“PLAYBOR” ON THE INTERNET

The Internet as Playground and Factory: A Conference on Digital Labor
The New School
New York City
November 12-14, 2009

During the opening of The Internet as Playground and Factory: A Conference on Digital Labor, organizer Trebor Scholz shared an anecdote about someone who turned down an invitation to participate in the event because of its perceived “anti-capitalist” stance. Indeed, based on the list of speakers and the preliminary online discussion, the conference seemed to offer a critique of the ways in which social activities mediated by the internet increasingly blur the distinction between work and leisure, consumption and production, collaboration and exploitation. But, if people did not come to this event to praise Facebook, they did not come to bury it. It is true that in the new digital economy, social desire is captured and commodified by the proprietary protocols of Web 2.0 platforms, and new forms of labor are no longer carried out at a workplace in exchange for a wage; instead, they are performed at multiple locations outside the workplace and rewarded with social capital such as attention, rank, or access. The speakers and participants at the conference recognized, however, that disagreements do exist about the exact cost and consequences of this paradigm shift. Is the expropriation of our “playbor” a small price to pay for the new forms of sociality that these new media products make possible, or is this exchange fundamentally unfair?

As the conference title suggests, we must begin from the assumption that the internet is neither playground nor factory, but simultaneously serves as both (which is also a way of saying that the metaphors of playground and factory quickly outline their explanatory usefulness). Thus, various conference presentations situated the internet in a Post-Fordist context, where social life is the site for the creation of value, the “standing reserve” of information capitalism, and the raw material that fuels the digital economy. In this state of affairs, corporations play a major role in shaping the modes of social participation and citizenship in the digital age. But if participation in the public sphere comes at the cost of commodification, does it come at too high a price in terms of control, surveillance, and expropriation?

The hype around social media tends to obscure the fact that digital networks actualize two contradictory processes: they increase participation while simultaneously increasing inequality. In the current privatized model, a surge in participation means an increased opportunity for generating profit (more users means more eyes to sell to advertisers). While users’ participation is rewarded mostly with social capital (e.g., rank), Web 2.0 companies are still able to extract material benefits, exacerbating power differentials between users and corporations—unless, or until, opportunities are created for transforming social capital into power (since corporations own most of the playgrounds/factories, these opportunities seem increasingly difficult to come by).

Accordingly, the mood at the conference alternated between this kind of pessimism and optimistic calls to acknowledge the opportunities for empowerment and inspiration afforded by social media. Important threads that emerged from the conference sessions include: the mediated nature of labor, the non-coercive appeal of participation, the distinction between exploitation and expropriation, the emergence of the monopsony (a single buyer) as the supplement to the monopoly in the age of user-generated content, the use of distributed mass labor as a new form of “artificial” AI (humans as cheap computers), the importance of users’ demands for transparency on the part of Web 2.0 companies and for opportunities to intervene in their governance, and an analysis of new discourses of racialized labor (including the Orientalism behind terms like “Chinese Gold Farmers” and “Mechanical Turks”) that often allow us to rationalize our own involvement in the digital economy by differentiating “us” from “them.”

The conferees widely acknowledged that the diversity of opinions provided the conference with richness and nuance, while, at times, produced binary contradictions. For instance, there were calls for re-reading and re-interpreting Karl Marx, but also calls for abandoning the Marxist framework as inappropriate for explaining the current situation. There were calls for more empiricism and calls for less pragmatism. There were calls for making the situation of the disenfranchised masses, for whom capitalism has already failed, more prominent, and calls for celebrating the individual and collective opportunities for empowerment that social media has brought to these same masses. I hope the next step is a more self-reflective point of view toward the political stances that informed each set of calls.

In the end, I was left with the impression that concerns over the anti-capitalism tone of the conference were unnecessary, because even most of “us” critics of capitalism recognize the internet as salvation. When anti-capitalists themselves approach the internet as a prerequisite for a new social order, it is clear that this sociotechnical network accommodates the deterministic fantasies of political actors across the spectrum. To paraphrase Martin Heidegger, the essence of technology is by no means technological, and we must acknowledge that the internet has captured and transformed our social essence. While withdrawal from the internet will be tantamount to social exclusion and economic suicide, I wonder what role selective withdrawal from some playgrounds and factories will play in asserting agency. Some will have the option to withdraw but won’t see the need for it. Others will withdraw selectively but at a high social cost. Deciding which networks to reject and which to belong to are political strategies, and in order to think clearly about their application we need to resist the short-term rewards of a reactionary, innovation-obsessed optimism and continue the critical thinking promoted by this conference.

Ulises A. Mejías is an assistant professor of Communications at the State University of New York at Oswego.