

## Contingency and Satisfaction under Digital Capitalism<sup>1</sup>

**Benjamin J. Anderson**

School of Communication  
Simon Fraser University

### Abstract

Explorations into today's labour context reveal a wide schism between those workers who live under conditions of precarity and contingency and those who seem to be living the dream – and not only in terms of wages. The standardized work day and Taylorized division of labour that characterized most of the industrial era has transitioned, at least in large part, into a regime of flexibility and insecurity that reconstitutes not only working but lifestyle conditions. This paper is intended as an initial conceptual investigation of a dual trend in the conditions of labour under digital capitalism: the rise of contractual contingency and insecurity and the introduction of fun and hipness into the office environment as a means of work intensification.

**Keywords:** Labour, digital capitalism, innovation, precarity

It is the not too distant future in a dystopian society characterized by numb drudgery in pursuit of mediated pleasures. Workers rise every morning and mount energy producing stationary bikes, plugging themselves into a sensationalist suite of entertainment commodities. In the bleak world of Channel 4's *Black Mirror*, we catch a glimpse not only of our own contemporary work situation, but also of the deeper spiritual strains produced by the colonization of life at the hands of work. In the world of the show, entertainment, exercise, aspirations, and even love have been absorbed by the imperatives of semio-capitalism<sup>2</sup>. The workers produce the energy that fuels the entertainment apparatus that in turn influences every facet of social life. Any means of flight depends on a complete and willing subjugation to the system as it exists – something we see through the tragic successes of the episode's protagonists. Life, work, and consumption are seemingly one. In this world there is no such thing as work-life balance as work and life, toil and pleasure, have merged in such a way that they have become co-constitutive. More, the show's producers reveal labour power in perhaps its purest form –

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally written as a presentation at the *Colloquium on Science and Technology, Governance, and the Public Sphere* organized by the Centre for Policy Research on Science and Technology in partnership with Social Science Korea in Vancouver, BC in November 2015. It was intended as an introduction to ongoing research into digital labour in British Columbia.

<sup>2</sup> Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2009) defines semio-capitalism as "the new regime characterized by the fusion of media and capital. In this sphere, poetry meets advertising and scientific thought meets the enterprise" (p. 18).

as energy itself. The work context has changed and technology has developed significantly but labour still stands out as the central organizer of production and of life.

The labour context in the 21st century displays a similar trajectory to the desperation we observe in *Black Mirror*. The standardized work day and Taylorized division of labour that characterized most of the industrial era has transitioned, at least in large part, into a regime of flexibility and insecurity that reconstitutes not only working but lifestyle conditions (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1995; Standing, 2011). This paper is intended as an initial conceptual investigation of a dual trend in the conditions of labour under digital capitalism: the rise of contractual contingency and insecurity and the introduction of fun and hipness into the office environment<sup>3</sup>.

This dichotomy of privilege is not necessarily new to our current stage of accumulation as even under the conditions of monopoly capitalism “a structure is given to all labour processes that at its extremes polarizes those whose time is infinitely valuable and those whose time is worth almost nothing” (Braverman, 1974, 83). However, in the period of digital production, this distinction becomes more complex and incremental. On the one hand, digital workers are increasingly dependent on limited-term contracts not only to get a foot in the door but also to keep it there (Huws, 2014). This is complicated by a work culture in which workers and intellectual property must be both standardized and appropriately autonomous as to provide room for creativity and innovation<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, for those workers lucky enough to enjoy security and privilege – a group that some call the “labour aristocracy” – the workplace has been revamped into an open, collective space complete with amenities that might include fitness centres, ball pits, hammocks, and everything in between. This addition of spaces of play and relaxation into the world of work, fun as it might sound, might also be seen as a colonization of non-working life wherein the worker spends more time at work and less in private pursuits (Frayne, 2016; Weeks, 2011). Ultimately, this paper aims to explore the ways in which trends in the complicated field of digital labour can be understood as simultaneous processes of periodic exclusion of the reserve workforce and of seeping passive intensification for the secure worker.

Generally speaking, worker discipline is engrained through the various ideological institutions that inform socialization and the resulting moral norms that are effectively normalized by a culture driven by work and productivity (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). Of course, this has been the case for a very long time and is one of the primary purposes of institutions like mainstream schooling and other hegemonic structures. However, new developments like the unpaid internship, the increasing need for self-promotion in the pre-work world, and the educational inflation that characterize our current work environment all contribute to an entrenchment of work ideology that transcends the need for a theistic work ethic. Today, the naturalization of the work ethic depends heavily on a narrative of freedom and autonomy instead of on a moralistic responsibility to productive citizenship (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). To truly be yourself, to stand out against the crowd, one is increasingly driven to work. The very cornerstone of identity, according to Peter Fleming (2015), becomes

---

<sup>3</sup> I introduce these trends quite tentatively, recognizing that neither is unexplored in critical labour theory or political economy literature. This paper represents the first steps of a larger project on work subjectivities under digital capitalism, one that is still developing.

<sup>4</sup> For a compelling account of the enclosure of collective creativity and of creative pursuits see Max Haiven’s (2014) *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power*.

the I-job where one's own sense of self depends heavily on the social capital of what one does for a living.

This entrenchment of work ideology occurs even in light of unprecedented abundance (Fleming, 2015). A fundamental tension in capitalist production is that between time and efficiency, best illustrated by the introduction of new machinery of production. If not for the imperative of expansion, new machinery would, it can be reasoned, allow the worker to work fewer hours while still producing the same output. Instead, what we observe is increased production mediated by this new technology. According to Fleming (2015), the intensification of labour under neoliberal conditions transforms our relation to work from toil in pursuit of a wage to an addiction-like obsession that leads the worker to refocus her alienation inward in the form of paranoia and self-hate.

This is easy enough to observe in the stereotypical workaholic, but in the digital age this dynamic takes on a new and distinctive flavor. Let us consider the contract-dependent app developer. Over the course of my continuing research on the digital industries in Vancouver, BC<sup>5</sup> I have attended a number of events in which digital workers have showcased their work. It is no exaggeration to say that nearly everyone in this field has a side project. Programmers and developers, while under contract, dedicate their efforts to their employer whilst simultaneously working nights in developing their own app, game, program, etc. The ultimate goal of this additional endeavor might be to go into business and escape the cycle of contracted insecurity, but, equally possible, it is very often a kind of lottery ticket – the next big app or at least something that can be sold to a larger company. So, even in this creative labour that seems self-fulfilling, the creative digital worker is still alienated from the product of her labour and in many cases without even a semblance of a wage. The almost automatic response to this claim is obviously that this might be seen as a labour of love. And it would be unfair to neglect the satisfaction a worker likely gets from this creative endeavor. This said, it isn't an over-reaching assumption to acknowledge that this is nowhere near the case across the board. These creative pursuits enclose free time - even if the work involved is in pursuit of a passion, the end product is still intended for market purposes. Instead of spending time with friends and family – amongst other activities – developers spend countless hours working on side projects often due to the necessity of a robust resume.

It is the very insecurity faced by many creative workers that fuels this drive of innovation. In order to wrest some level of security from a job market that is often characterized by an abundance of limited term opportunities, the young worker is compelled to create her own work experience. The developer who cannot find a secure position in a top firm must, it seems, take her training into

---

<sup>5</sup> My capacity on this project is as a research assistant, and, as such, I have not had a hand in guiding its political perspective or policy agenda. The project is, broadly, part of what might be called a liberally oriented technoutopianism geared at contributing to entrepreneurship, smart cities, and the digital economy as a whole, following policy commentators like Richard Florida. The obvious (and appropriate) critique of this stream is that it often contributes to problems of gentrification and displacement. Angela McRobbie (2016) insightfully highlights the blindspot of the Floridian perspective arguing that for all of the hope that it inspires it intentionally ignores systemic poverty, seeing the city as a clean slate, a place where the techno worker can enjoy the urban playground never having to think about the poor folks who used to inhabit it. All of this said, my role has involved interviews with a number of policy makers, business leaders, and software developers which has given me a particularly nuanced look at how this ideology functions at the local level – an insight that continues to develop.

her own hands, creating a portfolio that will, hopefully, land her in a more stable situation. This appears to be an increasingly common condition as businesses continue to download risk onto the individual in pursuit of lean production. One might even wonder if, after 40 years of neoliberal policy and management, the current spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) is characterized not only by the internalization of management and the reorganization of the workplace, but rather by an imperative of individual business venture and direct market involvement. As working conditions become more flexible and contractual and as innovation becomes the mantra of business and government alike, the privileged worker and the precarious contractor alike seem to gravitate toward trying their hands as capitalists.

This is not meant to suggest that the digital industries are solely made up of term-based or contract work. Although this is a common employment situation, it is, by no means the only one (or, for developers and engineers, even the most prevalent one). In fact, there is a seemingly equal and opposite trend in terms of secure work. The worker who finds herself in a permanent position in a top firm also, often finds herself in a hip, collaborative, and fun work environment.

What better way to illustrate such a phenomenon than through comedy? In an early *Portlandia* sketch, a character takes a job at iconic Portland advertising firm Wieden-Kennedy. Upon arriving on her first day she finds herself in a whirlwind orientation regularly interrupted by sign-ups for fun runs, games of Frisbee, and various other caricatures of work in one of these “fun” offices. The absurdity of the situation might be embellished but real world examples of the fun workplace abound. Digital offices are regularly outfitted with amenities such as kegerators<sup>6</sup>, open-format work spaces meant to be conducive to creative and collaborative work, gyms, sports facilities, and, in the case of a Washington, DC based digital firm that I visited some years ago, a ball pit ala Chuck E. Cheese.

The fun workplace seems like the realization of a dream scenario where the worker is appreciated to such a degree that the discomfort is removed from work entirely. Unfortunately, the sheen of such a workplace organization is easily dulled. Nick Dyer-Witheford (2015) and Christian Fuchs (2015) both describe the fun, high pressure, offices of Silicon Valley, highlighting the ways in which the amenities actually serve not as vehicles for unalienated pleasure but rather of work discipline. When a worker’s (false) needs are met, even in appearance, he or she might (and often does) neglect life outside of work. She spends her waking hours in the work compound and often feels compelled to work after hours as a means of earning this non-monetary compensation. The worker, finding satisfaction in her work fails to recognize the sacrifices she makes to afford that satisfaction. She no longer works to live but lives to work, as the saying goes. The factory worker, being acutely aware of the discomfort and toil of the factory can see the division between work and life and envision means of resistance (even as the social factory increasing encroaches on life itself). The worker in the fun digital workplace, in having her desires seemingly met might no longer envision the division between work and life. The two blur into one another making ‘leisure’ a part of production and making production the central purpose of life. The fun work place, one might claim, actually functions as a means for the intensification of work, the lengthening of the workday, and the effective automatization of the worker.

---

<sup>6</sup> Small refrigerators outfitted with beer taps.

These conclusions are, of course, quite broad and general in their current form. This is due in large part to the continuing nature of the inquiry introduced in this paper. What remains to be seen is just how these general developments fit into the current context of work in digital industries. Beyond the ontological conditions of working life (or life as work), we should probe deeper into how the continuums of contingency and security, desperation and fun are influenced by the current stage of capitalist accumulation. Specifically, what might we learn from the cultural drive toward innovation and how does this manifest under late-neoliberalism? As I tentatively suggested earlier, the worker of today is normatively encouraged to pursue alternatives to the wage relation in the form of entrepreneurship. It is no longer enough to “be your own brand.” Now, it seems, that brand should actually be put on the market in the form of a start-up, venture, or small business. As security shrinks for a large segment of the working population, can those effected keep up with this push toward the individualization of risk? At the same time, is the secure worker any better off when faced with the intensification of labour potentially present under the move toward openness and fun? These questions are beyond the scope of the present paper but will animate my continuing discussions with digital workers who work under these conditions.

## References

- Aronowitz, S., & DeFazio, W. (1994). *The jobless future: Sci-tech and the dogma of work*. Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Berardi, F. (2009). *Precarious rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation*. London: Minor Compositions.
- Boltanski, L. and Chiapello, E. (2005). *The new spirit of capitalism* (Elliott, G., Trans.). London; New York: Verso.
- Braverman, H. (1974). *Labor and monopoly capital: The degradation of work in the twentieth century*. New York; London: Monthly Review Press.
- Dyer-Witford, N. (2015). *Cyber-proletariat: Global labour in the digital vortex*. London: Pluto Press.
- Fleming, P. (2015). *The mythology of work: How capitalism persists despite itself*. London: Pluto Press.
- Frayne, D. (2015). *The refusal of work: The theory and practice of resistance to work*. London: Zed Books.
- Fuchs, C. (2015). *Digital labour & Karl Marx*. London: Routledge.
- Haiven, M. (2014). *Crises of imagination, crises of power: Capitalism, creativity and the commons*. Halifax; Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing and London; New York: Zed Books.
- Huws, U. (2014). *Labor in the global digital economy: The cybertariat comes of age*. New York; London: Monthly Review Press.
- McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Standing, G. (2011). *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Weeks, K. (2011). *The problem with work: Feminism, Marxism, antiwork politics, and postwork imaginaries*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.