GENDERING THE LABOR OF SOCIAL MEDIA PRODUCTION

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In recent years and against the backdrop of a creative economy marked by rapid innovation, a mushrooming independent workforce, and the much-vaunted ideal of entrepreneurialism, social media platforms are being valorized as springboards to successful and rewarding careers. Here, I refer not to professional social networks such as LinkedIn and Xing (although many career-seekers utilize these services) but, rather, to sites designed for the production, distribution, and promotion of creative content. Indeed, for individuals aspiring to capitalize on their talents and passions, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram seemingly provide unfettered access to potential fans and employers alike. The triumphant tales of Michelle Phan, the makeup vlogger who was catapulted to fame through her eponymous YouTube channel, or singer-songwriter Colbie Caillat, who used MySpace to garner a remarkable fan base, have helped to fuel the manic rhetoric of “getting discovered” on social media.

But to what extent may various forms of social media production be understood as gendered? To cyber-enthusiasts (e.g., Axel Bruns 2008; Clay Shirky 2008) as well as media executives touting the “democratic” nature of the internet, new media platforms enable individuals to transcend social categories of gender, race, class, and more. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, digital media sites tend to reproduce—rather than challenge—problematic gender relations (Brooke Erin Duffy 2010, 2015). In this essay, I show how feminist perspectives may help researchers redress what Angela McRobbie (2010, 62) critiqued as the “gender-blindness” among existing theorizations of cultural labor, with a particular emphasis on the social media industry. To map potential interventions into existing theories, methods, and political actions, I draw upon a series of research projects I’ve conducted involving in-depth interviews with cis female digital and social media producers, including bloggers, vloggers, and participants in user-generated promotions.

First, to advance the highly-charged “free labor” debate (e.g., Mark Andrejewicz, John Banks, John Edward Campbell, Nick Couldry, Adam Fish, Alison Hearn, and Laurie Ouellette
—which pivots on the issue of whether unpaid social media activities reroute power from media institutions to audiences, or alternatively, allow companies to exploit consumers by freely harnessing their content and data—I encourage academics to engage with feminist critique. Fundamentally, such engagement would command attention to various social hierarchies that exist across emergent sites of cultural production. Until very recently, those studying media industries largely overlooked gender, and theories of digital labor presumed a male subjectivity (Ouellette, in Andrejevic et al. 2014, 1094). Fortunately, media scholars have begun to shift attention to the role of gender in digital media by studying discourses of authenticity underpinning the “post-feminist self-brand” (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2012); social inequalities in the digital economy (Leslie Regan Shade 2014); and the commodification of female social media users (Tamara Shepherd 2014). By interrogating the imbrication of gender with contemporary logics of individual self-branding, consumer empowerment, and worker autonomy, these scholars reveal how digital modes of creative production may reify problematic gender constructions.

But the endurance of these social constructions demands further investigation. I therefore urge social media researchers to consider intersectionalities of gender with age, race, class, sexuality, and ability. Based upon my own research of young women who understand social media as platforms for “getting discovered,” I have found that the few who effectively translate their passions into full-time careers enjoy a relatively privileged position; they tend to be white, middle class, well-educated, and typify conventional beauty standards. Such conclusions mark a rupture with techno-utopian celebrations of digital equality by shedding light on the raced and classed nature of social media labor.

Another way that feminist perspectives may propel conceptualizations of social media production is through emphasizing the gendered history of invisible work. I agree with Kylie Jarrett’s (2014) fruitful observations about the parallels between immaterial labor in the digital economy and “women’s work,” or female domestic/care labor that has long gone unwaged despite—or perhaps because of—its role in sustaining the capitalist order. The notion of deferred compensation is at the heart of productive social media activities conceptualized as “hope labor” (Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas F. Corrigan 2013) or “aspirational labor” (Duffy 2015), terms which highlight how companies increasingly remunerate digital content producers through free goods or the promise of “exposure.” An exchange I had with Alice, a recent college graduate aspiring to be a full-time fashion blogger, brought the issue of unrecognized labor into stark relief. Sharing her frustration about brand publicists’ expectations, she explained, “The [publicists] don’t know that what [bloggers are] doing is actual work, so they think it’s free to ask us . . . to write whatever they want us to write.” When she asked the campaign manager of one “million-dollar company” about compensation, he informed her, “We don’t have a budget for that.” This company then sought to render Alice’s value-generating labor invisible at the same time that it tried to capitalize on her visibility in the social media sphere. Even payment through free products and services can be problematic as brands tend to essentialize racial and ethnic differences; one blogger, noting the stereotypical nature of products gifted to bloggers of color, argued in Clutch, “free leave-in conditioners and curling puddings aren’t enough” (Audra E. Lord 2010).

Moreover, we must question the extent to which certain social media activities actually complicate the bifurcation of production and consumption. Certainly, media scholars (myself included) have spent the last decade lapping up the rhetoric of “blurred
media boundaries” and developing hybrid terms like prod-usage (Bruns 2008) and pro-
sumption (George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson 2010). While these neologisms address
digitally enabled opportunities for content creation and distribution, we should consider
other ways in which the consumer-cum-producer remains inscribed within the commodity
circuit. That is, many of the activities that power social media creation require individuals to
purchase products and services in the tireless quest to promote the laboring self: technologies, equipment, software, and more. Of course, those activities that involve
branding the visible self (e.g., fashion and lifestyle blogging) fit well with ideologies of post-
feminism, which emphasize autonomous choice and self-fashioning; yet they simultane-
ously reaffirm the deeply problematic assumption that women are, above all, consumers. Consequently, I urge theorists to think through the various stakeholders that
may find these activities productive—most especially commercial brands seeking
innovative ways to engage potential consumers.

Not only may feminist perspectives advance existing theories of social media
production, they also offer guidance at the level of method by encouraging researchers to
listen to and represent women’s personal experiences in the social world. One of my
principal critiques of the “digital labor” debate described above was a tendency to
disregard the meaning-making of participants. Several years ago, in 2008 I interviewed
women who participated in a user-generated advertising contest sponsored by the Dove
Campaign for Real Beauty—perhaps the archetype of “commodity feminism”—to
understand their motivations for producing commercial submissions. It was only through
listening to the experiences of participants in their own voices that I was able to tease out
themes of creativity, authenticity, and professionalization in ways that broke down the
binary between empowerment and exploitation. This experience taught me firsthand the
value of feminist research methods (e.g., Patricia Hill Collins 1990; Sharlene Nagy Hesse-
Biber and Michelle L. Yaiser 2004) that reject sweeping generalizations about social groups
in favor of individual interviews, oral histories, and modes of participant-observation that
use reflexivity in an attempt to minimize researcher–subject hierarchies. Methods of data
collection that foreground women’s personal experiences also allow researchers to uncover
sites of cultural resistance and contestation—the very spaces in which we can best channel
our hope for social change.

Accordingly, I want to close by addressing how researchers, media makers, and social
activists—as well as those responsible for educating the next generation of social media
producers—may draw on feminist approaches to push forward policy interventions. It is
axiomatic to state that the digital media industry must prioritize the hiring of women as well
as their appointment to senior positions—particularly within social media companies that
target women and/or are populated by a mostly female user base. Yet persistent gender
inequalities go far beyond hiring statistics; women employed in these industries regularly
experience sexual harassment, discriminatory policies that are especially pernicious to
working mothers, and patronizing behavior associated with the “bro culture” of the tech
world. Redressing these concerns requires infrastructures designed to actively promote,
encourage, and mentor female technology workers. But what about for the unpaid,
aspirational laborers described above? Taking a cue from second-wave feminists’ “Wages for
Housework” campaign, we should seek ways to mobilize social media producers to
advocate for fair compensation based on the realization that many of these activities are
value-added work. Indeed, an unintended consequence of the “prod-usage” discourse is
that it potentially obscures the time, energy, and capital involved in these laboring
activities. Mobile collectives could thus rally against companies that try to financially exploit women like Alice, who are seen as free brand ambassadors. Of course, the burden of social reform should not merely fall back on participants as more unpaid work; instead, government and educational institutions must also bear responsibility for the rights of social media producers—along with unpaid interns and freelance workers.

In the end, social media are showing no signs of wear as creative aspirants continue to utilize these sites as platforms for “getting discovered” or “making a living from one’s passion project.” The spirit of entrepreneurialism that sustains this career trajectory dovetails well with neoliberal ideologies and policies while veiling the economic and social barriers that impede the pursuit of getting paid to do what you love. Yet for as long as this narrative remains what Miya Tokumitsu (2014) called “the unofficial work mantra of our time,” we as scholars, educators, and cultural workers must acknowledge that the personal is the political and—increasingly—also the professional.

REFERENCES


Over the past year, I have participated in a number of academic gatherings oriented towards establishing and defining feminist approaches to social media research. This includes the Feminist Approaches to Social Media Research panel at the 2014 International Communication Association conference, two full-day workshops at the Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing conference in 2014 and 2015, and the Queer Internet Studies workshop at Columbia University in 2014, sponsored by the Brown Institute for Media Innovation, JustPublics@365, and Microsoft Research. Given my investment in the scope of this scholarly lens, I began reflecting on how we might conceptualize social media within this broader research agenda. Are social media—like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, among many others—social spaces, platforms, or networks? Are they content providers, news sources, or advertising meccas? Are they companies, technologies, websites, or mobile apps? Are they software programs, or are they sets of graphical user interfaces, huge databases, and invisible algorithms? At their roots, are social media really just source code? It appears that social media are all of these things and more—but are they all of them simultaneously?

Contemporary debates within philosophy are contending with similar problems. For instance, Ian Bogost’s (2012) “tiny ontology”—part of his object-oriented approach that he calls “alien phenomenology”—argues for the leveling of all objects, human and non-human alike. When applying the imagery of fractals and black holes that Bogost invokes, social media can become one thing and everything simultaneously. The software of social media is one object and many objects—an explosion of technical bits constitute the software, becoming visible when we pry open the hood. Each object can fall under our analytical lens,