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Introduction: Philosophers of the World Unite! Theorising Digital Labour and Virtual Work—Definitions, Dimensions, and Forms

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In 1845, Karl Marx (1845, 571) formulated the 11th Feuerbach Thesis: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Today, interpreting the world has become an important form of labour that is expressed on and with the help of digital media. In this context it has become common to talk about digital labour and virtual work. Yet the changes that digital, social, and mobile media bring about in the world of labour and work have thus far only been little theoretically interpreted. In order to change the information society for the better, we first have to interpret digital labour with the help of critical theories. Social theorists of the world from different fields, backgrounds, interdisciplines, transdisciplines, and disciplines have to unite for this collective philosophical task.

This special issue of tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique aims to contribute to building a theoretical framework for the critical analysis of digital labour, virtual work, and related concepts that can initiate further debates, inform empirical studies, and inspire social struggles connected to work and labour in and beyond digital capitalism. The papers collected in this special issue (a) provide systematic definitions of digital labour, (b) analyse its specific dimension, and (c) discuss different forms of digital labour.

(a) Definitions of Digital Labour

The first group of papers focuses on conceptualising and defining the concept of digital labour. The contributions included in this section examine the relation between work and labour, discuss how digital labour should be defined and highlight implications of different definitions of digital labour. Olivier Frayssé's paper *Work and Labour as Metonymy and Metaphor*, which opens the special issue, offers an etymological contextualization of the digital labour debate. Based on literary analysis and linguistics Frayssé traces the roots and the meanings of the concepts of work and labour in different languages. The following three papers move on to defining digital labour in particular. Based on Raymond Williams' approach to cultural materialism Christian Fuchs and Marisol Sandoval in *Digital Workers of the World Unite! A Framework for Critically Theorising and Analysing Digital Labour* argue for a broad definition of digital labour that takes into account the various forms of mental and manual labour that are needed for the production, circulation and use of digital media. Jack Linchuan Qiu, Melissa Gregg and Kate Crawford in their paper *Circuits of Labour: A Labour Theory of*

the iPhone Era also advocate an inclusive understanding of digital labour. They suggest a "circuit of labour" model as a holistic framework for studying labour and ICTs and apply it to the case of Foxconn. Kevin Michael Mitchell's contribution, *Concepts of Digital Labour: Schelling's Naturphilosophie,* takes a philosophical perspective on defining digital labour based on Schelling's Naturphilosophie and argues for a materialist perspective on the digital.

(b) Dimensions of Digital Labour

By looking at some of the specific dimensions of digital labour such as exploitation, use value and exchange value, commodification, ideology, and subjectivity the papers included in the second section of this special issue further deepen the engagement with digital labour. Sabine Pfeiffer in *Digital Labour and the Use-value of Human Work. On the Importance of Labouring Capacity for Understanding Digital Capitalism* focuses on Marx's concept of labouring capacity (Arbeitsvermögen) as opposed to labour power and highlights its implications for analysing digital labour. Marco Briziarelli's article *The Ideological Reproduction: (Free) Labouring and (Social) Working within Digital Landscapes* examines (neo-)liberal ideology as an important dimension in reproducing digital labour, using Facebook as an example. Steffen Krüger's and Jacob Johanssen's contribution *Alienation and Digital Labour—a Depth-Hermeneutic Inquiry into Online Commodification and the Unconscious* shifts the focus towards the subjective dimension of the digital labour debate. They take a psychoanalytic perspective to interpret user posts on Facebook's Site Governance Page, and add to ongoing discussions of alienation on social media. Finally, Yujie Chen in her contribution *Production Cultures and Differentiations of Digital Labour* reviews various dimensions of digital labour including exploitation, surveillance, productive versus unproductive labour, commodification, and ideology.

(c) Forms of Digital Labour

The papers included in the third part of this special issue explore the breath of the field by examining a variety of different forms of digital labour including the labour of professional workers in Internet industries, unwaged labour, audience labour, and playbour. In *Digital Labour in the New Media Sweatshop* Bingqing Xia presents an analysis of the working conditions of professional workers in Chinese Internet industries. Another form of digital labour—unwaged labour—is the focus of Brian Brown in contribution *'Will Work For Free': The Biopolitics of Unwaged Digital Labour*. He proposes a theoretically nuanced definition of unwaged digital labour that captures main characteristics of unpaid labour in digital capitalism. Brice Nixon *in Toward a Political Economy of 'Audience Labour' in the Digital Era* addresses a specific form of unwaged labour—the labour of audiences. Drawing on the work of Karl Marx, David Harvey, and Raymond Williams, Nixon discusses the political economy of the audience labour process. Finally, Arwid Lund examines the relation between labour and play in his contribution *Playing, Gaming, Working, and Labouring: Framing the Concepts and Relations*. Lund contributes to an understanding and critique of playbour by constructing a typology of the concepts of playing, working, gaming, and labouring.

The papers collected in this special issue theorise digital labour as a multifaceted field characterised by exploitation, alienation, precariousness, power, inequality, ideology, and struggle. These problems of digital labour are however not inherent to digital technology as such but result from its inclusion and application in capitalist relations of production.

We can learn from Marx's discussion of the dialectics of machinery for understanding the contradictory potentials of digital technologies today. Marx regarded machinery as a powerful instrument to reduce the working day while highlighting that under capitalism it operates in the opposite way as a means for its infinite extension. He stressed: under capitalism machinery, "the most powerful instrument for reducing labour-time suffers a dialectical inversion and becomes the most unfailing means for turning the whole lifetime of the worker and his family into labour time at capital's disposal for its own valorization" (Marx 1976/1867, 532).

Taking a Marxian perspective helps to understand technology in a dialectical way: it can be employed to increase the domination and exploitation of workers but at the same time has the potential to alleviate work and reduce socially necessary labour time. Today, almost 150 years after Marx formulated his thoughts on the impact of machinery on labour, digital technologies still confront us with similar contradictions. In many ways they have made our (working) lives easier: they enable fast communication; allow connecting with people around the world; facilitate the storing and reproduction of content and data; provide access to a huge amount of information, etc. At the same time, digital technologies serve as an instrument for the exploitation, surveillance, and control of workers not only within but also way beyond factory and office walls.

Herbert Marcuse highlighted that realising technology's potential to reduce human toil requires radical social change: "If the completion of the technological project involves a break with the prevailing technological rationality, the break in turn depends on the continued existence of the technical base itself. For it is this base which has rendered possible the satisfaction of needs and the reduction of toil—it remains the very base of all forms of human freedom." (Marcuse 1964, 236). As Marcuse argues, the full realization of human freedom depends on technology—but technology without technological rationality, which characterizes capitalist society.

Theorising digital labour, as labour that produces or makes use of digital technologies, can help to understand its problems, limits, potentials, and contradictions. It can therefore highlight the need for social change and inspire political action. However, the act of freeing digital technology from being an instrument for the domination of labour requires to go beyond just interpreting the world and to engage in social struggles that want to change it.

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