totality that connects all physical and ideational production processes that are connected and required for the existence of culture' (p. 489). Cultural work therefore includes the physical and informational work that creates cultural technologies, information and communication. Digital labour, as a form of cultural labour, then conducts work relating to the 'production and productive consumption of digital media' (p. 492). Therefore, aligning with Mosco and McKercher's broad conception of knowledge work (2009), Fuchs and Sandoval (2014) define digital work as

> a specific form of work that makes use of the body, mind or machines or a combination of all or some of these elements as an instrument of work, in order to organise nature, resources extracted from nature, or culture and human experiences, in such a way that digital media are produced and used. (p. 496)

They go on to explore digital labour by emphasising its alienation in different dimensions, such as 'the alienation of the subject from itself (labour-power is put to use for and is controlled by capital), alienation from the object (the objects of labour and the instruments of labour), and the subject-object (the products of labour)' (p. 496).

By linking to the work on value chains, Fuchs and Sandoval (2014: 502–506) apply the theorisation of the new international division of labour to digital labour research. Their work aims to critique the commonality of forms and experiences of exploitation, that is, workers exploited not only by digital media capital, but also by other forms of capital, and to encourage a broad range of networked struggle to overcome capitalism. By identifying 'a network of agricultural, industrial and informational forms of work that enables the existence and usage of digital media' (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014: 507), Fuchs and Sandovol build up a framework to explore labour process and labour dimensions in a specific company, industry or sector of the economy.

The exploitation or labour agency dichotomy

Since 2016, there has been a rapid growth of interest in a generic framework for exploring exploitative forms of digital-related work, as a means of understanding the platform economy and the gig economy. Graham and his research team, based at the Oxford Internet Institute, have carried out significant fieldwork in Sub-Saharan Africa and in

South-East Asia. Their results have been published widely in recent years across different disciplines, such as communication studies, sociology, economics, labour relations, geography and politics. For example, Graham et al. (2017) address four concerns, namely bargaining power, economic inclusion, intermediated value chains and upgrading, which are underrepresented in policy discussions on digital labour. By analysing both positive and negative aspects of certain issues emerging in the platform work, such as disintermediation and discrimination, they have developed four constructive policy suggestions to improve the working conditions of digital labour. These include certification schemes, digital labour organising, regulatory strategies and democratic control of online labour platforms.

Graham and Anwar (2018) have researched how geography matters to digital work. On one hand, they argue that digital workers are exploited by the use of the contemporary geography of digital labour; on the other hand, they realise that geography opens up new possibilities for digital labourers to reshape their own work. Others apply Polanyi's embeddedness theory to explore transformations in the gig economy (Wood et al., 2019). They argue that digital labour is embedded within workers' own interpersonal relations and disembedded from cultural and legal norms. Normative disembeddedness leaves workers exposed to the vagaries of the external labour market in the absence of labour organisation and rights. However, workers in remote gig economies are embedded within interpersonal networks which workers themselves generate so as to overcome the low-trust nature of non-proximate labour relations embedded by big gig economy platforms.

Gandini (2019) applies labour process theory to understand gig work, including micro-tasks that can be done through 'click-work' platforms such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk, manual work organised through platforms, knowledge-based freelance work offered by platforms, and client-led service work such as delivery work, as points of production. He argues that gig work conforms to emotional labour by 'embedding "autonomous" and "voluntary" emotion work' (p. 1048) within the platform, driven by feedback, ranking and rating systems. This economy of feeling, whereby the social relationships between clients and gig workers are transformed to relations of production such as Uber drivers doing emotional work in exchange for rating, enforces the capital-labour relation upon gig workers. However, feedback and rating systems act as techno-normative forms of control and monitoring of gig workers. For example, platforms use ranking systems based on customer feedback, as a tool to manage gig workers' performance. Practices of control central to gig work leverage 'gamified' practices, encouraging workers to achieve their 'personal best' to stimulate productivity. Gandini (2019: 1051–1052) underlines two concerns that have been largely overlooked by disciplines such as organisation studies, sociology of work and critical management. First, digital gig platforms are designed as an organisational model that 'exploits the features of a digital infrastructure to further a "radical responsibilisation of the work-force" on an individual level' (Fleming, 2017; Neff, 2012). Second, Gandini reminds us to conceive of digital labour, in particular gig workers, from a Marxist perspective that discusses platform work in terms of 'points of production'.

Schmidt's (2017) analysis of gig work distinguishes between platform work for commercial purposes and that for commons based peer production. He helpfully introduces

a new potentially important platform for commons based peer production, namely 'Platform Cooperativism', which aspires to encourage decent work. This concept originated with Scholz (2014, 2016), a German-born digital labour expert and activist. He encourages a bottom-up revolution in platform work by placing a higher value on gig workers' control over their working conditions than on economic outcomes and profit maximisation. Indeed, this idealistic activism is echoed in our themed collection in many instances.

Contribution of this themed collection to a renewed critique of digital labour

Our themed collection highlights the variety of digital labour in the current debate. Zhou and Liu bring us Chinese rural migrant workers who play *zhubo* (anchors) on one of the popular social media platforms, *kuaishou*.[1] Zhang focuses on Chinese rural workers involved in platform-mediated work, namely village e-commerce. Wu switches our sights to Chinese immigrant engineers working in the Unites States information technology industry, who are more professional and stable than the aforementioned two sorts of platform-mediated workers. Kim and Lee investigate professional digital game producers in South Korea as a new area of digital labour research in East Asia. While our collection presents a broad variety of digital labour across platform-mediated gig work and professional platform-created digital work, our aim is not to simply show the diversity of working experiences, which have been discussed in the past decade. Rather, our collection moves beyond the familiar and, in some cases, outdated critique of digital labour, with its narrow focus on exploitation and labour agency.

First, our collection recognises agency in similar way to Scholz (2014, 2016), supporting the goal of creating decent digital work and overcoming the reproduction of global inequality. Our collection further recognises agency as a socio-cultural response initiated by digital workers themselves, that is, subjectivity itself, rather than an outsiders' view.

Zhou and Liu's work on *kuaishou* players focuses on how Chinese rural migrant workers realise upwards socio-economic mobility with an emphasis on collaborative and symbiotic relationships between platforms and users. Engaging in the *tuwei* (earthy)[2] culture debate, they move beyond the 'exploitation versus participatory culture' dichotomy, by demonstrating how these playbour[3] performers strategically build their cultural and economic capital. Their description of the collaborative dynamics between platforms, audiences and playbourers successfully demonstrates the context and process of mobilising agency.

Zhang's research connects local platform-mediated labour in Chinese rural areas to global digital capitalism. As a way to refute autonomist Marxist subjectivity, she depicts e-commerce labour in her study as 'market-based autonomous author-entrepreneurs', by showing the tensions embedded in the hybrid regime of digital labour. Her research helps us draw a big picture of how digital labour in East Asia connects, enriches and even reconceptualises the current global digital labour research.

Building on this, Wu's article on Chinese engineers' agency in their career development expands our insights into the oversea context, within which East Asian digital

labour normalises job-hopping practices to maintain high mobility in flexible employment. She guides us to understand the practices underpinning the concept of the 'bamboo ceiling' in US high-tech industries, and how Chinese immigrant engineers mobilise their university-based social networks to enhance job-hopping performance. Her work addresses the ethnicity dimension in digital labour research, which successfully turns the Western-centric paradigm of exploitation to the socio-cultural dynamics emerging in the East Asian digital labour community.

Kim and Lee's work on South Korean digital game workers enhances the non-Western-centric critique within this themed collection. They introduce the 'crunch culture' in the South Korean digital game industry and argue that the mechanism of crunch practices results in the game workers' physical and psychological pain. They argue that the bodily experience of pain and even *karoshi* induced by the 'crunch' work schedules characteristic of the industry has led to a new self-consciousness as embodied labour, and hence to a demand for recognition and to unionisation. Their work suggests a special cultural dimension in conceptualising digital labour in a non-Western context.

In the renewed critique of digital labour research, Gandini (2021) reminds us to 'illustrate the manifold ways in which the capital-labour relationship is enforced through [specific digital labour practices]' (p. 377). Our themed collection successfully depicts various dynamics in the capital-labour relationship, such as the upwards socio-cultural mobility of Chinese platform playbour, the gender issue in Chinese e-commerce workers' practices, the ethnicity dimension in Chinese immigrant engineers' agency and the cultural practices in South Korean digital game workers' struggles. Gandini (2021) suggests that any future sociology of work research agenda needs to acknowledge seriously 'gig work'. Likewise, our themed collection calls attention to different disciplines, including but not limited to labour relations, economics, policy studies, sociology of work, critical management, organisation studies and communication studies, as a way of enriching and renewing the study of digital labour.

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ORCID iD

Bingqing Xia (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6020-9960

Notes

1. One of the Chinese leading short-video platforms, and the main rival of TikTok in China.
2. A term that connotes earthy, uncouth, unfashionable and lowbrow and literally refers to 'rural taste'.

3. A hybrid form of play and labour which associated with user-generated content and value production in the form of play (Kücklich, 2005; Qiu, 2016). It is an emerging and vital concept in the digital game research.

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Author biography

Bingqing Xia is a lecturer at School of Communication at East China Normal University, Shanghai. Her research focuses on new media studies, in particular, on digital labour research. She has published several papers on digital labour issue, such as workers in China's Internet industries. She is now working on a book about working life in China's Internet industries, and conducting fieldwork in China's AI industry to explore data labelling labour's working life.