Making the ’Future of Work’ Work

Details & Preliminary Outcomes

Workshop funded by the National Science Foundation - HTF Future of Work
May 31– June, 2019

School of Information
University of Michigan
Locations: Detroit & Ann Arbor, Michigan
Organizers

Silvia Lindtner, University of Michigan (PI)
Cindy Lin, University of Michigan
Paul Dourish, University of California, Irvine
Shaowen Bardzell, Indiana University
Jeffrey Bardzell, Indiana University
Objective

The workshop brought together those who experiment with new forms of tech work outside the large corporate and university laboratories and those with experience in studying the economic, social, and political processes of tech work, labor, and industries. An underlying goal of this workshop is to work through alternatives and openings for solidarity in a neoliberal moment that is often broadly perceived as granting “no alternatives” to contemporary capitalist processes. We aim to identify opportunities and challenges at various scales of intervention from writing software code to engaging with policy makers, from local interventions to translocal collaborations, from one-time off events to sustained and long-term activities.
## Participants

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nasma Ahmed</td>
<td>Digital Justice Lab</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sareeta Amrute</td>
<td>University of Washington</td>
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<tr>
<td>Olayami Dabls</td>
<td>Bead Museum, Detroit</td>
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<td>Alessandro Delfanti</td>
<td>University of Toronto</td>
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<td>Jill Diamond</td>
<td>Sassafras</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bart Eddy</td>
<td>Brightmoor Makerspace</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nathan Ensmenger</td>
<td>Indiana University</td>
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<td>Mary Gray</td>
<td>Microsoft Research</td>
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<td>Victoria Hattam</td>
<td>New School</td>
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<td>Mikail Hussain</td>
<td>United Taxi Workers San Diego</td>
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<td>Lilly Irani</td>
<td>UCSD</td>
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<td>Maggie Jack</td>
<td>Cornell University</td>
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<td>Sarah Murray</td>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
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<td>Lisa Nakamura</td>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
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<td>Noopur Raval</td>
<td>UC Irvine</td>
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<td>Juno Salazar Parreñas</td>
<td>Ohio State University</td>
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<td>Damani Partridge</td>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
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<td>Nadya Peek</td>
<td>University of Washington</td>
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<td>Rachel Rosenbaum</td>
<td>Civilla, Detroit</td>
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<td>Cengiz Salman</td>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
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<td>Christian Sandvig</td>
<td>University of Michigan</td>
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<td>Adam Selzer</td>
<td>Civilla, Detroit</td>
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<td>Mitali Thakor</td>
<td>Wesleyan University</td>
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<td>Cara Wallis</td>
<td>Texas A&amp;M University</td>
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<td>Julia Yezbick</td>
<td>Film Maker, Artist, Anthropologist, Detroit</td>
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<td>Peter Zschiesche</td>
<td>Employee Rights Center, San Diego</td>
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Program

Friday, May 31, 2019, morning - Site Visit 1: Civilla

“Methods of Intervention: Design, Cooperatives, and Entrepreneurial Making”

At Civilla, we worked through concrete examples on experiments with new and old ways of working, collaborating, and organizing. Approaches such as user-centered design, training in entrepreneurial work, digital fabrication and making, coworking and cooperatives are all variously positioned as methods to intervene in the status-quo of the corporate world. What are other methods that remain unnamed? What role does feminist theory and critical race studies play in experiments with work? What is the relationship between methods in design and justice, solidarity, and organizing?

Presenters: Adam Selzer, Bart Eddy, Nadya Peek, Jill Diamond

Discussant: Jeffrey Bardzell & Silvia Lindtner
Program

Friday, May 31, 2019, afternoon and evening - Site Visit 2: Burnside Farms & Site Visit 3: Dabl’s African Bead Gallery

These three site visits enabled us to discuss and work through how histories of work and industrial production shape contemporary challenges for the future of work. The afternoon involved a hands-on activity at burnside farms with local innovators in food supply chain management and agriculture, with community partners working on digital justice and with African American minorities, and concluded in a forum of debate and dialogue at Cinema Detroit, which was open to the public:

Presenters: Mitali Thakor, Sareeta Amrute, Julia Yezbick, Cengiz Salman

This panel focuses on how “new” modes of work and labor challenge, repackage, and reproduce various forms of racial, class, and gender discrimination. The discussion follows a screening of Julia Yezbick’s short essay film “How to Rust” focused on Detroit’s production history. By exploring histories of labor and histories of resistance we ask: whose alternatives, now and then?
Highlights Day 1:
Fieldtrip and Engagements in Detroit - Civilla
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Highlights Day 1:
Fieldtrip and Engagements in Detroit – Cinema Detroit, Public Panel
Panel I: Labor in the Global Platform Economy

From voice assistances that replicate how care and service professions manage their own emotions to surveillance technologies powered by outsourced, contracted coding work, emotional, gendered, and racialized labor are the sources of “smart” technologies writ large. How does the promise of a better, hopeful “future of work” reproduce or contest exploitative regimes of labor? How does the promise of living the “good life,” of becoming the “smart” self, and individual empowerment prohibit other forms of solidarity?

Presenters: Nathan Ensmenger, Mary Gray, Lilly Irani, Cara Wallis

Discussants: Sarah Murray & Lisa Nakamura
Panel II: Algorithms, Scale, Speed, and the Work of Logistics

Digital labor regimes have infiltrated various processes from global logistics and supply chains to mass production and mechanic work. Scale, speed, and acceleration are key to these processes of increasing algorithmic control (simultaneously critiqued and celebrated). What are the cracks, frictions, and gaps in this seemingly all-subsuming finance capitalism? How might we have to rearticulate what counts as solidarity and collective organizing to counter distributed, isolating, and large-scale structures of control? How can we intervene in the persistent techno-optimism that live on in contemporary engineering and design?

Presenters: Alessandro Delfanti, Vicky Hattam, Margaret Jack, Noopur Raval

Discussants: Silvia Lindtner & Christian Sandvig
Program

Saturday, June 1, 2019, afternoon - Fishbowl: Reflecting on the Futures of Work

Kick-off: Digital Justice, Decolonizing and Tech Labor Unions

The fishbowl kicked off the afternoon session to come together as a group to synthesize how we might want to rethink and rework what counts as alternative to and intervention into various forms of labor exploitation. Structures of neoliberal capitalism are often understood through notions of subsumption, co-option, the social factory, and free labor – in other words, capital seems to have reached every corner of our lives. Is resistance in this neoliberal age of “no alternative” possible? How might we have to rethink what counts as resistance, intervention, and alternative? What is digital justice and how can it be realized in practice?

Presenters: Nasma Ahmed, Mikaiil Hussain, Juno Parreñas, Peter Zschiesche

Discussants: Shaowen Bardzell & Paul Dourish
Highlights Day 2:
Public Panel Debates & Fishbowl
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Program

Saturday, June 1, 2019, afternoon & evening

Making the “Workbook of Alternatives”

Design Leads: Jeffery Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell

In the second part of this session, we will transition from the open fishbowl conversation into an interactive and collaborative activity of producing a “workbook of alternatives.” This activity will begin from the collection of “objects of alternatives” submitted by each participant to think through and write up connections, frictions, and opportunities for solidarity in tech labor.
Outputs:
Making the “Book of Alternatives”
Outputs:
Making the “Book of Alternatives”
Outputs:
Making the “Book of Alternatives”
Outputs:
“Object of Alternatives”

Collapsing Scales
Outputs:

“Object of Alternatives”

Spaces of Solidarity
Outputs:
“Object of Alternatives”

The Interveners
Outputs:
“Object of Alternatives”

Allure of Intervening at Scale
Outputs:
“Object of Alternatives”

It Looks Like This, but It is Also That
Outputs:
“Object of Alternatives”

Histories we need
Making the ’Future of Work’ Work

Many thanks to
the NSF HTF
&
our participants and community partners
for making this workshop possible