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**Article (Published version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Shepherd, Tamara (2013) *Young Canadians' apprenticeship labour in user-generated content*. [Canadian Journal of Communication](#), 38 (1). pp. 35-55. ISSN 1499-6642

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Available in LSE Research Online: October 2014

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Young Canadians' Apprenticeship Labour in User-Generated Content

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ABSTRACT This article introduces a political-economic framework for analyzing young people's production of user-generated content (UGC) as a kind of apprenticeship labour. Based on case studies of four young Montréalers engaged in creating user-generated content, the author developed the apprenticeship-type model of UGC labour to denote a process by which online immaterial labour or "free labour" coincides with self-directed and informal job training, channelled specifically toward a career in the creative industries. The 20- to 24-year-old participants' online activity is seen as a non-remunerated training ground, driven by the promise of notoriety that begets autonomous future employment in areas such as fashion, music, and journalism. Throughout this process, young people must constantly negotiate their autonomy; negotiated autonomy is precisely what they are apprenticing into through UGC production, where uncertainty and flexibility serve as the hallmarks of new media working conditions.

KEYWORDS Production/Co-production; New media; Labour; Youth; Political economy

RÉSUMÉ Cet article propose une approche politico-économique afin d'analyser les contenus web générés par les utilisateurs (mieux connus sous l'acronyme anglais UGC : user-generated content) en tant que travail d'apprentissage. Suivant une étude menée auprès de jeunes montréalais actifs dans la création d'UGC, l'auteure a développé l'idée de « travail d'apprentissage » en tant que procédé au sein duquel le travail immatériel (ou « travail non rémunéré ») sert la formation informelle et autonome d'une main d'œuvre vouée plus spécifiquement aux carrières afférentes aux industries culturelles. Ainsi, les activités web des jeunes dans la vingtaine ayant participé à l'étude sont conçues en tant que travail bénévole motivé par la promesse de notoriété qui conduirait, de manière autonome, à leur futur employabilité dans les domaines de la mode, de la musique ou du journalisme. Tout au long de ce processus d'apprentissage, ces jeunes deviennent les agents de négociations constantes à propos de leur autonomie ; pour ces jeunes, l'autonomie négociée constitue précisément ce vers quoi culmine leur apprentissage, alors que l'incertitude et la flexibilité deviennent les marques distinctives des conditions de travail dans le domaine des nouveaux médias.

MOTS CLÉS Production médiatique; Nouveaux médias; Travail; Jeunes; Économie politique

Introduction: User-generated content

This article is based on a two-year qualitative study of four twenty-something Montréalers who self-selected as aspiring creative industries workers based on

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their current production of user-generated content online. User-generated content, or UGC, is a term meant to capture the diverse forms of productive Web-based activity that make up what is variously called “Web 2.0” (O’Reilly, 2005), “the participative Web” (OECD, 2007), “the writable Web” (Benkler, 2006), and “social media” (Lenhart, Madden, Rankin, & Smith, 2007). These practices may include: checking in at a particular location; creating a social networking profile; posting and commenting on links; participating in forum discussions; reviewing products; blogging and microblogging (where blog posts are constrained to a specified degree, such as Twitter’s 140-character limit); uploading photos, videos, or other media; and folksonomic tagging (where users collectively classify Web content using searchable and cross-indexed markers or tags). Although these examples vary in terms of the level of users’ engagement with content creation—for instance, editing and uploading a video to YouTube versus commenting on someone else’s uploaded video—what they have in common is that all of these forms of creation are hosted by corporately owned websites rather than by the user-producers themselves. In fact, UGC is somewhat of a corporate buzzword, along with Web 2.0, terms that I use in order to highlight the commercial context in which users contribute content and personal information.

Corporately owned and operated websites provide the interface for users to easily create and share content; popular examples of such sites include Facebook, Twitter, Blogger, Tumblr, Foursquare, Flickr, YouTube, Wikipedia, Delicious, and Instagram. But in addition to these UGC-based sites, a number of Web platforms integrate UGC elements—such as Amazon’s product reviews or reader comments on CBCNews.ca—in an attempt to harness audiences’ potentially greater participation in media industries, as afforded by the Internet in general (Jenkins, 2006). The designator UGC works in this article to denote the potential diversity in people’s online “cultural production,” which is itself a blanket term for heterogeneous modes of creative, innovative, and/or communicative production of cultural meanings (Huws, 2010), as well as to accommodate emergent iterations of Web-based production that will become popular in the near future. One of the central challenges of studying new forms and uses of technology lies in predicting what kinds of activities will remain relevant in the ever-shifting terrain of new media. As such, UGC in particular implicates a growing reliance on mobile devices and Wi-Fi for Internet connectivity. Smartphone applications based on UGC include mobile versions of the sites listed above as well as more specialized apps, such as RunKeeper, which uses the phone’s locative capabilities to track the user’s running routes and share them with other users. This kind of functional convergence at the level of technological artifacts occurs in tandem with corporate convergence—the way that user “co-creation” gets harnessed within ever more consolidated structures of corporate ownership (Banks & Humphreys, 2008)—a commercial backdrop that forms the constitutive terrain for technological innovation as well as everyday uses.

UGC activities provide an especially interesting nodal point for thinking about convergence, since they fall somewhere in the middle on a continuum between consumption/use and production. This hybrid status has inspired the application of terms such as “prosumer” (Toffler, 1980) and the more recent “produser” (Bruns, 2008) to people engaged in creating UGC. This liminality is in turn compounded by the way

that people who create UGC simultaneously occupy the positions of user and producer in relation to the similarly liminal axes of their aged and gendered identities and leisure/labour. Similarly, the term “ProAm” has also been applied to UGC producers as a way of capturing the multiple sense in which their activities fall in between the concepts of amateurism and professionalism (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004).

Yet while the recent surge in this kind of production on Web 2.0 platforms has been heralded as nothing short of revolutionary (as in *Time* magazine's 2006 choice for Person of the Year: “You,” illustrated by a mirror-like image of a computer screen, bordered by YouTube's familiar video interface), such optimism has been tempered by more critical notions, like the controversial “90-9-1 rule” of participation inequality, where 90% of users never contribute, 9% of users contribute a little, and 1% account for the bulk of participatory action (Nielsen, 2006). In terms of the platforms themselves, Web 2.0 sites have come under scrutiny for their application of asymmetrical capitalist business models to user production and communication networks (Coté & Pybus, 2007; Gillespie, 2010; Scholz, 2008). Reflecting this turn toward positioning Web 2.0 platforms rather than users at the centre of UGC, *Time*'s Person of the Year for 2010 represents the flip side of “you”: Facebook co-founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who embodies the corporate thrust of UGC in appropriating user content as part of Facebook's massive expansion as a marketing and advertising platform. In this context, rather than representing “nonmarket work” (Ito, 2010, p. 323), user activity constitutes a kind of labour within an economy of UGC where social, cultural, and economic value is extracted from the work of user-producers.

The labour theory of value and UGC

In *Capital* (1867), Karl Marx posits a “labour theory of value”: the value of a good is based on the time needed for its production, where capitalists who own the means of production (at a fixed value) purchase workers' labour power (at variable value or wages). Because labour power functions as what Marx calls “variable capital,” meaning that it “both reproduces the equivalent of its own value and produces an excess, a surplus-value,” capitalists seek to appropriate that surplus value as the means of generating profit (p. 317). On the part of the worker, however, surplus value is felt as surplus labour, in other words, as exploitation. As Marx explains in the *Grundrisse* (1857/58), “What appears as surplus value on capital's side appears identically on the worker's side as surplus labour in excess of his requirements as worker, hence in excess of his immediate requirements for keeping himself alive” (p. 324n). This surplus labour, upon which the capitalist depends in order to make a profit, amounts to the workers producing an excess essentially for free. This unpaid labour that produces surplus value forms the basis of Marx's theory of the capitalist class structure.

Marx's labour theory of value has since been taken up by neo-Marxist approaches, particularly since the late 1960s and 1970s *Operaismo* movement in Italy. This worker movement represented one of the first organized repercussions of the deindustrialization of society, changes that were heralded as post-Fordism or (less frequently) post-Taylorism, in the context of “Empire” or a globalized form of capitalist sovereignty (Hardt & Negri, 2000). While Fordism and Taylorism describe Henry Ford's and Frederick Taylor's early-twentieth-century mass production efficiencies furnished by

mechanization and scientific management (Braverman, 1975), post-Fordism or post-Taylorism are terms used to denote current models for capitalist production in deindustrialized Western contexts:

In the post-Fordist workplace, the mechanical mass-production assembly lines have been replaced with new modes of computerized labour-shedding “flexible production” or sent to cheap labour zones in Asia, Latin America, or Eastern Europe. In the field of consumption, mass markets have been increasingly broken down into more customized and segmented “micromarkets,” while at the same time these niches are cultivated to a far greater extent on an international basis. In the area of government, the Fordist programs of social benefits have been eroded by privatization and deregulation and the creation of a state that is far more oriented towards promoting business interests and policing public order. (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003, p. 64)

Technology is central to this reorganization of production and labour processes, as is apparent in related concepts, such as “information capitalism” (Morris-Suzuki, 1984, 1986), “cultural economy” (du Gay & Pryke, 2002), and the “new economy” (Ross, 2004), where the production of goods shifts to the production of information and culture. And while the existence of a demarcated break between Fordist and post-Fordist production has been subject to vigorous debate, such a break was posited by the *Operaismo* movement as the wellspring for the “social factory” as a force of potential rupture to capitalist exploitation. *Operaismo* proponent Paolo Virno (2004) sees the hallmark of post-Fordist labour as capital’s appropriation of what he calls the “general intellect” (p. 41), those linguistic and cognitive habits or “generic faculties” available within the social arrangement of the “multitude” (p. 105). The multitude is in fact constituted by the sharing of general intellect through basic forms of communication and sociocultural production.

By putting the general intellect to work, post-Fordist capital has transformed labour into what Maurizio Lazzarato (1997) identifies as “immaterial labour” (p. 133). Immaterial labour produces the informational (i.e., cybernetics) and cultural (i.e., added value based on mass intellectuality) content of the commodity, and thus harnesses faculties of the general intellect into a project of capital, where an “aesthetic model of production” (p. 143) inscribes the consumer into the product from the moment of its conception. As a broad social arrangement that transcends traditional designations of work and labour, and indeed, transcends any attempted dichotomy between material and immaterial labour, Lazzarato’s concept highlights the fact that it is the whole social relation that constitutes production.

The labour theory of value as seen from the perspective of immaterial labour, therefore, emphasizes social production using the faculties of the general intellect, rather than labour time, as the variable capital central to the creation of surplus value. As Lazzarato (1997) summarizes, “[T]he ‘raw material’ of immaterial labor is subjectivity and the ‘ideological’ environment in which this subjectivity lives and reproduces” (p. 142). Capitalist extraction of surplus value works to appropriate subjectivity as part of investing commodities with cultural and informational ideologies. Examples of this appropriation abound, especially in light of Tiziana Terranova’s (2000, 2004) influen-

tial reading of immaterial labour on the Internet as “free labour”. Unpaid surplus labour emanating from general intellect can be seen in Terranova’s account of the sharing of computer code within the free/libre/open-source software (FLOSS) movement; in Andrew Herman, Rosemary Coombe, and Lewis Kaye’s (2006) analysis of residents of the virtual world *Second Life*; in José van Dijck’s (2009) description of Google users; and in Susanna Paasonen’s (2010) portrayal of Netporn communities, among other examples (e.g., Downey, 2001; Petersen, 2008).

Although the creation of value on UGC platforms still relies on surplus labour time put in by unpaid workers/users, it is notable that this labour process is meant to be invisible through benefits to the user, such as free services, communication, play, and so on (Benkler, 2006). Immaterial labour in the domain of paid work is similarly rendered less exploitative through the concept of autonomy as incarnated within a range of creative and media-based professions, including fashion modelling (Wissinger, 2007), software development (Brophy, 2006), video game development (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2005; Kline et al., 2003), television industry work (Hearn, 2010; Stahl, 2010), and new media work (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Neff, Wissinger, & Zukin, 2005; Ross, 2004), in addition to non-remunerated modes of work such as in the open-source software movement (Terranova, 2004, 2006), and in Internet platforms like MySpace (Coté & Pybus, 2007) and America OnLine (Postigo, 2003). Immaterial labour has thus been an extremely productive concept in this regard despite its shortcomings, which have been vigorously critiqued by David Hesmondhalgh (2010) and others to include the neglect of political questions of subjectivity within notions of liberatory autonomy (see also Camfield, 2007; Dowling, 2007; Hearn, 2010). To contribute to this critique, I propose the integration of a number of other perspectives with the Autonomist account: Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) “emotional labour”; Dallas Smythe’s (1981) “audience commodity”; and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) “new cultural intermediaries.”

Emotional or affective labour is implicated in the concept of immaterial labour, wherein the worker is expected to perform flexible, informal acts of communication that mobilize underlying human faculties, including affect (Virno, 2004). From a sociological perspective, Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) influential writing on emotional labour describes in greater detail how self-presentation as part of cultivating one’s career persona involves emotional work that resonates outside of the workplace. Emotional labour is especially important for women, Hochschild argues, because of the way that occupational segregation reflects popular stereotypes about women’s “natural” (p. 163) skills. What Hochschild describes as “emotion management” has since become a key feature in conceptions of creative work (see Gill, 2007; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008; McRobbie, 1998; Ross, 2004). One of the ways in which her theory has been updated in this context has been through empirical work that elucidates the multiple contours of emotional labour, both in occupational environments and in the home, outlining how these public/private divides are in fact fluid and thus ethically problematic (Steinberg & Figart, 1999). The elaboration of this ethical standpoint on emotional labour has built on Hochschild’s (1983) initial formulation of the concept, where she offers a decidedly feminist perspective on the naturalization and relative invisibility of women’s emotional work within a capitalistic system that organizes the “commodification of feeling” (p. 190).

Just as feeling can be seen as an aspect of immaterial labour that gets commodified throughout the circuit of cultural production, so the audience's work and pleasure in consuming media products functions as a commodity with exchange value. This idea can be traced to Dallas Smythe's (1981) concept of the audience commodity. Smythe's political economic framework marked a shift away from the Marxist view of the culture industry as the source of ideologically inflected texts designed to shore up hegemonic power, instead positing that media chiefly produce audiences and not texts: "audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed, it commands a price and is a commodity" (p. 256). This view places audience labour at the heart of the commodity cycle, determined by market and governance structures particularly in relation to advertiser-supported media.

Despite the abstraction and consequent limitations of Smythe's theory in accounting for audience members' heterogeneous practices of textual interpretation (see Jhally & Livant, 1986), the audience commodity is a useful concept for highlighting how the commodification of audience labour functions in the production and consumption of cultural texts. For instance, Eileen Meehan's (2002) more recent writing on the "commodity audience" has highlighted the gendered ways in which audiences are measured through ratings systems, where ratings monopolies construct audiences and their labour as "truly *manufactured* commodities whose content depend[s] on changing power relations within that market" (p. 215, emphasis in original). As such, ratings reflect gendered assumptions in demography that work to segment audiences according to institutionalized sexism (Meehan, 2002). What is important about this for UGC is that Web 2.0 platforms are similarly based on advertising models where audiences are traded as commodities, according to gendered demographics and audience labour, in addition to the gendered constructions of meaning that take place within structures of capital and within the audience itself.

Although the concept of the audience commodity or commodity audience is useful for framing the work of Internet users as a kind of consumption, looking at their work as media production in the sense of professionally creating cultural texts requires some grounding in theories of cultural work. Recent cultural economy literature has drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) sociological account of "new cultural intermediaries" in explaining culture as a form of capital. For Bourdieu, cultural capital accrued largely through one's class origins gets mobilized within a particular taste public (or "habitus") as a mark of distinction. Taste thus serves to shore up class boundaries, through a naturalization of the structured divisions of habitus (p. 56). Bourdieu outlines how part of the cycle of production that goes into producing and maintaining taste hierarchies involves those professions explicitly concerned with capitalizing from the popularization of middlebrow tastes. Occupations of popular cultural and artistic production—in such industries as radio, television, marketing, advertising, and so on—comprise what Bourdieu calls the new cultural intermediaries. The new cultural intermediaries do their work to popularize legitimate culture through simultaneous imitation of an artistic disposition and refusal of stodgy didacticism, "and all this must be done while living in the unease of the inherently contradictory role of a 'presenter' devoid of intrinsic value" (p. 326). Yet lacking intrinsic value in this case means that

new cultural intermediaries enjoy a relatively less structured profession, which allows these children of the bourgeoisie to avoid the threat of downclassing through good connections rather than formal qualifications (p. 151).

While Bourdieu's framework admittedly reflects a specific historical context (1960s France), his characterization of the new cultural intermediaries remains useful for conceptualizing culturalized working practices as part of a larger, structured field of cultural production based mainly upon class origins. This broad "culturalization" of the economy forms the basis for the organizing concept of "cultural economy" (Flew, 2009) and is described by Paul du Gay (1997) in terms of how culture (language, meaning, and representation) is increasingly central to understanding economic life and identities. Du Gay defines the culturalization thesis according to its three main postulates: 1) that the global power of the culture industries (i.e., media conglomerates) has steadily grown; 2) that an increased production of cultural goods and aestheticization of banal products corresponds with increased influence of advertising and design, in concert with the development of flexible specialization in manufacturing; and 3) that rising notions of business culture or workers' identification with the firm serve to improve corporate functioning. These points resonate with the immaterial labour thesis in terms of how the "cultural turn" in organizational thinking renders work as central to identity, with workers enacting new forms of emotional labour that help them stay afloat in precarious working situations.

Apprenticeship-type model of UGC labour

In preparation for precarious working conditions in culture industries such as music, fashion, and photography, the four participants in my study operate within an apprenticeship-type model of UGC labour, where current participation is seen as a non-remunerated training ground, guided by the expertise of successful online content producers as "masters," and driven by the promise of notoriety that begets autonomous future employment. This move toward professionalization through UGC tends to be based on the cultivation of a particular "branded self" (Hearn, 2008, 2010), where identity formation gets shaped by the exigencies of an imagined future profession in what Mark Banks (2010) has termed a "negotiated autonomy": a constant process of tactical movement between precarious and liberatory subject positions in digital cultural production (see also Huws, 2010). This process is what the four participants in this study, Shawn, Angelika, Laura, and Marilis¹—all in their early 20s—are apprenticing into through UGC production, where negotiated autonomy serves as the hallmark of new media working conditions; as Rosalind Gill (2007) finds, new media workers draw on an ideology of liberation that "poses the freedom and autonomy of working for oneself against the banality of office-based, hierarchically organized and traditional employment" (p. 14), despite the actual lived precariousness of free and freelance labour.

Through their diverse content creation activities online, these young people experience a hybrid status between amateur and professional, consumer/user and producer, as has been underscored through the creation of various neologisms to describe such actors in terms of ProAms, prosumers, and produsers. As shown through my discussions with Shawn, Angelika, Laura, and Marilis, these hybrid identities proved to

be not such fixed concepts, but rather seem more contingent upon a transitional life stage. In their early 20s, the participants represent “post-adolescence,” marked by a delayed entry into paid employment,² along with an ambivalent attitude toward familial dependency (Maguire, Ball, & Macrae, 2001). Given the significance of this transitional life stage, I frame their engagement with UGC as a kind of apprenticeship labour founded on processes of identity construction, which include the construction of multiple identities: new media worker (promoter, journalist, creative professional), writer, photographer, friend, citizen, consumer, and so on—where they learned how to enact these roles through consuming online content produced by UGC “masters,” those successful few young people who have crossed over into online notoriety. The simultaneous production and reproduction of these various identity positions on Web 2.0 platforms for UGC also implicates labour that is less autonomous or controlled by the user-creators. Websites that host UGC themselves of course depend on user participation to co-construct their value as new media platforms, operating in capitalist terms of commercializing surplus value (Bonsu & Darmody, 2008; Coté & Pybus, 2007; Fuchs, 2010; Petersen, 2008; Sarikakis, 2010; Scholz, 2008).

In this context, the term “apprenticeship” is used loosely, in an anthropological sense, to describe the practical training of young people for a specific mode of craft production. Although more traditional versions of apprenticeship in craft production have been solidified through government policy in Canada, including various vocational training programs implemented to defer the decline of apprenticeship contracts exacerbated by widespread industrialization in the mid-nineteenth century (G. Hamilton, 2000), apprenticeship is nonetheless a useful model for describing many aspects of the training practices entered into by my study’s participants. This training, which involves the two simultaneous processes of socialization (learning the skills, values, and norms of the profession) and social control (determining the worker’s place in the occupational hierarchy), happens online in an informal and self-directed way (Graves, 1989). Instead of formal programs for apprenticeship, the participants search out and indeed construct their own “masters” out of the pool of UGC success stories, as a way of entering into creative professions in the context of high youth unemployment during the transitional phase or “floundering period” leading into adulthood (S. Hamilton, 1990, p. 20). While this kind of apprenticeship is thus implicit and not bound by labour contracts, it can still be seen as a form of “civil servitude” (Stahl, *in press*, p. 109); free labour in the apprenticeship process creates value for commercial Web platforms through violations of privacy and intellectual property rights. Through their marketing agendas, Web platforms leech individual control over these rights and alienate people from their work and identities; UGC as an extension of the persona gets consolidated in commodity form and exchanged on the marketplace without the individual’s control or even knowledge. In this way, the contractual terms of Web 2.0 platforms delimit the rights of young people engaged in UGC apprenticeship labour, marginalizing and devaluing their work of cultural production in a way that resembles the degradation of young apprentices in early modern Europe (Darnton, 1991).

The apprenticeship model might not be fully appropriate to convey the distributed and transitory nature of the master-apprentice relationship in UGC production, how-

ever, the term describes how this study's participants envision their investment in creating online content, particularly in terms of highlighting how age serves as a pivotal axis along which their labour's value gets determined. At the same time, this model underscores how they are learning from social media masters not only the practices of online cultural production, but also the attendant norms of free and immaterial labour, such as precarity and self-exploitation (Neilson & Rossiter, 2005). In this way, the concept of UGC apprenticeship used here is guided by Michael Coy's (1989) anthropological definition of apprenticeship:

Apprenticeship is the means of imparting specialized knowledge to a new generation of practitioners. It is the rite of passage that transforms novices into experts. It is a means of learning things that cannot be easily communicated by conventional means. Apprenticeship is employed where there is implicit knowledge to be acquired through long-term observation and experience. This knowledge relates not only to the physical skills associated with a craft, but also to the means of structuring economic and social relationships between oneself and other practitioners, between oneself and one's clients. (pp. xi-xii)

In the case of UGC apprenticeship, apprentices acquire knowledge through constant reading, watching, and conversing with other young people who have been successful in deploying their online self-brand toward lucrative ends. Laura discussed this in relation to her celebrity gossip blog, where she tried to emulate the writing style and promotional strategies of her favourite blogger, 28-year-old Michael K of Dlisted, whom she read religiously in an effort to cultivate a similar style. For young people hoping to develop a creative industry career, engaging in an informal apprenticeship through online content creation offers a means of honing their professional abilities in writing, image production, Web design, and networking, along with their internalization of the ideologies, roles, and social relations that underpin new media work.

Over the course of two years, I conducted a series of interviews and observations with this group of young Canadians, piecing together an account of how their free online labour contributes to an overall attempt at professionalization through identity construction, in terms of how it relies on the commercial infrastructures of Web 2.0. The scope of this article allows space only for a small glimpse at this richer picture, but I hope the examples cited add to the contours of how the concept of apprenticeship labour might make sense of some typical experiences that young people have in directing their UGC toward future creative industry careers.

Young Canadians and UGC apprenticeship labour

Young people's apprenticeship investment in commercial Web 2.0 platforms extends beyond their present use of these sites for socializing and self-expression (Ofcom, 2008), into their professional futures—futures imagined as those of new cultural intermediaries or members of a “creative class” (Florida, 2002). Creative jobs are seen as offering workers moments of microlevel agency, while they are simultaneously constrained by precarious working conditions and exploitation of their affective investments in the work (Gill, 2002; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003; McRobbie,

1998; Ross, 2004; Stahl, 2010). Because the working conditions of creative jobs—including long hours, low pay, few benefits, and constant uncertainty—are difficult to sustain over time, these jobs require a steady stream of younger workers who have fewer “binding commitments” [and] supposedly more ‘mobile’ life situations” (de Peuter & Dyer-Witthford, 2005, n.p.). As Gina Neff, Elizabeth Wissinger, and Sharon Zukin (2005) have pointed out, creative careers attract these young workers and normalize the personal risk associated with flexible labour, mainly through public perceptions of creative work as “cool.” As part of this cool labour force, new media workers are supposedly having fun while exercising autonomy over their work, rebelling against staid corporate norms according to the “no-collar” ethos and a kind of “enforced youthfulness” (McRobbie, 2002; Ross, 2004). In other words, the cultural capital gained from being associated with creative industries not only outweighs precarious working conditions, it also promotes the naturalization of precarity and risk through the positive, as in playful and youthful, self-images of these workers.

Accordingly, the young people I studied all expressed a desire to enter into creative professions. They saw UGC platforms as a bridge between personal expression and communication and their aspirations for a career in creative industries. Part of cultivating such a career involves building up a portfolio of work that garners some notoriety through an online presence. As Shawn explained: “I started my blog because I figured I’m a journalism student who wants to work at a fashion magazine, so therefore I need credibility. And now, the best, and easiest, way to get any kind of credibility is through a blog” (September 25, 2009). Building “credibility” through a blog is framed here as a requisite for working at a fashion magazine, positioning UGC as something of a stepping stone toward a more traditional creative career. Using this frame, he drew a distinction between his own blog and a blog about manners written by a friend’s mom:

I think for her, it’s more of a hobby, because you know, she’s like, retired and a mom, and she doesn’t have a job because she’s retired and she stays home and it just gives her something to do. Whereas like mine I’m kind of aiming to ... make this credibility so I can move on from there and write for other things. (September 25, 2009)

Because Shawn saw himself at the opposite end of a career path from his friend’s mom, he framed his blogging as apprenticing for a career, while hers was demoted to an amateurish hobby. For Shawn, the value of UGC sprang from its utility for learning a trade in the hope of future employment, making it further contingent on age. The designation of user-generated content as “Pro-Am,” a hybrid between professional and amateur (Leadbeater & Miller, 2004), can thus work in slippery ways according to the influence of identity categories, in this case age.

Also touching on the Pro-Am category as a wellspring of “innovation” (one of Leadbeater and Miller’s most oft-used words), attempts at building a legitimate career through UGC rest on the status of user-generated content as something creative in the sense of “original.” For instance, Shawn’s motivation to build credibility as a journalist pushes him to go beyond reposting images or stories from other sources to contribute something unique and self-made:

Last time we were talking about original content, and then I actually ... it was Montreal Fashion Week, so I finished class at Loyola [Campus] at like 7:00 that night, and then there was a [Denis Gagnon] show at like 8:00 and a show at 9:00, and I made it all the way to Old Montreal, and I took notes and like photos and stuff, and then I had a story online by midnight. (October 24, 2009)

Elaborating on this story of his original content creation, Shawn explained that “instead of just like, posting photos and stuff,” he aimed to be contributing original Fashion Week stories, and what’s more, publishing them on his blog immediately as opposed to the next day when many other outlets would have also covered the Denis Gagnon show. In this way, Shawn saw the immediacy of blog writing as key to communicating original ideas and thus contributing original material in the form of UGC.

In contrast to Shawn, Angelika was adamant that originality in her blogging was diametrically opposed to explicit career goals, and that her photography blog did not serve as a direct route to professional development. Her blogging was seen as “more for fun and just to get information out there, and just, put myself out there—not really for a professional thing” (October 19, 2009). At the same time, though, Angelika conceded that while putting herself “out there” on the blog was just “for fun,” her online presence also had implications for future professionalization. Rather than aiming for a career in photojournalism or commercial photography, Angelika described her career ambitions thusly: “I want to do visual culture” (October 19, 2009). She noted that in this context, she could probably use her blog as a kind of calling card. And, when we revisited this issue in a later interview session, Angelika said that even if she were not to show anyone the blog, it fulfilled the important function of being a place to maintain her creative production:

It’s helping me just feel like I’m doing something that makes me feel like I’m constantly, just even if it’s like just writing something stupid or doing the Playboy thing [posting scans of old Playboy magazines], makes me feel like I’m doing something creative. (February 5, 2010)

Similarly, while Marilis had worked as a journalist, her career aspirations had less to do with writing and more to do with planning and promoting cultural events. For her, blogging also served as an indirect route to cultivating a more professional persona; one of her blogs is an online portfolio of the events she has been involved in putting together. Yet as Marilis describes it, “event planning” probably does not encompass all of the kinds of productions she would like to do:

I guess at this point I have a lot of trouble focusing on one thing, I really like the idea of doing a bunch of different things. So if I could do [blogging for a magazine] while continuing to like plan events and occasionally do styling and artistic direction and editing and that kind of thing, then ... (January 21, 2010)

Reflecting her diverse interests in cultural production both online and offline, Marilis was working on a Web-based television show that would feature local artists and allow her to be involved in various aspects of production:

I'm really excited for that, because it will kind of touch on a lot of different things that I do, right? So it will be like, I do the director of photography, like we shot the promos and I directed them. And I also get to feature musical acts that I like, like we have people in the city that I really admire, and also help with writing the dialogue, well not dialogue but intros, and it will also be like organizing an event, 'cause it will be taped in front of a live studio audience, and we'll make it into a show at the same time. (January 21, 2010)

The expertise and connections that enabled Marilis to take part in such a production in the first place came from blogging, primarily the street-style blog *Pregnant Goldfish*. As part of putting together *Pregnant Goldfish*, Marilis worked with a team, going around the city to different events, meeting people—mostly stylish young people and musical artists—to take their photographs, and presenting them on the blog with brief, whimsical written descriptions. In this way, Marilis's blogging had led to her current career goals of event planning, promotion, and production activities, in less direct ways than Shawn's fashion show coverage or Laura's celebrity gossip blog.

For each participant, UGC did serve as a kind of stepping stone, although the ways it did so varied according to context. Although both Shawn and Laura saw blogging as a link to journalism, for example, Shawn's investment in his blog as a way to develop journalistic credibility differed from Laura's sense that blog writing mainly benefited her cultivation of a unique journalistic voice. Outside of the journalism ideal for UGC, Angelika used her blog as a space for creative exploration that was mostly personal, and where sharing her work was framed laterally as a way to inform and possibly inspire other people in her position. She was not too concerned about her blog's role in leading to some kind of career but saw how she could possibly refer employers to her work posted there—a nonchalant attitude similarly expressed by Marilis. Yet Marilis's assertions of a carefree approach to blogging, particularly on her just-for-fun Tumblr, *Beer Tearz in Heaven*, belied the fact that her blogs were crucial for enabling her to become extremely well-connected in Montréal's youth cultural scene. She acknowledged these connections, as well as the skills she developed through putting the blogs together and publicizing them, as prerequisites for her career in cultural production that spanned offline and online contexts.

The participants' faith in UGC as a place where they could cultivate a do-it-yourself kind of apprenticeship situation implicated the acquisition and promotion of specialized, and thus marketable, skills. These skills include technical proficiencies with computer hardware and software, and especially Internet-based coding languages, aesthetic and design skills for the visual elements of a Web presence, strong writing abilities and a unique voice, as well as other less measurable abilities, such as networking and social skills. These less measurable skills were, perhaps counter-intuitively, the ones that the four participants of the study reported developing most—skills that had more to do with an integration of Internet technology into their overall communicative ecology (Slater & Tacchi, 2004), rather than as a specialized technological artifact. The participants' uneven levels of technical competency revealed that technical expertise was not essential for creating UGC. Rather, composing the content itself was seen as the main locus of cultural production, while the blog's appearance and functionality were sec-

ondary, to be dealt with mostly by someone more technically inclined or by the interface of a hosting site. This is not to say that the layout and aesthetics of the blog were unimportant (consider Shawn's contention that he wanted his blog "to have the same aesthetic; I want to be posting from within the same kind of vision all the time"), but that the participants saw their primary skills as having to do with creating original content.

For this group of young Canadians, creative industry jobs thus seemed to be the logical endpoint of their apprenticeship labour of learning how to create original online content, even though they seemed aware of these jobs' downsides. For example, they all acknowledged that they would be making little money in such pursuits, at least for the first few years, which meant that they found other ways of justifying the choice to do creative work. Some of the participants even expressed the idea that the refusal to make money indicates a purer creative imperative, an idea that Bourdieu explains as "economic disinterestedness." According to Bourdieu (1984), disinterestedness becomes a hallmark of artistic and cultural production—what he calls the "economic world reversed" (p. 39)—where autonomous modes of cultural production seem to operate on principles that oppose the profit motive. Reflecting this notion, Marilis described working on the fashion show of her friend Dane, who dropped out of her fashion design program because of his unconventional aesthetics:

I really, really respect his work, and um, he decided to quit school to just work on a collection, 'cause he felt like it would be a better investment of his time and money, which is true. ... There's this new PR agency, they're friends of ours that are just starting this production company. And they're really talented, just like, good people who are gonna help us with the show, and are really excited about his stuff basically, and wanted to be behind it and help him out. So it's like a really positive project, because none of us is getting paid out of it, but we support him so much that we just want to make sure that he does a great job. (March 1, 2010)

Characterizing this work—cultural production with friends who are all in the position of starting their own creative ventures—as positive "because none of us is getting paid" captures the disinterestedness ideal described by Bourdieu. Not getting paid for cultural production functions as an appeal to "authentic" or "autonomous" creativity. This ideal was compounded by the kind of fashion show Marilis was putting on for her friend Dane, who could not show in more conventional settings, since his work is, as Marilis described, "not wearable really" and too "artsy" for showing at the official Montreal Fashion Week.

But while Marilis's story, along with Angelika's general refusal to connect her blog to a professional development imperative, offer examples of disinterestedness, making money nonetheless came up as a main concern across the interviews. Shawn, for example, was pointed about the active steps his blog enabled him to take toward becoming a paid fashion journalist:

If my plan goes as projected, and I start writing for other fashion websites or whatever, I'd hope to get paid. But I'm also really interested in like, getting enough traffic on my website that people want to advertise. (September 25, 2009)

Getting paid seemed to be top-of-mind for Shawn in his optimistic and ambitious approach both to his own blog and to future writing for fashion blogs and print publications. And in addition to blogging, Shawn went to London on a semester's leave from university to pursue this fashion career. He did some modelling, acted as an assistant to a designer, and blogged for a Canadian modelling website, ModelResource.ca. In those blog posts, he outlines the peculiarities of model markets in London and Montréal, reports on the excitement of London Fashion Week, and provides tips for other models. The aim of guest blogging on the Model Resource site as well as posting on his own blog was expressly presented as attaining a paying career in an industry where Shawn himself acknowledges the difficulty of that ("Nobody gets paid in fashion"). Despite his recognition of the slim likelihood of getting paid as a fashion blogger, Shawn cited examples of small-town Canadian bloggers who had "made it" in the industry. His examples reflected popular notions of gaining notoriety and thus monetary compensation from UGC, essential components to the myth of the democratization of media production, where good ideas, even from small producers, get rewarded with fame and fortune.

The idea that UGC could lead to not only a professional identity, but also one that would be both notorious and richly compensated, seemed to fascinate the participants (see also Marwick, 2010). Both Shawn and Marilis shared earnest stories about people they knew who had made noteworthy fashion careers through blogging—Marilis' friend Dario, for example, began a street-style blog in an unstylish little town in Ontario by staging a "street clash" competition among bloggers in larger, more cosmopolitan international cities. Through that blog, he eventually got to be the editor for *Stil* in Berlin, a popular Berlin-based street-style blog, as well as a fashion journalist for different Fashion Weeks, including Milan and Toronto. Marilis recounted Dario's rise to fashion blogging prominence twice during our interview sessions, indicating the salience of the notion of blogging fame that would lead eventually to a dream career and commensurate remuneration. Laura reiterated this notion in an extreme and effectively satirical form when describing her ideal patronage scenario for blogging: "just try to find a rich person who likes my opinions ... like, 'I find this blogger really funny, I want them to write just for me and my friends, we'll read it on our yacht'" (October 27, 2009). What made this conversation humorous was precisely the absurdity of Laura's far-fetched plan to secure a wealthy blog patron. I think her understanding of how unlikely it is to get paid for blogging was in fact shared by the other participants, although they seemed more sincere in their hope for future compensation.

While making money was thus a theme that came up again and again in the interviews, the participants expressed a complicated set of attitudes toward UGC as a kind of paid labour. Cultivating a professional creative job, maintaining some disinterestedness to support authentic creativity, and hoping for near-instant notoriety all mingled together as aspects of UGC apprenticeship labour. Participants painted an overarching picture of blogging as a step toward professionalization through the development of various skills that would eventually (hopefully) lead to making a living; however, within these discussions about labour, they also maintained that the social context of cultural production online was intrinsic to cultivating not only a professional

identity, but also a social and personal identity. Their notion of creativity as a kind of labour meant that production was not only applied toward making money, but also toward making friends and making the self. Laura probably summarized this idea best when she claimed “huge emotional fulfillment and creative expression ... from being able to just write what I want” (October 27, 2009).

Although the issue of money came up in our interviews at turns as a dangling carrot and as an unnecessary luxury, the participants seemed to agree that their cultural production involved a definite experience of personal fulfillment from emotional labour. This suggests that, as Suzan Lewis (2003) has argued, perhaps instead of leisure as the new work, postindustrial work is the new leisure:

[T]he changing nature of work and the apparent ‘free choice’ made by many people to spend increasing lengths of time in employment related activities, beyond the time for which they are remunerated and obligated, together with the apparent enjoyment of much knowledge work, contribute to a situation in which work is becoming indistinguishable from leisure. (p. 345)

From this opposite vantage point, perhaps free labour looks more like “productive leisure” (Arvidsson, 2008), but in either case, the UGC activities described by the participants fit somewhere in between commercial and affective or emotional motivations. In other words, users act as a commodity audience where their labour and data get traded to the benefit of commercial platforms, in complicity, because in addition to “the physical benefits of communicating with others and expressing oneself, site users describe emotional benefits, including feeling part of a group and getting attention” (Ofcom, 2008, p. 37).

Noting the emotional components of free labour in UGC invokes Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) landmark study of flight attendants’ emotional labour, where what she calls the “transmutation of an emotional system” results in the transformation of “what it is that we do privately, often unconsciously, to feelings that nowadays often fall under the sway of large organizations, social engineering, and the profit motive” (p. 19). A similar dynamic happens with UGC when identity construction, with all its pleasures of experimentation and play, gets mitigated by commercial contexts and professional aspirations. Here I think it is also useful to point out that remuneration of emotional labour has long been a pivotal issue with regard to women’s unpaid domestic work, a kind of “shadow labour” of hidden affective work that can be said to have since traversed the private/public boundary to become integrated into post-Fordist production in both life and work (Weeks, 2007).

The gendered emotional demands of new media labour tend to get effaced through the privileging of new media work that does make money—for example, in the spectacular profiles of young Internet billionaires like Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), or Larry Page and Sergey Brin (Google)—reflecting particularly masculinist ideas around highly visible technological labour. Moreover, these stories highlight how success means explicitly commercial success on a huge scale, which has come about in part due to the exploitation of users’ free labour. This larger commercial context is important not only in terms of popular myths about new media labour, but also in light of new media policy that privileges corporate structures of cultural production that

are in line with existing models for taxation and market-based regulation. What such policy imperatives tend to miss are the more everyday examples of cultural production online that implicate the emotional work of identity formation, and thus deserve some protection from commercial exploitation, regardless of whether or not they qualify as traditional remunerated labour.

Conclusion: Negotiated autonomy

In their unique manifestations of UGC apprenticeship labour for future creative industry careers, my four case studies of young Canadian cultural producers offer some new provocations around the notion of free immaterial labour in Web 2.0 environments. Terranova's (2000) free labour theory, prescient for its time, remains extremely useful for teasing out the different kinds of labour involved in online cultural production, especially once it is paired with older theories of the commodity audience, new cultural intermediaries, and emotional labour. Users' sense of the value of cultural production tends to be located within labour structures that are both apparent, as in the emotional and creative work that goes into the production of UGC, and hidden, as in the way that free labour as well as personal information are exploited through commercial imperatives. In this way, Web 2.0 as a training ground for online cultural production offers users an apprenticeship-type model where they get inculcated in the naturalized structures of risk and precarious labour. The skills they learn through this apprenticeship often extend beyond technologically fetishistic literacy imperatives to include older forms of cultural production, such as writing, and less institutionalized social skills like networking. Throughout the accumulation of such skills in UGC apprenticeship labour, the future promise of remuneration remains a touchstone for competing desires to be compensated for labour time, while also being able to uphold some notion of unpaid, autonomous creativity. This autonomy also implicates the labour of identity formation that remains crucial for young people in their online cultural production.

When UGC labour is framed as a kind of apprenticeship, it serves to highlight how assimilation into creative industry jobs requires young people's cultivation of a particular kind of creative identity—one that naturalizes the risk associated with precarious and low-paying employment. What this kind of identity formation also accomplishes is the development of the self as a kind of brand or "commodity sign":

Here we see the self as a commodity for sale in the labour market, which must generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional skin, within the confines of the dominant corporate imaginary. (Hearn, 2008, p. 201)

This branded self is a necessary construct for negotiating the precarity of creative industry careers, which raises the question of the limits of any normative conception of autonomy in this context. David Hesmondhalgh (2010) notes that any designation of cultural work as autonomous or self-realizing might be critiqued from a broadly post-structuralist perspective on the social construction of identity, and indeed from a Marxist perspective on how a sense of personal autonomy is the necessary condition of the worker's own self-exploitation. Here identity can be seen as an expressly political construct in that, as Hesmondhalgh asserts, framing autonomy and self-realization as

normative concepts implicates understandings of justice in cultural work—work performed by mostly white, middle-class, educated people according to larger structures of privilege. Identity work in the context of both a future creative career and a present free immaterial labour investment thus intersects with political iterations of identity as it simultaneously raises the issues of social justice and rights on UGC platforms.

Even broader than the particular case of UGC labour as apprenticeship, however, the issue of rights extends to all individuals participating in networked communication. If networked life is a condition of contemporary citizenship (Castells, 1996), or even if it is less hyperbolically a space of “networked publics” (boyd, 2008), the status of citizens online remains at least partially defined by their offline constitutional rights. In this context, identity work encapsulates not only professionalization, self-branding, and exploration/play, but citizenship and its attendant rights structures within what Banks (2010) has termed a process of “negotiated autonomy,” as opposed to the radical autonomy envisioned in the theories of immaterial labour:

The concern here is less with usurping capitalism and more with seeking opportunities for meaningful self-expression within its limits; more prosaically, it is concerned with subsistence, survival and “making the best” of the conditions under which one is employed as a cultural worker. This is not to disclaim the importance of the “disinterested” political or aesthetic motive, but rather to recognise its compromised and negotiated character in the context of a capitalist system that most people have come to accept (either willingly or unwillingly) as a relatively enduring (even immutable) feature of working life. Yet, here, autonomy can play a more multipart (and liberating) role than that conventionally ascribed by orthodox critics, acting as a resource for underpinning a variety of practices and courses of action. (p. 262)

What is useful about the concept of negotiated autonomy in relation to rights is the space it opens up for the negotiation of regulatory protections around fundamental online rights. Such rights are indeed tied to identity in critical ways, for example, the class identity of free labourers has been posited as a potential departure point for envisioning resistance to capitalist exploitation (Terranova, 2004). But class is not the only salient identity politic here; multiple asymmetries of power are implicated in the negotiation of rights-based discourses. In the case studies of these four young Montréalers, age, gender, and subcultural affiliation have been shown to modify their relationships to cultural production as a kind of networked citizenship. Yet again, power relationships in this case are contingent on the relatively privileged North American context—negotiated autonomy means something quite different in less affluent and less mobile arrangements of labour globally.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the participants of this study for generously sharing their time and experiences. Thank you to Leslie Regan Shade, Alison Hearn, and Matt Stahl, along with two anonymous reviewers, for their insightful comments on the article. This research was funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Notes

1. Participants have consented to the use of their first names in any published material from this research. They have also seen and approved the content of this particular article.

2. In Canada, rising youth unemployment rates reflect this sociological trend, where 15.3% of 15- to 24-year-olds in the labour force were unemployed in 2009, up from 11.3% in 1989 (Cohen, 1991; Statistics Canada, 2010).

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