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The Politics of Work – Section 001

The Internet as Playground and Plant: The Factory of Digital Voyeurism

A Foucauldian and Marxian Perspective on Free Digital Labor

The business model of the Internet does not exist in a vacuum, nor do its implications. They trickle into and permeate the human spirit in ways that can only be conceptualized by witnessing the ever-adapting social phenomena occurring today, challenging our notions of the Internet as a harmless and accurate extension of human nature. It's only human to want to connect, to share, to interact, and to keep up with others, right? Under our label of social animals, these are the singlehanded fundamental truths that pioneered and popularized the inception of social networking sites, welcoming the dawn of a new social age with open arms. The democratization of personal expression through the birth and accessibility of the *personal platform* continues to be a thrilling novelty for anyone using the Internet. The promise of an ubiquitous and always-there audience was the catalyst to a radical shift in sociocultural paradigms and relationships. Our definition of *The Celebrity* in relation to *The Fan* was once characterized by the stark, physical boundary placed between the two, as well as the reliance on external media outlets and paparazzi for celebrity-specific coverage. In a matter of months, the Internet in the context of social media spun the traditional relationship between Media and Celebrity versus Celebrity and Fan on its head. Now, the reliance on a media middleman for celebrity-specific coverage is deemed illogical and unbelievable when celebrities can now craft their own narrative instead of relying on money-hungry media outlets who potentially have their

worst interest at heart. What's more, fans can now "interact" with their idols through comments and direct messages. As parasocial as the Celebrity-Fan social media relationship may be, there's no question about the relevancy of this implication in how quickly it reoriented popular culture.

This reorientation of pre-platform social boundaries continued to forge on in various culturally significant relationships, such as those among the creative Artist and captive Audience or the prolific Writer and ponderous Reader. The Internet transcends the Artist's need for a physical exhibit while also allowing the Audience to dabble in these fruits of creation as they please; the Writer no longer needs a publisher to be an author, nor does the Reader need to buy print copies to access said work. And yet, the paradigm shifts once again with a newfound reorientation of who we perceive ourselves to be through the development of the personal platform: Are we bound to our subordinate position as mere audience members, readers, and general consumers of creation, or are we also able to create, produce, and publish new works in a way that's never been offered to us before? This reestablishment of the self, including all of our creative facets that can now be so naturally and readily expressed through the personal platform, juxtaposed with the actual logistics and profit-model of engagement-driven social media sites, sparked the age of the infamous Influencer.

The Influencer represents yet another expression of the ever-adapting capitalist spirit: the golden promise of upward mobility. The distinction between work and play continues to erode further as the commodification of the self becomes an inherent and inescapable aspect of Internet culture. The Influencer personifies the exploitation inherent to the capitalist promise that proves to continuously trickle further into the depths of our consciousness, poking, prodding, and penetrating the core of our humanhood further and further. We've all witnessed the power of Internet virality that created the lottery-esque ability to move classes, both in status and in

wealth, with one caveat. This promise of upward mobility comes only to those who have utilized the algorithm in their favor, and the Influencer quickly realizes that there is a method to the madness that is algorithmic engagement. First and foremost, the Influencer's success is based on a learned expertise of their platform's algorithm and audience, a free labor actualized in the hopes of the proper compensation that is virality. It's simply a given that to play the engagement game of Internet fame, one must understand the way the algorithm of the platform(s) of choice operates, the mechanisms through which virality manifests itself. Pinpointing what content will perform well comes with scrutinizing the content that people engage with most, as well as understanding platform-specific metrics that increase visibility— whether it's the use of hashtags, posting at a certain time, clickbait titles, extremity, et cetera.

Social media users on the quest for Internet stardom, or *Micro-Influencers* from our cyber vernacular, now take on the role of the undercompensated worker. They are constantly performing, producing, polishing, and packaging up content made specifically for other user consumption, while simultaneously deluded and encouraged by the success of prominent Influencers who played the game and won, who 'made it'; all the while ultimately benefiting the corporation, who can sit back, relax, and watch its users try their luck at stardom and generate more content and app use as they're persuaded by none other than those who *have* achieved influence. The fruits of the Micro-Influencer's free labor are only properly compensated once virality is achieved, eradicating the 'Micro' label as they become the pinnacle of 'Macro' influence with open arms. Virality, at last! The compensation manifests as brand deals, brand sponsorships, and in the case of TikTok, a creator "fund"— all of which further motivate the Influencer and eager Micro-Influencers to continue creating content, continue optimizing, and continue figuring out what they can do to maximize engagement. On the topic of the TikTok

creator fund, Luke Miani, content-creator influencing over 400,000 on YouTube, recently shared his earnings from the alleged fund on Twitter (@LukeMiani)– “If anyone is wondering how much TikTok pays for 7.5M views, 629K likes, and over 5K comments: it’s 3.95”– stated above two screenshots of his earnings within the app. On continued optimization, It is particularly interesting to analyze the growing number of content-creators who utilize (what I call) the factory of digital voyeurism, an extremely bizarre phenomenon, which I will expand on further.

The carrots of potential virality dangled daily in the faces of Internet users include, but are not limited to: 1) Wealth with the power to transcend the socioeconomic status you’ve known your whole life. 2) A guaranteed ascension in status, popularity, and therefore power. 3) The power of trend-setting, affecting millions, and the notion of the world (at least, a very large amount of it) at your fingertips, under your influence. It’s nearly impossible to scroll through social media without stumbling across a successful Influencer who seems to have won the ultimate jackpot– easy money, status, and opportunities, just by using the same exact social media that we peruse through for leisure. To witness a mere commoner of the Internet turn into an Internet star that thousands of real people care about (i.e. interact with) solely because of one viral post is to instill the age-old capitalist notion that fuels the system’s perpetuation: *This could be you!* Except, this time, it’s not the traditional capitalist promise of *This could be you!* (Through good old, roll-up-your-sleeves hard work; i.e. productive labor). Originally, this *good old hard work* that promises to transform your socioeconomic status is defined most commonly by working, at minimum, 40 hours every week under the label of “full-time worker”, while often also working overtime, obtaining extra jobs, and/or living paycheck to paycheck to chase this promise of a distant financial ascension.

The Influencer's capitalist promise is one that bypasses the traditionally exploitative work that we're used to, and instead it repackages and presents a more clandestine form of exploitation, one that we're much more inclined to chase. The Internet facilitates creation, art, creative expression, sparks innovation, and makes the impossible possible. How could something we turn to for entertainment, for expression, and to appease our curiosity be considered exploitative? Mark Andrejevic, writer of "The Violence of Participation" in Trevor Scholz' *The Internet as Playground and Factory*, describes that the commercial appropriation of information and data surveillance meet an abstract definition of exploitation. To be online is to have disposable time. It is an exploitation definitively characterized by firstly having the means to even engage in the online activities that are surveilled and tracked. Google tracks its 1 billion unpaid users to profit off their data and sell it to advertising clients, who consequently target users more accurately with ads. He describes the way in which commercial surveillance has become a crucial component of our communicative infrastructure, blurrily intertwining labor, leisure, consumption, production, and play. He emphasizes that to be exploited does not mean that exploited workers do not take pleasure in the success of their collaborative effort—there are moments of pleasure despite the fact that we are losing control of our productive and creative activities. Which is to say that to critique this form of surveillance exploitation and the way it is socially institutionalized is not to disparage the pleasures of the workers and leisure obtained from use, but it also does not nullify the exploitative social relations that define its existence. The emergence of social media and the social phenomenon that is climbing the ladder of Influence are both expressions of the capitalistic *always-optimizing* tendency to increase and commodify disposable time. As Marx describes, "But its tendency always, on the one side, to create disposable time, on the other, to convert it into surplus labor" (Marx 1857/58, 708). In

capitalism, time plays a role in the form of labor time, reproductive labor time, struggles over the working day, and absolute and relative surplus-value production based on a dialectic of labor and time. We often turn to our devices and social media when we are not *overtly working*, which is to say, when we have disposable time, whether it's before clocking in, during our lunch break, after our shift, or any time during the 24-hour day that allows for a period of respite. 'Respite' precisely describes the sense of relief users feel when they use social media, and why it's so attractive in our overworked culture. To use the algorithmic Internet for pleasure is to disconnect from the world of hustle and of real obligations and to step into a digital sanctuary of entertainment perfectly catered to your interests, a reflection of a digital pleasure map of your brain. You're allowed to switch off the complex functioning necessary in your day-to-day obligations and immerse yourself in a world where you can "do nothing" (i.e. scroll and interact), and yet, "doing nothing" continuously feeds data to and further strengthens the personalized algorithm created to keep you hooked, representing new qualities of the expression of the labor theory of value. The more time a user spends on TikTok or Facebook or YouTube or any capitalist social media, the more profile, browsing, communication, behavioral, and content data the user generates— which is then offered as a commodity to advertising clients. Internet users do not own the money that is generated for others. The more time a user spends online, the more targeted ads can be presented to them, which is at the core of capitalist social media corporations' accumulation strategy. It is a method of relative surplus-value production— not just one ad is presented to all users at the same time, but many different ads are presented to different users at the same time. As described by Fuchs, "Individual targeting and the splitting up of the screen for presenting multiple ads allows to present and sell many ads at one point of time. In the pay-per-click mode, clicking on an ad is the value realization process." (Fuchs, 2015.)

While the traditionally exploitative work guarantees a wage, the Influencer's work is destined to be unwaged until they amass an audience of millions through constant performance and content creation. The Influencer's life becomes their unwaged work, commodifying their every experience and therefore themselves in a desperate attempt to win the Internet's lottery. They must constantly view their day-to-day experiences as the next possible opportunity of financial freedom. Their life experiences are simply the means to the end of potential capital. They know an audience will always be there, and their selfhood is infiltrated upon through the internalization of constant surveillance, beyond the duration of traditional shifts and into the untimed, never-ending shift of life. Foucault's conceptualization of power in Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon offers a critical perspective in understanding the Influencer's behavior in direct relation to the ever-watching audience. Originally created as a new way to regulate citizens, the structure of the Panopticon allowed guards to continually see inside each prisoner's cell from a high vantage point in a central tower, unseen by the prisoners, offering a powerful form of internalized coercion through the consciousness of constant surveillance. Power, Foucault describes, "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault 1980, 30). The true danger is not that individuals, or in this case, Influencers, are repressed by the social order that is their omnipresent audience, but that they are "carefully fabricated in it" (Foucault, 1977), with the "haunting" of power penetrating into their behavior. Power produces reality. The importance for Foucault lay in the effect that power has on entire networks, practices, the world around us, and how our behavior can be affected.

It is undeniable that the Internet's inception of an omni-attentive audience has created in its users an effect similar to the internalized consciousness of constant surveillance. Performance

is second nature to the social media user, along with the internalization of a social realm that never sleeps; hence the immense amplification of the Fear of Missing Out, or FOMO, exacerbated by social media under a new social rule. Social media was created to aid our urge to connect with others, and the medium itself instills in its users a contract under the guise of a symbiotic relationship; It's natural to share what we're doing or who we're with and it's natural to give and receive validation (in the form of engagement) to said sharing, right? If you post something, I'll like and comment. Or however that saying about back scratching goes. At the same time, the power of the Internet's synergistic blend of both permanence and impermanence facilitates the attraction of posting, updating, and participating even more. It completely reorients the way that history and human existence are recorded. To share is to prove your existence among billions who are also proving their own. To share is to not become obsolete! To share is to mark your existence on the wall. Did anything truly happen if it wasn't published permanently on the archive of human existence that is the Internet? As hyperbolic as it may seem, in a culture that perpetuates an environment of constant performance and/or curation—take Instagram, for example, our very own extension of our lives in photo form to be viewed by others—hypervigilance of the self in relation to one's identity and portrayal from the always-anticipating audience seems bound to happen. To use the Internet is to unravel a novel extension of human consciousness, immortalized as long as technology lives on. To know that the Internet exists and is thriving is to obtain knowledge that permeates our everyday behavior. FOMO is the 21st-century expression of the internalization of surveillance and power as described by Foucault's Panopticon. These mediums largely dominate the actions of millions daily, perpetuating a socio-technological universe with rules of its own, and it's no question why. Its users are promised the freedom of a space fully *their own*, in every facet and at the core of their

experience. The Internet is a force like no other in accessing opportunity, connection, and knowledge, all over distance and time. It is a groundbreakingly nuanced addition to the history of communication technology, this we know. In the playground that is the factory, refusal of mainstream social media (in the name of a surveillance solution) is tantamount to social isolation with the costly price of *missing out* to pay, professionally, personally, romantically... In whatever ways one utilizes the different environments of different information (Tinder or LinkedIn?) to their benefit.

We are witnessing, in real-time, the modern phenomena of *digital voyeurism*, a term to describe the bizarre product at the intersection of Influencer, Consumer, and Reality Television, the next extension of the continuous democratization of content production. We've witnessed the sheer success amassed by teenage YouTubers, like Emma Chamberlain, lauded for their "relatability" through lifestyle vlogs, unlocking a new form of content that was perceived as authentic, and at the time, incredibly rare. Although teenage YouTubers like Bethany Mota were well around and popularized before the performance of pure authenticity reared its head on the site, their content was hyper-produced with box lights, backdrops, and a more obvious and put-together performance. To put the success of this new genre of content in perspective, Emma Chamberlain made casual videos of her daily life, like her first day of Junior year in high school, where she drove and talked to the camera on the way there and brought it into school and did the same. At age 18, she gained 8 million subscribers in just *two years*, later leading her to be flown out and seated front row in Paris Fashion Week at a Louis Vuitton show in 2019 while she climbed the charts with her still-budding podcast as number one in fifty countries. Simply by exuding nonchalance and "realness", her performance of everyday life changed life as she knew it in an instant, reorienting our understanding of what watchers and users like to engage with. It

makes sense that we feel more drawn to creators we relate to or who portray themselves as more “authentic”—take the app TikTok, for example. It has become increasingly popular to come across a skit that is portrayed as real, objective truth, oftentimes extreme and unsettling to gauge the most engagement and reaction. We’re no strangers to the concepts of clickbait and cliffhangers, but what is most interesting in this phenomenon of TikTok skits is the genuine distress and acting that occurs, juxtaposed with a camera angle that is blatantly recording a person who must know they’re being recorded (there is no intent to hide the camera, but there also isn’t an understanding of a camera out in the open, like in reality TV), meaning that there are people who are continuously putting themselves or their partner (in the case of couples) in dangerous or morally ambiguous situations, solely in the hope of achieving Internet stardom and influence so that one day they can enjoy the fruits of their never-ending, daily performance.

To describe this phenomenon, take this example of dialogue for instance. Racking up over 7.5 million views and 700,000 likes, a woman desperately pleads with her boyfriend in a viral TikTok video as she stands in an empty, unfurnished home, inches away from the broker who allegedly sold the home to the boyfriend without her consent, using the majority of her funds. Recorded from the perspective of the boyfriend, the three-part series starts in utter chaos and does not falter throughout, as we, the audience, see the distressed woman brought to angered tears before she ultimately walks out the door. “It was 75% my money! You didn’t even consult me on this! [...] We haven’t even gotten married yet! This should’ve been a decision between both of us! [...] Go get my money back! [...] Keep the keys. I will get a lawyer. You did not get my signature on this house.” The third part ends with some final words from the boyfriend, speaking first to the girlfriend, then to the broker— “I already signed it already. It’s over. Get the lawyer, I’m staying here. Call the lawyer, whatever you gotta do. I signed the paperwork. Your

money is just as good as my money. [...] We're moving here, bro, just give me the keys. We're moving here, she'll be alright. [...] Alright, thanks for doing business with me." Skit or not, the extent of genuine anguish present in the videos is enough to make anyone uncomfortable. Yet the extremity of the situation and the way in which it was recorded, or rather, the fact that it was recorded to begin with, is enough to make anyone speculate the validity of the story and the true objectives beyond the lens. If one was to watch the actual video, it is particularly uncanny to see that the videos themselves are intentionally recorded from a first-person point of view with the phone pointed upright at the subject without a hint of intended concealment. The camera is completely unhidden, and obviously and intentionally recording (with the subject seemingly staring right at it), furthering the sense that the bizarre altercation is much more calculated than we're led to believe. It is very obviously and intentionally created for consumption, and how could that be authentic to begin with? It seems that watchers can't help but be enthralled by the drama before them, regardless of its validity, largely due to the nature of the app and ease of content creation— even if it's not real, it's on the app to be consumed and engaged with, and that it will be. Has TikTok created docile users appeased by both the algorithm and the Influencers who post mind-numbing content like this?

Once again, we see that Influencers are now taking on the role of the undercompensated worker, starring in an unpaid reality TV show as they post any and every engagement-based move in a desperate attempt to climb the ladder, commodifying their human experience by viewing it solely as a means to the dystopian end of Influence that could happen any day. This is the factory that pervasively permeates our behaviors within our playground of creation.