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Digital labor is the new killer app

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Abstract
Research on digital labor tends to fall into idealized, oppositional binaries that are judgmental rather than based on detailed analyses of the actual system or site. Our goal in this article is to provide a view on digital labor that is grounded not in speculation but in narratives from the producers of the platforms and content of the digital economy. To provide original perspectives on digital work we emphasize the agency of the producers and freelancers working at the global outsourcing firm Samasource and the cable television network Current TV. Our analyses of these two cases reveal important questions regarding (1) the values and organizational culture of firm founds and executives and (2) the mobility of freelance workers within the networks of digital labor. In conclusion we interrogate how wealth is distributed within the network. Across these questions, we introduce a research agenda that considers the ethical challenges of labor exploitation as well as the promises of social entrepreneurship in the digital economy.

Keywords
agency, culture, Current TV, digital, entrepreneurship, history, labor, media, Samasource, work

Introduction

Theories associated with digitally-distributed labor, or the coordination of labor through the use of networked 'new media' technologies, tend to fall into idealized, oppositional binaries that are judgmental rather than based on detailed analyses of the actual system or site. On the

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one hand are celebrations of user-generated content emerging out of the free time and willful contributions of millions of people. And on the other hand are accounts of exploitation that highlight the dystopic impacts of capitalist labor and outsourcing. This article argues for inductive analyses that consider both celebratory and dystopic perspectives that center on interview data. This is critical when one analyzes emerging social enterprises, which attempt to fulfill a primary social outcome while still maintaining a competitive position within the market and are thus both usually social and profit-oriented.

To demonstrate our argument we present two case studies: (1) the microwork organization Samasource which outsources labor to developing-nation communities and (2) the cable television network Current TV founded by former Vice President Al Gore in 2005. These case studies were selected because each is (at least partly) a market viable social enterprise that employs digital technologies to accumulate, distribute, and coordinate multiple forms of networked labor. Both organizations are involved in crowdsourcing, that is, they gather information and input from user-public crowds that can assist them in accomplishing their organizational missions. Because of their diversity, one a non-profit working with developing world non-technical workers (Samasource), the other a for-profit firm working with primarily western technical workers (Current TV), together the two cases present a good platform for our argument in favor of developing theories inductively from data gathered from interviews and observations.

Our Current TV case study involved two years of reflexive participant observation (2009–2011) conducted by one of our authors, who was employed as a video producer. At Samasource, our fieldwork entailed several meetings with organizational leadership, and two field visits (and observations) at the firm's home site in San Francisco. In the case of Current TV, we have longitudinal data that speaks to changes in managerial and labor strategies through time. Our work with Samasource was based on several interviews, which merged observational data and formal interview responses. While the data on this case is more preliminary, it is sufficiently interesting to present in parallel with the Current TV case so as to uncover key insights for further research.

Our methodology allowed our analyses to emerge out of observed practices and 'on-the-ground' realities. Our interview questions emerged from careful observation so that they could appropriately allow us to identify key issues within the environments we studied. As opposed to the scientific method of arriving to a field location with a testable theory, our methods are most similar to grounded theory in which theory and data come from fieldwork (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Consistent with grounded theory, we analyzed the data we gathered and looked for key patterns, which we present at the end of each case study's section and in the article's conclusion.

Our analyses allowed us to identify the importance of three factors that must anchor future research: 1) values of executives, 2) mobility of laborers, and 3) capitalization of wealth, none of which are highlighted in most digital labor research. Our conclusions express concern that both organizations tackle their social goal through scale-driven approaches that lack attention to the diverse agendas of the communities they aim to empower.

Literature review – Digital labor: Peer production or exploitation?

Numerous scholars have written about how networked technologies transform communication, business, and the nature of community or culture (Varnelis, 2008). Foremost

amongst these is sociologist Manuel Castells. Srinivsasan had a conversation with Castells on April 27, 2010 where the topic of networked power was discussed. Castells' research has pointed out how networks need not re-distribute power and that, in contrast, tend to reify hierarchies. Discussing digital labor cases, where opportunities for inclusion and participation are presented to previously absent publics, Castells remarked that the same hierarchical results may likely occur, unless resource ownership and user agency were directly considered. His point, 'Networks kill or kiss based on how they are articulated and programmed' speaks to our task in this article to study cases of networked digital labor and see the means by which they structure participation and resource accumulation.

In the below sections, we outline optimistic and critical theories associated with digital labor. On the positive side are theorists discussing the profit-making and democratizing potential of the 'long tail' (Anderson, 2006), 'cognitive surplus' (Shirky, 2010), and 'commons-based peer production' (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006). These describe the creative value produced by (mostly) technologically literate people inventively using networked devices to add content to publicly available internet platforms. In contrast lie negative interpretations of networked production described as 'free labor' (Terranova, 2009), precarity (Deuze, 2007), or exploitation (Andrejevic, 2009; Miller, 2009). These interpret digital labor as tools for organizational profit and power. Our case studies suggest that when organizations mix market and social intentions, what results are asymmetries in labor equality combined with expanded opportunities for participation (Jenkins, 2006).

Peer-production

Networked technologies produce, manage, and share information for several personal and social reasons. Theorists have considered how networked technologies impact and create new types of publics (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006; Fish et al., 2011; Jenkins, 2008; Shirky, 2010). Some of this research fails to directly address the issue of labor, using examples that focus on generosity rather than the gain provided to the organization. For example, Benkler and Nissenbaum's (2006) term 'commons-based peer production' describes social processes that rely on and encourage voluntary contributions to an organizational project. Shirky (2010) directly addresses the critique that social media generates free, potentially exploitative, labor for corporations by arguing that digital volunteerism is not labor, but a type of creative leisure activity, an inventive product of 'cognitive surplus.' He further argues that users cooperate and contribute out of an intrinsic desire to achieve autonomy, competency over a skill, membership in a community, and social connectedness.

The above scholars tacitly accept that economically valuable information is created that contributes to the organization's mission. Their discussion, however, focuses on subjective and social factors more so than finance and labor. Moreover, both Shirky (2010) and Benkler and Nissenbaum (2006) fail to directly discuss the firm that manages, models, and manipulates the nature of participation. These authors select nonprofit examples of creative labor, such as Wikipedia and Slashdot, to bolster their argument.

Labor and exploitation

Technology journalist Dibbell (2007, 2006) conducted ethnographic research in China on workers playing video games for virtual goods ('goldfarming') that they sell for actual currency to Western gamers. He argues that these are 'virtual sweatshops' that are exploitative in their extraction of value from cheap labor. Similarly, Aneesh (2009) investigates how programmatic or algorithmic systems control and discipline Indian call center workers.

Deuze (2007) and Terranova (2009) both argue that digital labor is a tool of neoliberalism. Demonstrating this, Andrejevic (2009) exposes two types of 'user-generated content' that YouTube attempts to monetize, the videos and granular behavioral data, used for targeted advertisements. YouTube's owner, Google, makes billions of dollars from selling personal ads based on search queries (Auletta, 2009). This provokes Miller's (2009) polemic against the 'cybertariat's' advocacy of the 'populism' of YouTube. Keen (2007) concurs with this critique by noting the loss of expertise and quality as more people produce video content online.

Carr (2008) extends this critical discussion by arguing that the internet economy doesn't produce new or creative jobs but instead automates existing work and turns a gift economy of the many into the market economy of the few. He is concerned that with the booming web 2.0 internet economy also comes 'the replacement of skilled as well as unskilled workers with software, the global trade in knowledge work, and the ability of companies to aggregate volunteer labor and harvest its economic value' (2008: 147). He further discusses the 'economic realignment' that is happening as users upload information and do granular social media 'labor' that is exploited by information technology companies. Carr points out that multibillion dollar corporations such as Facebook and Google are transforming the generosity of millions of individuals into profit for a few.

These different interpretations of digital labor provide us an opportunity to present our research on two social enterprises.

Inductive research on digital labor: Samasource and Current TV

Samasource

Defiantly stating that 'the biggest moral problem of our time is a waste of talent', founder Leila Chirayath Janah argues that Samasource, the organization she founded and leads, accomplishes an activist goal of providing the 'dignity of work' to many millions worldwide who have not had the privilege of access to jobs (interview March 23, 2010). Headquartered in San Francisco's mission district, Samasource is a start-up social enterprise located in proximity to a number of crowdsourcing and new media firms, sharing its office with Crowdflower, a social enterprise mobile application firm, with which it partners on various projects. Dating back to the dot com boom from the mid to late 1990s, the mission district has served as a hub to search and find information services, social media, and now digital labor outsourcing companies. Samasource benefits from its presence in this hub and attempts to link particular worker populations (with which it

builds partnerships through grass-roots NGOs and organizations) in the developing world with digital labor tasks introduced by largely Western corporations (Figure 1). Samasource's goal is to provide jobs to as many individuals as they can of the 4 billion individuals in the world who live on less than three dollars per day, a true 'waste of talent,' according to Janah.

Samasource's mission to empower through access to labor directly engages a body of literature focused on the relationship between information and communication technologies and development (ICTD). Because of the poverty associated with networked exclusion, wherein marginalized peoples lack access to the resources provided by technologies, governments and professionals have attempted to bridge the 'digital divide' via mobile and wired information infrastructures into rural villages. At one extreme, some projects have assumed that the mere presence of access-oriented information technologies and portals can generate learning critical to development (Warschauer, 2002). Though scalable, these have been criticized for their lack of local community participation (Srinivasan, forthcoming). In contrast, many grassroots initiatives have emerged that consider the subtleties of subcultures, moving away from the homogenization of community, and attempt to develop projects from the 'bottom up'. These 'contest, interrogate … and create forms of knowledge transfer and social mobilization … on behalf of the poor that can

Figure 1. Samasource's business model

be characterized as a "grassroots globalization"' (Appadurai, 2000: 3). Samasource navigates these two approaches by accessing system-introduced outsourcing jobs while building partnerships with local organizations. Their partnerships focus on leaders within the different nations and communities who can then translate the Samasource 'solution' to their local worker publics. Yet, as we later reflect upon, this approach, designed to while achieving scale and greater reach, is not one that invests heavily in the culturally diverse agendas, realities, practices, and ontologies associated with the different communities with which Samasource partners.

Samasource provides work to 900 laborers across nine countries, and by journalistic accounts will continue to expand (Bates, 2010). Diminished transaction costs associated with digital labor have enabled companies to provide work to less expensive laborers worldwide, allowing corporations to benefit from an expanded labor market where most workers will work at a fraction of 'first-world' costs. Samasource routes jobs to laborers worldwide via systems such as mTurk, which pay as little as a few pennies for straightforward clerical tasks, such as proofreading, product categorization, spell-checking, and more. A range of more high-skill tasks including graphic design and programming are not targeted by Samasource.

Noting the significant increase in literacy worldwide, Janah states that developing world populations can be effective digital laborers. Setting up a required internet connection is simpler than building a road or wiring a village. According to Janah 'until 15 years ago most businesses required exchange of physical material, but we live in a world that has really changed and enabled labor to move freely across borders through the internet (previously only capital could move across borders).' Samasource VP Dave Yoon explained that the data deluge of today's web 2.0 world (O'Reilly, 2005) creates the need for humans to work with algorithms 'to check (content) over and make sure it is right … the type of work we are training our workers to do [includes] transcriptions, translations, and image digitization' (interview July 28, 2010). Janah is hopeful that outsourced digital labor may empower those with basic education to access jobs that the domestic sector and corrupt states have failed to provide. Citing a recent trip to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, Janah explained that the co-existence of 50% literacy and 80% poverty rates speak to a 30% gap in employment possibilities that Samasource can work to fill, with 'simple computer-based clerical work that is dignified and won't force anyone to break their backs in the hot sun' (interview March 23, 2010).

Despite the 'openness' of digital labor platforms like mTurk, most developing world laborers have encountered difficulty navigating these sites, bidding for work, and accessing jobs (and pay) effectively. Samasource steps in the middle to serve the needs of the marginalized by providing admittedly uncreative labor that helps the foreign corporation increase its profit margin. In one interview with Janah, she articulated the importance of her organization in advocating for these workers, ensuring that the work they do is 'dignified', where they opt in willingly, and are provided a wage floor.

In an era of digital networks, Samasource has emerged precisely because of the need for a human intermediary, connecting laborers to jobs. Yet we question whether Samasource perpetuates rather than challenges a dependency whereby marginalized populations occupy subordinate positions within global networks, and where wealth and power concentrates at the top. Samasource's pragmatic approach rejects the exoticization

of the poor and the belief that the poor must resort to participation in local craft industries. Janah argues that Samasoure promotes creativity, by providing dignified labor, instead of marginalizing the poor by either seeing them simply as an untapped market of consumers at the 'bottom of the pyramid' (Prahalad, 2004). Yet Janah expresses concern with an alternative of highly uncreative, clerical work. She states.

> Coming from a social justice argument, if I first heard about Samasource I may be critical too. (Social justice) folks keep us on our toes, and I too have a fear of creating a global class of secretaries. Yet initiatives like ours are exploitative (only) if you don't give people a real choice without a wage floor. … What's going to catapult (the poor) out of poverty is making real money with the skills they have spent their lives cultivating. (interview March 23, 2010)

Samasource argues that it is pointless to criticize labor outsourcing in a world where this is so widespread. Samasource employees firmly state that access to labor promotes dignity, and that an infusion of money can empower a poor society. Since her time in high school, Janah has identified herself as a pragmatic activist, turning a scholarship from a tobacco company into a teaching position at a Ghanaian high school.

By enabling poorer laborers to willfully opt in to labor contracts, a services industry can emerge in poorer nations that is invigorated by an active labor force's improved access to money. In India, Samasource employees noted that the information services industry (which involves a range of skill-level information technology projects) is growing at a 30% a year rate, accumulated over 200 billion dollars, and empowered a growing middle class. While it's unclear whether the Indian phenomenon would be replicable in the many smaller and even poorer countries in which Samasource works, 'repetitive work' usually done in the West can be the source of an emerging middle class in nations such as Kenya and Ghana, where Samasource has developed strong connections.

As is common with social enterprises, Samasource is flexibly structured, allowing for clean segmentations to be drawn between its multiple, concurrent missions. Samasource employees argued that the market survival of the company is a statement of its effectiveness and ability to actually deliver its goals, and that competition from other organizations will allow Samasource to adapt and improve. Without the test of the market, inefficiency could persist along with a vision that considers purely philanthropic goals that lack realism. Samasource can thus be framed as a 'non-loss, non-dividend' organization. This market orientation also influences its organizational culture. Bankers and wealthy corporate employees have either worked for Samasource or are actively involved with its development. Janah states, 'We all work late hours here and the organization is run "the Goldman way"' (interview March 23, 2010).

Samasource's market identity allows it to effectively develop partnerships that are beneficial for other firms, including Amazon's mTurk with which it has a service-provider agreement. Its ability to synchronize and co-evolve with these for-profit, venture capital-funded companies will allow it to provide digital labor that is more diversified as supply and demand markets move toward non-clerical domains. Its ability to seamlessly engage with digital labor platforms allow it to function, according to Yoon, as a 'turnkey solution'—an optimal standalone firm that requires little to no human intervention. Yoon states, 'Turnkey solutions is something where the client doesn't need to do anything …

[Samasource] is just something that you just plug in and it solves your problem' (interview July 28, 2010).

While the above points speak to Samasource's strategy to maintain market coherence, it must maintain 'field coherence,' adapting to the 23 countries from which its laborers come. Its approach has been to partner with local organizations worldwide, so that each can maintain its independence and function effectively without dependence on another arm of a larger organization. Samasource leadership emphasized the importance of seeking out 'charismatic entrepreneurs,' individuals who have drive, resilience, and an entrepreneurial spirit.

We were told about Maria, a Pakistani woman, who had been forced into a domestic, servile life but had a great desire to create an organization that could bring money to her and other women. Through her partnership with Samasource she now has been able to create an organization that employs 50 people, and recently 'bought an iPhone, which I think is awesome. … I want all our workers to be able to afford this.'

Samasource, via its organizational manual, requires that partners learn to build networks via LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Like iPhones and Facebook, Samasource is an intermediary between a person and a corporation. In the following sections we will further analyze Samasources goals in light of recent questions about globalization and labor.

Samasource analysis

It remains unclear whether Samasource will grow to the levels it aspires, as the most prominent supplier of digital labor to the 'other' 4 billion. Yet our use of grounded theory allows the presented data and interviews to generate two key issues for further study.

Most importantly, we believe it is critical to explore the nature of the labor that firms such as Samasource outsources, to see whether Janah's claims more appropriately fit the access to labor, or the nature of the labor itself. We believe further study could focus on whether Samasource's labor opportunities serve as a satisfactory 'ceiling' for laborers such as Maria, in terms of either the amount compensated, type of work conducted or the opportunity to work on other initiatives that may evade Janah's fears of creating a global class of secretaries. We believe that further study of Samasource's organizational culture, perhaps in contrast to other digital labor non-profits, could allow researchers to link organizational missions and actors to the experiences, efforts, and compensation of developing world laborers. The ambivalence within the Samasource case, merging activist and fair use discourses with 'Goldman way' praise, call for greater analysis of organizational culture.

Our other important question for further research would be to uncover profit-models and capitalization in social enterprises as Samasource. Specifically, we believe that studying the distribution of resources within the networks that Samasource manages could provide interesting comparisons with various for-profit corporations and other networked organizations. Is there truly greater access to labor and money for developing world laborers, and does this access allow for the re-orienting of existing inequalities? These questions surface from the interviews that form our grounded research.

Current TV

Digital Correspondents (DC). On stage to accept a Primetime Emmy for Interactive Television for Current in 2007, US Vice President and Current TV Chairman Al Gore said, 'We are trying to open up the television medium so that viewers can help to make television and join the conversation of democracy and reclaim American democracy by talking about the choices we have to make.' Two years earlier, Current TV, YouTube, and many other internet video and social media sites had started. Current TV is in 80 million homes worldwide including Italy, Ireland, England, USA, and South Africa. It is one of the first cable networks to come to air in the Web 2.0 era marked by the capacity for user-submitted internet video and news content. Current TV encourages participants to produce television documentaries and submit internet news content. This, they say, empowers citizens to make content that engages in dialogues about democracy.

Current TV's first production and labor model, circa late 2004, was to train as many as 200 Digital Correspondents (DC) to shoot and edit nonfiction stories from around the world. Each DC was going to be fully-employed and given health benefits. Television producer Michael Rosenblum was brought on by Gore to design and supervise the DC project. Rosenblum's idea was to 'put them through an intensive training course … like a Peace Corp [and] put them on two-year contracts for minimal amounts of money and essentially create this army of new young bright journalists with video cameras [who] go all around the world and make stuff for next to nothing' (interview August 30, 2010). Rosenblum modeled the DC journalism program on the signature project of using inexpensive labor to do the benevolent work of US international philanthropic organization, the Peace Corps.

In the competitive world of nonfiction media production, this new labor model of quickly training amateurs to do the work otherwise assigned to seasoned professionals was radical. As noted by several of our informants, this programming plan excited thousands of young filmmakers and journalists to submit lengthy application materials. The DC model is also an interesting point around which to understand Current TV's stated mission to democratize the production and sharing of media. As Andrew Fitzgerald, of Current TV's Collective Journalism department said, '[the DC model] is a good place to start in terms of democratizing because what you are talking about there is you are creating an elite squad … it is an elite republicanization of media versus a true democratization of media' (interview May 26, 2010).

The DC model is more alike pre-internet content production models. This could be seen in contrast to the emerging ideal of democratizing production that places content creation in the hands of everybody or the crowd. The DC model thus not only confounds the democratization mission but also posits a particular logic about labor in digital age: that such workers need to be trained and tethered to a corporation. This is decidely distinct from the crowdsourced viewer created content (VC2) model that followed as the DC model met its demise.

Viewer Created Content (VC2). Gore and Hyatt were looking for a president of programming for Current TV. In late 2004, Hyatt met with David Neuman, a television executive with experience in news programming, audience engagement, and citizen journalism at

CNN, ABC, Disney, the Digital Entertainment Network, and Channel One. Taking a note from the ultra-participatory Burning Man Festival that he had just attended, Neuman suggested to Gore and Hyatt that instead of training 200 DCs, the network should use an internet-based video site to train, critique, and collect the works of any video journalist in the world who wanted to contribute to Current TV. His plan was to use the internet to crowdsource content production, not from a few well-trained professionals but from thousands of less-trained and globally distributed media workers. This idea was resonant with Gore's mission to democratize media production. This program was called VC2 or Viewer-Created Content and it replaced the DC model, after Neuman replaced Rosenblum as the network's choice for programming president. Neuman explains how he convinced Hyatt to change this production model from the DC professional producers to non-professional VC2 producers. Neuman related to one of the authors a story of a dialogue between him and Hyatt. Neuman confronted Hyatt's plan to hire 200 digital correspondents by saying: 'Why 200? Why not 30,000? It is virtual. Why not put your training up on the web and teach everybody how to [produce citizen journalism]? And that is what we ultimately did.' Fish responded by saying: 'But it doesn't create a living wage for 200 people' (interview April 12, 2010). Neuman replied,

> No it doesn't … I didn't think that was really what the company was about, the company was about facilitating the democratic dialogue, the company wasn't about how many full time jobs we can create with benefits in San Francisco for an elite cadre of young creators. In fact, we never intended it to be that. In fact, I wanted to have no fulltime employees, really. To me the ideal would have been eBay. … my desire was, let's have 30,000 people making content for Current TV. That would be beautiful. (interview December 4, 2010)

Not everyone was convinced the VC2 project was going to be 'beautiful.' Saskia Wilson-Brown, an ardent supporter of independent film production and the head of filmmaker outreach for Current TV, was skeptical of opportunities given to filmmakers by the VC2 program: 'You made a little bit of money, and it was cool, but it really wasn't like a very, very large opportunity, it was a semi-large opportunity and it was a shit ton of work' (interview November 15, 2009).

Despite the hiring of a staff tasked with outreach to film school students, community media producers, and under-funded documentary filmmakers, the 30,000 video journalists Neuman discusses never arrived to provide inexpensive and diverse content. The labor and skill involved in creating television-quality documentaries did not appeal to the crowd as much as desired, and the $500–$2000 renumeration was considered insufficient. Wilson-Brown notes above that the pay-scale was not appropriate for the amount of work required. Thus, this eventual failure of the VC2 program (2005–2008) prompted yet another labor model, one based on the productivity not of citizen journalists but of professional Hollywood producers. With a dependency on professional producers, Current TV's social mission to democratize media production for citizen journalists became less plausible, with the network instead turning to the task of maximizing profits.

The VC2 department and program was disbanded in November 2008 after nearly three years of sourcing and curating low-pay media producers. Three issues made the

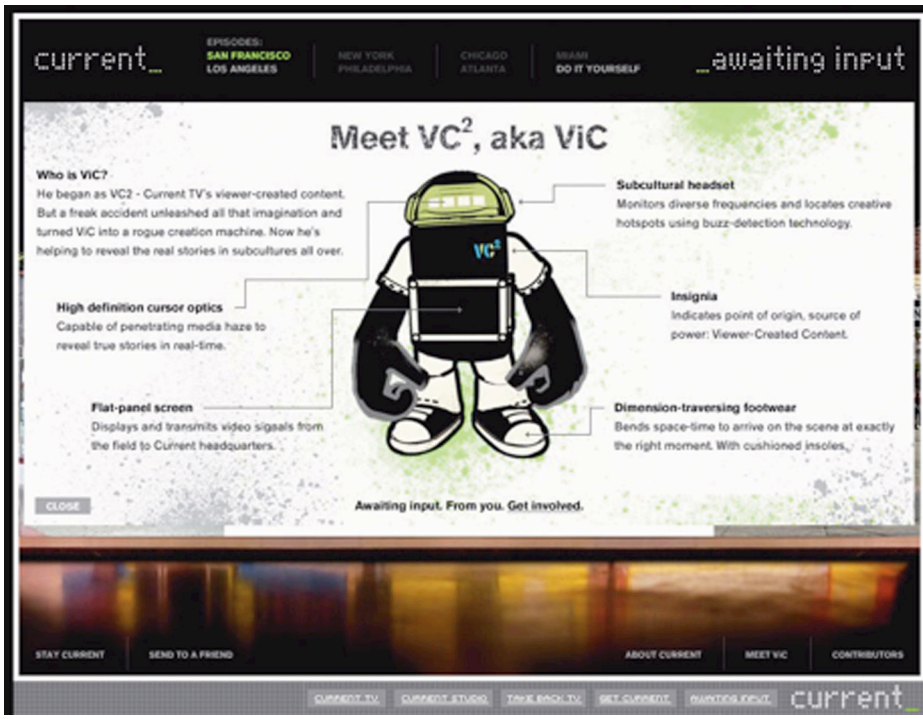

Figure 2. ViC, Current TV's VC2 Robot, expresses Neuman's desire to automate Current TV

VC2 model unsuccessful: 1) quality, 2) quantity, and 3) intellectual property. The content was not as good as it needed to be. It needed to be re-edited by salaried editors before television broadcast. Secondly, VC2 producers were few. There were between '2–3 dozen' and 'one hundred' VC2 producers. Thirdly, those who did exist and could produce good content were reluctant to sign away the broadcast and digital rights for such a small sum (between $500 and $2000).

Current TV implemented Neuman's VC2 as opposed to Rosenblum's DC plan and with it enacted an explicit theory of labor based on crowdsourcing. The DC model was more focused on the 'chosen few', yet gave producers a living wage with benefits. The VC2 model, in contrast, exploited the technological capacities of a globally distributed internet for individuals to contribute content from around the world, yet still failed to access those diverse voices or appropriately support them. This approach was motivated by the faith of empowering a desire to create content and show oneself on television, while hopefully accessing the growing numbers with inexpensive camcorders and editing laptops, all of whom could provide diverse, cheap content. Today, Current TV's content acquisition plan is alike that of all other nonfiction networks—get it from professional Hollywood production companies. This pitch-focused model is much more expensive and less democratic but has taken the network, according to executives, closer to a state of profitability.

The VC2 period at Current TV was a rare moment between the DC and Hollywood labor models in which any would-be documentary producer had access to cable television distribution. But this democratization had a cost as stated, as these same producers had no stable employment from Current TV which required a huge commitment of time and resources to produce short documentaries. VC2 was but a historical moment between two ideological and economic systems, the salaried DC system and the professional Hollywood system. The detractions of precarious work and the joys and opportunities of access to new forms of technical labor existed simultaneously in this stage. We observed that the profit and the social visions often existed uneasily and ambivalently in the actions and statements of network executives. Before collecting data for this article, Fish produced 15 VC2 documentaries for Current TV and can confirm that the payment was both significant in a market deluged by free content and insignificant considering that it wasn't enough to pay for substantial facets of contemporary life. Essentially, he had to find additional work but also thrived on the prestige associated with being a TV producer.

Current TV analysis

Our data from two years of analysis (2009–2011) considers labor over the course of several manifestations: the DC, VC2, and Hollywood labor systems. Individual subjectivities, political identities, and artistic affiliations transformed Current TV's development of labor systems. As was demonstrated above, democratization as an ideal informed the structuring of labor tasks and topics. This allowed us to analyze two notable dimensions of Current TV's labor practices: the creative agency of the workers and the population who profits from the capitalization and labor of workers.

In Current TV's case the most agency was provided to laborers who had the least job security, via the VC2 model. Freelance outsourcing provided workers with the greatest agency to participate in ways they chose along with the greatest precarity of job security. It is this volatile intersection that was described as democratizing by informants.

Current TV issued and withdrew an IPO (a public stock offer) in 2008 in order to acquire funds to pay back investors who financed the 2005 founding of the company. Without a successful IPO, these same investors (mostly Democratic Party supporters, media moguls, and Hollywood insiders), remained vigilant about seeing a return on investment. The disbanding of the VC2 model could thus be seen as a turn toward investor agency and away from the mission-driven agency of the founders.

Current TV's movement toward production by professionals is paired with an increasing emphasis on profitability not only via cable carriage deals (where the bulk of Current TVs' revenue originates) but also through advertising revenue which requires a consistent and high viewership. Given its present agenda to ensure this viewership, Current TV's profit-making approach has shifted to the more conservative, professional model. The present Hollywood model for content acquisition is undertaken on a company to company basis. This model provides the outsourced laborer (contract-based and hierarchically organized production companies) with less agency and is more prescriptive in terms of the content being asked for. Yet executives at Current TV see it as a model of providing greater sustainable security for the outsourced

laborers. Creative agency is greatly reduced as Current TV ceases to solicit documentary ideas from the crowd.

Yet questions remain, namely, how was the freelance labor during the VC2 Phase capitalized? It is clear from our research that Current TV's VC2 endeavor was mission-driven but it remains unknown whether it was also a way of acquiring inexpensive content that enabled the pooling of profits into Current TV's executive coffers. Also, in related video entrepreneurial firms, such as Google's YouTube and Next New Networks, we see business models emerging that are profitable for both the freelance producer and the hosting firm. In the euphoria of this recent capitalization of digital labor, what is the fate of the social component of 'social entrepreneurship?' This question arose out of engagements with our informants as well as inquiry into the ethical impacts of their organizational culture, capitalization, and agency.

Organizational culture, capitalization, and agency

Our methodological approach, focused on observations and interviews, provided us with a set of fragments that allows us to identify key concepts that must anchor further theoretical and applied research on digital labor. We point to these concepts at the end of each of our case studies. In both cases we are concerned with 1) the creative agency and values of the executives and founders, 2) the agency of the freelance workers, and 3) how labor is capitalized and wealth is accumulated at different points within the network.

It is important for us to note, however, that the ways these issues play out in each case differ. For example, because Current TV is interested in outsourcing more creative labor, agency is increased in terms of the variety of content that laborers can produce. However, our data indicated that Current TV producers may not be able to sustainably maintain a robust income from their contributions. Samasource's labor, in contrast, is more secretarial and clerical, yet provides guaranteed wages.

Both cases thus highlight the importance of studying how wealth and power accumulate at different positions within these networks of crowdsourcing and outsourcing. While scholars such as Anderson (2006) and Benkler (2006) discuss the wealth of networks, on the meta-level of the entire structure, their discussion fails to consider levels of stratification across different positions. Zittrain (2009) usefully has noted that digital labor can range from highly creative tasks to projects where the laborer is unaware of the impact of his or her contributions. We note that freelance employees from both firms have agency to choose what they want to work on though this is subject to the approval of the firm. But neither have complete agency over their choice of work. Current TV laborers can choose to make videos about whatever they like but their ability to be compensated is constrained by entertainment, aesthetic, and editorial concerns. Samasource laborers are provided with more specific, targeted, and constrained tasks that they can choose to engage.

These points about choice and creativity, mobility, and accumulation/capitalization within networks emerge through our uses of grounded theory, and though not unforeseen must highlight a research agenda that explores social enterprises and other organizations that leverage networked technologies to coordinate labor across national and cultural boundaries.

Concluding thoughts: Remembering ethics and heart

While the above points may begin to be addressed by further analyses of the above two case studies and the introduction of more cases, we also believe that theoretical and intellectual work on digital labor must also take an ethical turn, one that does not just quantify positions of power and choice, but discusses their implications on such important questions as global power, neoliberalism, and the dignity of labor. We note that despite advocating for global social impact and empowerment, both organizations are silent in their complicity with neoliberal systems that have long perpetuated wealth-based stratification.

To spell this out, we note the confidence by which Samasource employees spoke of their 'turnkey' solutions to the social dilemmas they identify. These solutions are based on Samasource's vision of empowerment, rather than necessarily considering local goals held by community partners. In parallel, the reality that Current TV's 'global producers' are demographically homogenous complicates a grassroots, multicultural agenda. Moreover, the fixed technology platforms used by both organizations speak to a desire to 'scale out', rather than locally configure. An alternate vision of social development need not lie in Janah's 'straw person' critique of craft industries, but in placing at least part of the power in community partners by asking them to articulate their own longer term goals for development. This participatory approach neither patronizes tradition (as Janah criticizes) nor assumes that development must involve participating in neoliberalism.

While the laborers in both cases reside worldwide, particularly in Samasource, both organizations are based in San Francisco, one of the most expensive cities in the world, at the center of one of the densest populations of managers of digital content and venture capital, the San Francisco Bay Area (Neff and Stark, 2003; Neff, 2005; Ross, 2003). Their recruitment of global labor speaks less to empowerment and more toward a desire to evade regulation and overhead costs. By benefiting from labor conducted in the developing world, Samasource and Current TV extend the reach of capitalism with new technologies and internet-enabled communities.

As mentioned, Samasource and Current TV informants praised their uses of scaled out social and technological solutions, without discussing issues of class, in Current TV's case, or ethnicity and nationality in Samasource's case. Take for instance the shared emphasis on training. Samasource and Current TV both require their workers to get training in the arts of the West, secretarial tactics and media work, for example. Pedagogy ignores local educational approaches and instead privileges a western model of professionalization. Laborers could reasonably be seen as units of undifferentiated work fueling the amassing of wealth near the top of the pyramid.

Returning to the theoretical questions with which this article started, neither Benkler nor Carr propose a solution for global empowerment around new media that considers participation as a creative, culturally adaptive, and ontologically diverse process. These dilemmas replay themselves in both our cases. Likewise, even the cyber-Marxist Dyer-Witheford is only hopeful that networking technologies carried by the practices of capitalism will plant systems that can interrupt or oppose capitalism (1999). In order to enhance life in unexpected ways through new technologies we believe in the importance of thinking past 'peer production,' to consider alternative modes of production that

emerge from the energies of living local culture, respecting the sovereignty of diversity and community, and synergizing these into new approaches toward designing and deploying networked technologies.

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