

## Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0: MySpace and Social Networks

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### abstract

Why did News Corporation spend \$580 million on MySpace, one of the fastest growing websites on the internet? Our contention is that it contains a dynamic new source of creative power: what we call ‘immaterial labour 2.0’. MySpace is where (mostly) youth ‘learn’ to expand their cultural and communicative capacities by constructing online subjectivities in an open-ended process of becoming. The labour performed therein is one of modulation and variation in the networked formations that result in an exponential expansion of discrete nodes of both affect and affinity and of potential surplus value. We present immaterial labour 2.0 as an ambivalent modality of both biopower and biopolitical production, and as an exemplar of the paradigm shift underway in our interface with popular culture, media, and information and communication technology. By recalling Dallas Smythe’s ‘audience commodity’ we contrast the ‘producibility’ of subjects in relation to broadcast media with the ‘productivity’ of immaterial labour 2.0 in social networks like MySpace

Can one already glimpse the outlines of these future forms of resistance, capable of standing up to marketing’s blandishments? Many young people have a strange craving to be ‘motivated’, they’re always asking for special courses and continuing education; it is their job to discover whose ends these serve, just as older people discovered, with considerable difficulty, who was benefiting from disciplines. A snake’s coils are even more intricate than a mole’s burrow. (Deleuze, 1995: 182)

If you have not heard of MySpace yet, you will soon. With almost 100 million members and ranking as the sixth most visited website on the internet (third in the United States), it is clearly no accident that Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation purchased this emerging on-line lifeworld for \$580 million in July 2005 after a bidding war with Viacom. It is not surprising, then, that there is so much buzz around a site that continues to grow by over 1.5 million users (the majority of which are youth between 16-24) each week. It is our contention that social networks like MySpace are not only exemplary of what is increasingly known as the Web 2.0,<sup>1</sup> they are also paradigmatic of an emergent

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1 O’Reilly (2005) uses this term to describe what many see the internet is becoming; that is, as second-generation networked services. For example Google would be a leading Web 2.0 entity as the efficacy of its search engine largely depends upon the collective activity of its users. Web 2.0 is what happens when the accretion of cultural knowledge, or the ‘general intellect’ – in networked relations – becomes the primary dynamic of the internet. In addition to social networks, other exemplars of the

form of immaterial labour. The progenitor of the concept, Maurizio Lazzarato (1996), identifies one manifestation as an activity that produces the cultural content of the commodity – that is, “activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion”.<sup>2</sup> Our fundamental thesis is that what is transpiring on social networks like MySpace is an emerging kind of immaterial labour – what we are calling *immaterial labour 2.0* – a more accelerated, intensified, and indeed inscrutable variant of the kind of activity initially proposed by Lazzarato or within the pages of *Empire*. Thus, our interest in social networks like MySpace is in the social and cultural component of labour; where above all else, users enthusiastically respond in the affirmative to the call, ‘become subjects!’ In other words, our inquiry regards how we ‘work’ amidst our myriad interfaces with Information and Communication Technology (ICT); and how the digital construction of our subjectivity within such social networks is a constitutive practice of immaterial labour 2.0.

For some, immaterial labour is an untenable dilution of the category of labour; flying in the face of the continued presence of material production, and the immiserating global diffusion of factory production.<sup>3</sup> However, we harbour no totalizing delusions that this has become the singular new form of labour; rather, we present it as a tendency that helps us understand the way in which capital has taken a cultural and subjective turn on the edges of its expanding borders. Indeed, the very notion of immaterial labour will seem nonsensical unless you are willing to consider the following: that there has been a conflation of production and consumption; an elision of author and audience – especially in the new virtual ICT networks which increasingly mediate our everyday lives; and that therein, our communication and our cultural practices are not only constitutive of social relations but are also a new form of labour increasingly integral to capital relations. In short, we want to build upon and expand the working definition of immaterial labour so that it can account for the modulations and variations present within networked formations like MySpace. We do so not only to highlight an important new realm for the expansion of capital and thus surplus value, but also for emerging forms of new politics.

An important point of clarification is necessary here. While Hardt and Negri’s (2000) interpretation of immaterial labour remains the most well-known, at that time ICT-mediated social networks were in their infancy and thus the practices described in this paper were not yet visible. Thus we propose immaterial labour 2.0 as a distinct new

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Web 2.0 would be wikis (open user-generated content sites like Wikipedia) and folksonomy (user-defined categories or ‘taxonomy from below’; such practices are commonly known as ‘tagging’ and are a central feature on social networks like Flickr or de.licio.us).

- 2 While the original source for Lazzarato’s eponymous article is Hardt and Virno’s (1996) *Radical Thought in Italy*, it has since been diffused throughout the internet. Perhaps the richest such source is the veritable treasure trove, the Generation Online site [[www.generation-online.org](http://www.generation-online.org)] which has a vast array of articles from a very broadly defined Autonomist tradition and incisive materials on concepts ranging from ‘immaterial labour’ to ‘biopower’ to ‘general intellect’.
- 3 Cf. Wright (2005). Wright is not only a thoughtful critic of the immaterial labour thesis but his book *Storming Heaven* (2002) offers perhaps the best English-language overview of Italian autonomist marxism, the theoretico-practical crucible from which the very concept emerged.

subset and addendum to their tripartite frame.<sup>4</sup> What the ‘2.0’ addresses is the ‘free’ labour<sup>5</sup> that subjects engage in on a cultural and biopolitical level when they participate on a site such as MySpace. In addition to the corporate mining and selling of user-generated content, this would include the tastes, preferences, and general cultural content constructed therein. While this strongly resonates with the “labour that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 108), we want to further delineate the subjective composition of this labour. Immaterial labour 2.0 explicitly situates this subjective turn within the active and ongoing construction of virtual subjectivities across social networks. Furthermore, we wish to emphasize the role of affect as the binding, dynamic force which both animates those subjectivities and provides coherence to the networked relations. Finally, we posit such social networks as biopolitical networks, insofar as they articulate new flows through differential compositions of bodies – populations, as it were, whose capacities to live are extended through the particularities of their subjective networked relations.

The focus of our article entails the following: a political economic overview of MySpace to unpack some structural elements of this new cultural practice; considering how social networks can be understood as burgeoning sites of immaterial labour – specifically, how MySpace is a site for the expansion of the cultural, communicative and subjective capacities of its users; and how therein that networked capacity is captured in discrete quanta as a dynamic source of surplus value. In short, we present MySpace as exemplary of immaterial labour through the composition, management and regulation of the activities of its users. In addition to highlighting the actual techniques and practices of capture of MySpace, we will follow other trajectories. First, presenting immaterial labour as a modality of biopower/biopolitical production; and second, contextualizing an early attempt to understand the role of cultural labour in the reproduction of capital relations via Dallas Smythe’s ‘audience commodity’. The ‘producibility’ of the subjects in relation to broadcast media can be contrasted with the ‘productivity’ of immaterial labour 2.0 in social networks like MySpace. Throughout we will remain mindful of the genealogy of the concept of immaterial labour – namely, its often overlooked reliance on a productive intermixing of Foucault and Marx, primarily via Autonomists like Lazzarato, Negri, and others.

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- 4 Hardt and Negri’s frame can be broken down as follows. The first form of immaterial labour refers to cerebral or conceptual work like problem solving, symbolic, and analytical tasks. Typically, such jobs are found in the technological sector of the culture industry – i.e. public relations, media production, web design etc. What is key is that production shifts from the material realm of the factory to the symbolic production of ideas. The second component includes the production of affects. Herein affective labour refers to those forms which manipulate “a feeling of ease, well, being, satisfaction, excitement or passion” (Hardt and Negri 2004: 108). Historically, this labour has been unpaid and has been commonly regarded as ‘women’s work’. Jobs in this field typically include those that produce services or care through the body. The third flags the way in which communication technology has been incorporated and transformed original industrial production (Hardt and Negri 2000: 293), thus referring to the way in which labour has become increasingly mechanized and computerized.
  - 5 Tiziana Terranova (2004) impressively draws upon Autonomist theory, cybernetics, and information theory in her book *Information Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. Therein she develops a similar thesis that she called ‘free labour’ – namely, that free labour is a central feature of both the internet and informationalized economy.

## What is MySpace?

The lifeworld of MySpace is expansive, with an abundant capacity for the proliferation of networked relations. It is more than a blog and more than an instant messenger. MySpace is not just a place to have a conversation with one friend – it is a network of friends. Thus it is not a static peer-to-peer (P2P) site where one user anonymously links to another. Instead, it is a vast cyberspatial public sphere, a place to ‘hang out’ with all one’s friends at the same time and connect to new people through the dizzying array of user profiles which are all publicly available for browsing. These profiles are the equivalent to on-line subjectivities or “your personality”, says 17 year old Edward, who likes “open-minded and cool people but not nerds and liars” (USA Today, 2006). Like an interactive version of a high school yearbook entry, users aspire to express their on-line subjectivity as a complex synergy of cultural influences, articulated through what they choose to write and upload on their profile pages. Unlike a webpage that remains static, one’s MySpace site is always *becoming*, constantly in process, being updated and rearticulated – as are cultural trends – to reflect the user’s evolving interests and tastes. Furthermore, MySpace is also quite different from a blog, although what distinguishes these two digital platforms is nuanced. Both types of sites are frequently updated; often daily and for some, even hourly. And, both types of sites are connected to on-line communities based on individual interests. However, a MySpace account, unlike a blog, has the capacity to be interconnected among several different communities simultaneously, while a blog generally has a very specific purpose and community with which it interacts. What’s more, MySpace users typically have their site open whenever they are online, and thus concurrently post on their home page, as well as on their friends’ pages, versus a blogger who would log in, post and log out. In this sense, one can imagine a user’s MySpace page as their own communicative interface, that is, online subjectivity or an immaterial expression of who they are – their very own lifestyle brand continually being circulated and refined in cyberspace. Each individual site, then, becomes a unique construct of a public persona that is continuously maintained as the user strives to adequately construct his or her subjectivity through the diverse networks of relations to which he/she belongs.

## Biopower: Theorizing the ‘Digital Body’ of MySpace

Let us take a momentary step away from the particularities of MySpace here to consider the implications for this new composition of bodies – or network of friends. We have theorized this composition by making the claim that the immaterial labour exercised therein is a modality of biopower; here we will also suggest that the organizational form of MySpace can be seen as expressive of biopower. Unpacking this claim necessitates a brief overview of Michel Foucault’s famous triptych of sovereign power-disciplinary power-biopower, specifically the latter two. This is especially important because each of those dispositifs of power is dependent upon a specific deployment of bodies. What is also important here is our proposed genealogy of the very concept of immaterial

labour – namely that of a particular Foucault in relation to a particular Marxism.<sup>6</sup> This enables us to read the diffusion of production in the social factory as not only being exemplified in MySpace but also as resonant with the dispositif of biopower.

Organizationally, what most distinguishes disciplinary power from biopower is that the former fixes relations between individuals and various institutions; power is exercised over those individual bodies in order to attain capacities and aptitudes more adequate to the different and changing needs of the social body. Thus discipline is enacted by individualizing techniques of power. As Foucault stated in a lecture in Brazil in 1976, later published as *Les Mailles du Pouvoir*, disciplinary power entails “how we surveil someone, control his conduct, his behavior, his aptitudes, intensify his performance, multiply his capacities, put him in his place where he will be most useful” (Foucault, 2001: 1009).<sup>7</sup> While this provides a greater flow in comparison to the rigidity of sovereign power, it remains discontinuous. In the memorable characterization by Deleuze: “Individuals are always going from one closed site to another, each with its own laws: first of all the family, then school (‘you’re not at home, you know’), then the barracks (‘you’re not at school, you know’), then the factory, hospital from time to time, maybe prison, the model site of confinement” (Deleuze, 1995: 177). In other words, disciplinary societies were a matter of spatially and temporally ordering things in a discrete manner that composed bodies in a way that made them greater than the sum of their parts.

Such a dispositif of power, however, was inadequate to an ever-increasingly mobile and interconnected society: “[t]he mesh of the net is too large, almost an infinite number of things, elements, conducts, and processes would escape the control of such power.” Hence they are supplemented by newer, more continuous networked relations of *biopower*, which is less onerous and more flexible, and “is exercised in the direction of economic processes” (Foucault, 2001: 1009). Since we are making linkages to the Autonomist Marxist concept of immaterial labour, we must stress that Foucault is not bringing back a causal economic base; indeed, he explicitly warns against falling into this habit “once again, in the spirit of a somewhat primitive Marxism” (Foucault, 2001: 1010). This wards off the mode of production as a totalizing causality lest the cohesive form of the terminal composition blind us to the heterogeneous trajectories of its constitutive elements. In this way, it is not that there is any incompatibility or total disassociation between capital, and the dispositif of biopower. Rather, it is that there are myriad ‘minor’ elements with their own temporal-historical trajectory whose particularities would be effaced by such a perspective. One real implication of that

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6 For an introduction to this genealogy, cf. Coté (2003). Briefly, this is the Foucault of the mid-1970s who realized power was expressed in subjectivities, and that the possibility of resistance always came before strategic relations of domination. This was the Foucault enthusiastically read by many Italian Autonomist Marxists, eventually taking form in the ‘second-generation’ Autonomist Lazzarato’s concept of immaterial labour.

7 This article (literally translated as ‘The Meshes of Power’ or more elegantly as ‘The Intricate Network of Power’) is arguably one of Foucault’s most significant never to be translated into English. It is of particular importance in this context because in it Foucault addresses his conceptual relationship to Marx in an atypically candid manner, specifically in relation to his dispositifs of power. He emphasizes his reading of Marx where he locates a ‘positive’ conception of power very much inline with his own. All translations are our own unless otherwise stated.

perspective is that the target of radical social change is the terminal form, as opposed to the dynamic elements which make any dispositif function in the first place.

Thus, following Foucault, we can look at the relationship to capital in the dispositif of biopower without reference to a determinant economic base. Here we can remember how Lazzarato (2000) emphasized the conflation in biopower of the *zoe* (natural life) with the *bios* (political life); similarly immaterial labour signifies the diffusion of a new labouring subjectivity into the biopolitical lifeworld. If so, then perhaps a more amenable method for doing so is to think of capital as a logic which increasingly flows through more and more otherwise discrete social relations, and finds passage in different political and social techniques and practices – precisely what we are suggesting is at play in MySpace. Foucault himself repeatedly noted that an emergent capital had the urgent need for a new dispositif of power. Of course, there *still* remains the sovereign power, a relationship between the sovereign and his/her subjects, and disciplinary power which begins as a process of increasing individual flexibility vis-à-vis specific and discrete institutions. Yet there were urgent needs, from capitalism and elsewhere: an organizational form not just for individual, atomized subjects, but for a population of living beings, arrayed in myriad flows of compositions of differing capacities.

Biopower, then, is that which “uses this population like a machine for production, for the production of wealth, goods and other individuals” (Foucault, 2001: 1012). Regulating the flow of bodies in specific compositions would supplement the containment of disciplined juridical subjects in institutional spaces. “From the 18<sup>th</sup> century, life becomes an object of power” (Foucault, 2001: 1013). This marks the end of neither sovereign nor disciplinary power; juridical and normative practices continue to flourish – dispositifs are always overlapping, never totalizing. However, there is a new materiality (and increasingly a virtuality) of power expressed through networked relations in populations. It is in this manner that Foucault situates his study of sexuality: “a point of articulation between the discipline of individuals and bodies, and the regulation of populations...of primary importance for making society a machine of production” (Foucault, 2001: 1013).

Biopower<sup>8</sup> then, marks a shift away from both the juridical body of sovereign body and the individual body of disciplinary power. It is the social body in its entirety, or the population, which becomes an object of regulation of power relations. It is because of the emphasis on the composition of bodies in a given population that social networks are a most adequate organizational form for biopower. In summary, sovereignty exercised the power of death over life; discipline is a corrective power over individual bodies to make them more adequate to institutionally-grounded socio-economic demands; and biopower coheres and flows through compositions of bodies to maximize particular capacities to live. This capacity to live is manifested most directly in subjectivities; to better understand the asymmetrical dimensions of power relations is to consider which subjectivities are valorized over others. Immaterial labour is thus an

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8 Quite relevant to our examination of immaterial labour is the lengthy consideration by Hardt and Negri of the way that “life itself becomes an object of power” (2000: 22-41).

important modality of biopower as it radically extends the productivity of those bodies in a manner suffused with both affect and capitalist valorization.

## Learning to Immaterial labour and Develop Affective Capacity

So what happens when aspects of immaterial labour become the quotidian activities of youth in a place of their own? For many who are hanging out on MySpace, the site has come to represent a refuge, particularly for the younger users seeking lines of flight from the controlled confines of home and school. This space is not under ‘adult authority’ and thus can be considered an autonomous public space in which users can interact and ‘chill’ with their friends (boyd, 2006). We posit that Lazzarato’s concept of immaterial labour can act as a guidebook for the efficacious forging of such social networks. Thus we can read how the ‘work’ of hanging out on MySpace “constitutes itself in immediately collective forms that exist only in the form of networks and flows” (Lazzarato, 1996). There are ‘entrepreneurial skills’ necessary for forging effective links, especially if you want to enter the stratosphere of MySpace popularity. There is “continual innovation in the forms and conditions of communication... [which] gives form to and materializes needs, the imaginary, consumer tastes, and so forth, and these products in turn become powerful producers of needs, images, and tastes” (Lazzarato, 1996).

These series of activities are not recognized in an orthodox conception of work but they are at the heart of immaterial labour; they are also vital to the *raison d’être* of MySpace – to be valorized and to extend one’s social network and hence cultural capital. For this is an overtly public space, a place where people constantly want to be seen – an extension of peer to peer communication, but, unlike the individual experience of file sharing, it is shared within a community. While the idea of ‘hanging out’ on-line may seem strange to some, for those who are using MySpace, this affective dimension is as real as they are. “I’m on it every day for like two hours at a minimum,” says Shanda Edstrom, 18, of Clackamas, Oregon. “It’s just crazy” (USA Today, 2006).

We cannot adequately understand what is different about immaterial labour unless we understand the biopolitical lifeworld in which it operates. Lazzarato leans conceptually on Foucault precisely because of the urgent need to propose a different kind of political economy, which is “neither the political economy of capital and work, nor the Marxist economic critique of ‘living labour’” (Lazzarato, 2000). Instead, it is an economy of forces, in which there is a contestation between a coordination and command that seeks ‘surplus power’ and radically new collective possibilities, the likes of which were envisaged as far back as Marx (1973) in his visionary *Fragment on Machines*. Our understanding here is that the creative and communicative practices of immaterial labour help us enumerate the particularities of that new ‘economy of forces’. And that part of the ‘surplus of power’ produced – certainly that which is pursued with great avarice by capital – is the affect that coheres and differentiates those myriad networks which express those myriad subjectivities. It is immaterial labour that flags the conflation of production and consumption, which bedevils the labour theory of value and initiates a crisis of value (though not for the corporate-likes of MySpace).

Lazzarato, in seeking to clarify misconceptions that arose since his initial article, more recently wrote:

The activation, both of productive cooperation and of the social relationship with the consumer, is materialised within and by the process of communication. It is immaterial labour which continually innovates the form and the conditions of communication (and thus of work and of consumption). It gives form and materialises needs, images, the tastes of consumers and these products become in their turn powerful producers of needs, of images and of tastes. The particularity of the commodity produced through immaterial labour (seeing that its essential use-value is given by its value contained, informational and cultural) consists in the fact that this is not destroyed in the act of consumption, but enlarges, transforms, creates the 'ideological' and cultural environment of the consumer. This does not produce the physical capacity of the workforce, it transforms the person who uses it. Immaterial labour produces first of all a 'social relationship' (a relationship of innovation, of production, of consumption); and only if it succeeds in this production does its activity have an economic value. This activity shows immediately that which material production 'hid': in other words, labour produces not only commodities, but first and foremost the capital relationship. (Lazzarato, 2001)

Capital relations are, of course, always already social relations. Social networks enable an exponential explosion of such social and economic relations. And what is also produced in these social and economic relations – indeed, what causes them to coalesce in the first place – is the production of affect. It is this affective trajectory that we argue passes through the heart of what is immaterial labour – a modality of work that diffuses production (in subjectivity and consumption) throughout the extremities of the social factory. MySpace demonstrates the extent to which this social factory has already become ensconced in youth-specific social relations. Indeed, it is both a liminal and constitutive part of the social factory. Given that the majority of MySpace users are young adults, many have yet to fully enter the labour market. One of the most fundamental tasks they learn is a kind of online personal brand management in a network comprised by multiple lines of valorization (both social and capitalist). Thus it is similar but different from the *Learning to Labour* outlined in the classic study by Paul Willis some 30 years previous. At that time, English working class 'lads' were disaffected from an education system they were compelled to attend. Amidst their cultural practices in the resultant resistance – a line of flight away from school – they unwittingly reproduced their working class position in the labour market (Willis, 1977). But our passage toward biopower – what Deleuze (1995) also calls 'society of control' – not to mention our post-Fordist turn to the social factory, necessitates new ways for youth to learn to labour anew. One of the things that MySpace users must learn to more adequately construct, if they wish to be extended through a wider social network, is something both iterable and mutable, and expressive only in relation to others (both users and preferred cultural commodities). In short, they learn to produce their networked subjectivity on social networks which offer an unprecedented milieu for myriad forms of circulation and valorization. This apprenticeship is not only socially 'profitable' for youth, it helps capital construct the foundations of a future of networked subjectivity and affect.

This is why we must not reduce the experience of MySpace users to unwitting immaterial apprentices. A critical analysis would be blunted were we to dismiss the intensely gratifying component built into MySpace, which allows users to feel a part of something larger. Thus to open a MySpace account is to extend oneself into cyberspace,

thereby becoming what danah boyd (2006) calls a 'digital body'. What motivates users is the composition of bodies with which they can network. Thus an affective dimension is inscribed into a user profile, which only grows as people increasingly build their unique public personae through language, imagery and media (boyd, 2006). In turn, friends of the user are expected to write comments on the message board found on each profile's page; creating a feedback loop that serves as a means of peer valorization for one's on-line subjectivity. This enables one to maintain intimate relations among their peers through a "shared cultural context that allows youth to solidify their social groups" (boyd, 2006). Popularity is then achieved in a number of ways, the most obvious of which is through the number of friends one can successfully acquire, but also by which and how many users make comments on one's profile. Finally, for those who construct their subjectivities via promotional logic, 'fame' is achieved by maximizing posts on different people's home pages. Strategically this helps to extend one's social network (your picture and link go back to your profile and are posted when you make a comment), which leads to more friends, more popularity and ultimately more recognition. Through the user's built up network of social relations comes a sense of connectivity and belonging amidst the multiple on-line communities. And it is this sense of connection and participation in something that is larger than one's self, which provides the impetus for exploring new techniques and practices of communicative and affective productions. The 'work' of MySpace, as a corporate entity, is to 'monetize' these practices in a manner which does not compromise the good will of users.

As these networks flourish, the lifestyle brand of the immaterial self gets expressed in its capacity for becoming through the 'My' in MySpace; afforded by its potentially infinite affective relations of affinity and resistance it develops as it comes into contact with other profiles. That such affect is a constitutive element of immaterial labour has recently been noted by Negri, particularly how the emerging 'attention economy' necessitates an interactivity for the production of subjectivity, and how in turn this further complicates the measure of value of labour-power. Thus, "the more political economy silences the value of the labour force, the more the value of the labour force is extended and affects the global and biopolitical plane. On this paradoxical rhythm labour becomes affect or rather, labour finds its value in affect, in so far as the latter is defined as [the Spinozist] 'power to act'" (Negri, 1999: 79).<sup>9</sup>

Thus affect – expressed through particular compositions of bodies which alter our capacity to act – helps forge relationships with consumers through new subjectivities and networked relations that have the potential to interpolate users for the various lifestyles and identities that are being produced on an on-going basis. Thus built into MySpace is the sharing of information in order to create a suitable digital body. Users who participate provide valuable information about their personal tastes in music, film, television or about who they are and what they want. This, in part, is why News Corp

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9 Hardt and Negri continue to emphasize the importance of affect to immaterial labour: "[affective labour produces] social networks, forms of community, biopower [where] the instrumental action of economic production has been united with the communicative action of human relations" (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 293). In this issue, Emma Dowling makes a similar connection between affect and *material* social networks in relation to service work in her paper 'Formulating New Social Subjects? An Inquiry into the Realities of an Affective Worker'.

paid \$580 million to gain access to MySpace's veritable youth culture database goldmine; the exploitation of these rich affective and subjective veins is an ongoing concern of the new corporate masters.

## From the Audience Commodity to Immaterial Labour

Murdoch's News Corp is no stranger to the traditional forms of mass media with a movie, newspapers and television empire that literally straddles the globe. Between Sky satellite services and the stable of Fox Network broadcasting stations, News Corp is aggressively pursuing audiences in the United States, the UK, Asia, South Asia, and Latin America, among others. Its payment of more than half a billion dollars for MySpace suggests an understanding that there is a paradigm shift underway in the relationship between audiences and popular culture.

We have made the claim that immaterial labour is rich in possibilities for helping us better understand how the economy, media, culture, language, information, knowledge, and subjectivity are becoming increasingly inseparable in the reproduction of our contemporary social order. In other words, how communication and subjectivity – including the realm long considered 'mere consumption' – have become an active articulation of capitalist production. In short, like News Corp has done instrumentally in its pursuit of surplus value, we need to conceptually trace the shift from the *audience* as discrete, measurable quanta in the chain of production, circulation, consumption, to a dynamic, productive composition of bodies as aggregates networked in ICTs. One way of contextualizing this shift is to consider what the political economist of communication Dallas Smythe called 'the audience commodity'.<sup>10</sup>

What seems curious today is the novelty of the concept of the audience commodity when it was first proposed amidst the famous communication blindspot debates of the late 1970s,<sup>11</sup> especially as here we are considering one that has largely supplanted it. In 1980, Smythe wrote in *Dependency Road*, "presently we know very little about this strange commodity, the audience" (Smythe, 1981: 263). The basic thesis of the audience commodity is straightforward: "readers and audience members of advertising-supported mass media are a commodity produced and sold to advertisers *because they perform a valuable service for the advertisers*" (Smythe, 1981: 8). In short, the audience is not a category like class, gender or race; rather, it is an aggregation of people linked to a particular market, be it for a cultural commodity (such as a TV program) or the commodities advertised therein. There is already a conceptual alert to biopower here – the audience is a population that must be managed if capital is to attain desired aptitudes and capacities. In Smythe's more Marxist terms, the audience is always already a market. It is because of this intrinsic functional position in the circuit of production and

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10 Dallas Smythe was a trailblazing peripatetic communication scholar who went from a 'prairie boyhood' in Saskatchewan to graduate study at Berkeley during the Depression, to work in the US Federal Communications Commission, to suffering the anti-communist hysteria of McCarthyism, and finally to returning to Canada in the 1970s to develop various communication programmes as an elderly but engaged Maoist.

11 Cf. Jhally (1982); Livant (1979); Livant (1982); Murdock (1978); Smythe (1977); Smythe (1978).

consumption that Smythe – ever the political economist – considered the audience commodity as a key entry point in the analysis of capitalist reproduction.

It is important to remember that Smythe, in part, was responding to the Frankfurt School's critique, which considered 'ideology' as the main commodity produced by the culture industry. He writes "[f]or a variety of methodological and substantive reasons I do not find them particularly helpful...I mistrust such analysis because it seems static – ahistorical and tending to ignore the movement of the principal contradiction: people vs. capital" (Smythe, 1981: 268-271). This latter comment is especially important to the genealogy of immaterial labour as it demonstrates an affinity to both Foucault and the Autonomists. Smythe found nothing novel in the notion that force was supplemented by the use of media in the service of the dominant class. From Smythe's perspective, the Frankfurt School's focus on the domination thesis meant overlooking the productive role audiences played in the production of surplus value and the general extension and intensification of capitalist markets into everyday life. Likewise, because Smythe's concept theorises 'commodity output' as driven by the demand produced by the labor of the audience commodity, it problematizes the base-superstructure model in a way that renders it redundant. So despite some antiquated and problematic elements, one can admire Smythe's conceptual insight.

Nick Dyer-Witheford has also noted this linkage between Smythe and Autonomist Marxism, the theoretical crucible in which the concept of 'immaterial labour' was developed. In *CyberMarx*, Dyer-Witheford mentions Smythe within his analysis of the circulation of capital. In a footnote about the key role of audience 'labour' he reveals that "[i]n a personal conversation shortly before his death Smythe agreed his perspective converged with the Autonomist [...] analysis" (Dyer-Witheford, 1999: 271). We must be careful not to remake Smythe into an Autonomist – his understanding of the 'audience' is rather static and preformed, as they are passively bought and sold with no participation other than the movement of their eyeballs. Yet there remain strong parallels. Smythe writes "[f]or, in inventing the mass media and the mass audience as its principal protagonist, monopoly capitalism has created its chief potential *antagonist* in the capitalist core area" (Smythe, 1981: xvii). As he never tires of repeating, the principal contradiction of capital is 'people vs. capital'; likewise for Autonomists, the true dynamic of capitalism (and one of their key conceptual interventions) is the antagonistic relationship between labour and capital, with the former driving the latter.

Immaterial labour attempts to conceptually map major shifts that have occurred in labouring practices amidst post-Fordist globalization. One of many important differences with Smythe's audience commodity is the conflation between production and consumption – keeping in mind that Smythe's audience commodity was a corrective response to what he considered an excessive focus on 'consumption' via ideology. As Lazzarato notes, with the economy of immaterial labour, 'leisure time' and 'working time' are increasingly fused, making life inseparable from work. This is a key aspect of what Marx (1990) called 'real subsumption' – the absorption of capitalist logic and the dictates of surplus value through more and more of everyday life.

We by no means suggest there are no longer 'audiences'; rather, that immaterial labour is a better conceptual lens to understand the qualitative shift in which culture, subjectivity, and capital come together in new networks of ICT. In short, the term

‘audience’ is not adequate for understanding social networks like MySpace. Even if we modify audience with the term ‘active,’ it still fails to capture the shift in the process of capitalist valorization – or how surplus value is produced. This is one of Lazzarato’s underlying reasons for conceptualizing immaterial labour in the first place. Part of the process of ‘real subsumption’ is capital seeking an unmediated form of command, not just over labour in the factory but in everyday life (similar to the form of command in which biopower is exercised). That is why, for post-Fordist capital, Lazzarato coins the slogan ‘become subjects’ (Lazzarato, 1996) – hence the subjective reading of capital. But this is not an uncritical celebration of the proliferating subjectivities of postmodernity. When looking at actual labouring practice, the subjects that you become must be compatible with the needs of contemporary capitalist reproduction. That is one reason why linguistic and communicative elements are so integral, as they facilitate an expanded capacity for social cooperation – absolutely essential for more flexible production practices.

But we cannot make a straight line to immaterial labouring practices in the social networks of popular culture here. Rather we must remember the Autonomist view of labour, which like Foucaultian resistance, always comes first. Even in the context of MySpace, we must remember its origins in the cultural practices of P2P file sharing like Napster. It is techniques of immaterial labour that allowed for the proliferation of such decentralized practices of virtual social cooperation, in the process radically altering potential kinds of interface with popular culture. Yet, this is not to make an argument for some kind of emerging consumer sovereignty. Indeed, one thing the immaterial labour thesis stresses is the higher level and intensity of antagonism that is created along the way – something borne out in practice with the forced closure of Napster and the subsequent proliferation of new and seemingly uncontrollable forms of P2P practices. Lazzarato notes this fundamental contradiction in the workplace. Capital “is obliged ([in] a life-and-death necessity for the capitalist) not to ‘redistribute’ the power that the new quality of labor and organization imply” (Lazzarato 1996).

We can see this playing out in the dynamic decentralized architecture of the internet – the distributed network in which computers with a shared protocol can communicate directly without a hierarchical intermediary. This is not only a radically different media terrain than television, it is one animated primarily by immaterial labour. In short, we have shifted from the static world of the couch potato to the dynamic one of the ‘websurfer’ or ‘blogger’. Capital has paid attention to this and there is a shift in what is being valorized. With television, the audience commodity was an isolated and sedentary beast, an aggregation of individuals linked only through the show they watched each week. Its organizational form was also more static: a centralized network with the audience in a cluster of dead-end lines. With the internet – and specifically, social networks – it is about the dynamic immaterial labour that traverses and constructs the decentralized networks. In short, it is the links, the networks that people construct and participate in that comprise not a new audience commodity but immaterial labour 2.0. Now we can turn to the political economic structure of MySpace and the techniques and practices of immaterial labour therein.

## (Profitably) Managing and Regulating the Immaterial labour of MySpace

For economics, there remains only the possibility of managing and regulating the activity of immaterial labour and creating some devices for the control and creation of the public/consumer by means of the control of communication and information technologies and their organizational processes. (Lazzarato, 1996)

MySpace, and social networks in general, did not exist when Lazzarato wrote the above quote about immaterial labour. Yet it is our assertion that MySpace is emblematic of an emergent form of immaterial labour. As it turns out, the political economic history of MySpace reveals precisely such a strategy of ‘managing and regulating’, and of developing ‘devices for the control and creation’ of the social and cultural activities therein. While the founders of MySpace have meticulously constructed a narrative of a plucky little organic site, considerable evidence points to a site that grew as a calculated marketing endeavour with its origins in the bane of most people’s internet experience: spamware, pop-up ads, spyware, and adware (Lapinski, 2006). Therein lays the structural ambivalence not only of social networks, but of immaterial labour 2.0. Specifically, MySpace is indeed an open site, a *tabula rasa* shaped by the creative imprints of its users. However, its political-economic foundation demonstrates how such user-generated content – immaterial labour 2.0 – is the very dynamic driving new revenue streams. Thus, it is the tastes, preferences, and social narratives found in user entries which comprises the quotidian motherlode of these new revenue streams. It is this user-generated content that spyware and adware monitor to microtarget those same online subjectivities. This is what has excited media conglomerates like News Corp who realize the value of mining these new networked subjectivities to extend existing and produce new markets – indeed, to construct a new paradigm of capitalist market relations.

Sovereign power coexists with biopower then, not only in society at large but also on MySpace. Part of what enables the management of the immanent networked relations is the juridical forms of the site’s ‘Privacy Policy’ where it is clearly stated that all information recorded on the website can be shared with third parties to “allow an ad-network to deliver targeted advertisements that they believe will be of most interest to the user” (MySpace, 2005). This has allowed MySpace to adjust the cost of an advertisement on their home page more in-line with Yahoo’s rate of around \$600,000 a day (even though the site presently earns News Corp over \$13 million in ad revenues each month) (Forbes, 2006). Furthermore, News Corp recently reached a deal with Google, where the latter paid \$900 million for the rights to power all search capacities on MySpace, as well as for the majority of Fox Interactive Media properties. As a result, Google will become the “exclusive provider of text-based advertising and keyword targeted ads through its AdSense program as well as, a right of first refusal on display advertising sold through third parties on Fox Interactive Media’s network” (News Corporation, 2006). What does this mean for users? Google’s search bars will appear on every MySpace page, creating a new discrete interface for immaterial labour. In Smythe’s model, the broadcasted content aggregated the audience for the advertiser; Google’s ‘AdSense’, however, is also emblematic of immaterial labour 2.0 because every time the user submits a search topic, it accretes – like surplus labour – in the

Google database and in turn microtargets an advertisement tailored not only to that particular user but to that specific search. This is a key element of the ‘architecture of participation’ that is built into social networks which not only intensifies a personalized experience more adequate to the construction of subjectivities therein, but it also facilitates discrete capital relations.

At the time of writing there were 20 more products – all aimed at rearticulating cultural practices and social relations into surplus value – about to be launched, including a deal with either Amazon or eBay, a Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) phone service, as well as talk of an actual physical magazine that will profile MySpace users and highlight the most frequently viewed pages. What’s more, MySpace has recently signed a deal with Helio, a cell phone company that has invested more than \$440 million into a technology that will allow users to view and update their MySpace pages through their cell phones. Not surprisingly, Chris DeWolfe, one of the site’s founders, is confident that the ‘sugar daddy’ quotient of Rupert Murdoch’s bottomless pockets will only “extend MySpace around the world so it can be a major force globally” (CNN Money, 2006; Red Herring, 2006).

Yet despite MySpace’s growing success, what about the possibility of it becoming too popular, thereby compromising the loyalty of its users? Fortune Magazine once asked DeWolfe if “MySpace could be like a fashion brand. The more successful you get, the more common you become.” To this DeWolfe replied “We’re not deciding what’s cool. Our users are [...] MySpace is all about letting people be what they want to be” (CNN Money, 2006a). And so, if people are ‘being what they want to be’, just how are they going about doing this? The main way is the construction of their online subjectivity in a never-ending process of becoming – again, in relation to other users in the increasing circulation of cultural commodities. Each new device and resource expands the capacity of their ‘digital body’ and allows them to forge new compositions of relations. Yet, remembering the origins of MySpace, each device is a variation of ‘spam 2.0’ which is fuelled by freely given immaterial labour. In this model, corporations circulate ‘free’ digital commodities in exchange for valuable information that is in turn sold to (or in the parlance of MySpace, is ‘shared’ with) ‘third parties’. As such, it is more accurate to view MySpace not as a unique site of accumulation, but rather as an aggregator, consisting of a complex network generating surplus value all of which is driven by the creative cultural content of user’s immaterial labour.

Further extending its aggregating capacity, MySpace allows its users to link to other digital services known as either ‘MySpace codes’ or widgets (Mashables, 2006). These are digital services that are not owned by MySpace but which can be linked to and will appear on user’s sites. Some of these widgets include YouTube, Imageshack, Photobucket, and Stickam.<sup>12</sup> Thus one could view uploaded pictures from Photobucket, a video from YouTube or even have a Stickam webcam all on their MySpace profile page. The flexibility built into this platformed application model is in part why users keep coming back to site. MySpace has reluctantly agreed not to limit user ‘expression’

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12 YouTube [<http://www.youtube.com/>], Imageshack [<http://imageshack.us/>], Photobucket [<http://photobucket.com/>], and Stickam [<http://www.stickam.com/>].

to its in-house applications.<sup>13</sup> In turn, this increases the overall number of MySpace users. While it endeavours to develop as many widgets in-house as it can, the giant cannot match the creative ferment of the myriad Web 2.0 start ups.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from the growing number of widgets that users are attaching to their profile pages there are also several companies that are equally capitalizing on the provision of digital content to help users appear ‘cool’ and more unique, particularly for those who are not as technologically savvy. Such websites include PimpMySpace, Freeweblayouts, Hotfreelayouts, and Pimpyourpro<sup>15</sup>, to name but a few of the most successful, all seeking to capitalize on the millions of MySpace users who want to have the most unique online subjectivity expressed via profile page and graphics. In fact, this industry is so large that according to Hitwise, “MySpace layouts is now the world’s ninth most popular search term...And in fact, these sites are growing at about the same rate as MySpace itself” (Mashables, 2006a).

We are seeing how, for some users, MySpace is becoming their main portal into the internet; hence it is vital to maximize your affective and immaterial capacity to best forge the links of your desired social network. The result is a richly layered interface in which each potential intensity has both widgets and commodified content to facilitate the cultural and communicative production.

There is one last widget to mention. Silent Productions<sup>16</sup> tailors its products to each client but the function is always the same: help users maximize the number of friends in their social network through an automated program that works on specific demographic information. In effect, this is a variation of a direct-marketing campaign but with the sophistication and microtargeting abilities that only an information-rich environment like MySpace can provide. Hence one need not labour intensively by adding friends ‘one click at a time’ (MySpace the corporation is unhappy with this development because it wants to monopolize this potentially rich capital stream and has issued several cease and desist letters [Forbes, April 2006]) For now, this new ‘killer app’ continues to grow in popularity, no doubt because it is fully compliant with the cooperative and affinity-based ethos of social networks: the necessary labour is downloaded on the users contacted, who must explicitly consent to being added as a friend to the marketer. Tila Tequilla,<sup>17</sup> MySpace’s number one celebrity who boasts 31.5 million hits on her website, has learned the subtleties of immaterial labour 2.0 well – she too has enlisted the help of Silent Productions to help make her an overnight success (Silent Productions, 2006).

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13 Initially MySpace tried to ban YouTube from its site, however, after much protest from its users it was forced to concede its position. In turn this led to the rise of YouTube as the fourth most trafficked website on the internet (New York Times, Jan. 2006) (Alexa, March 2006).

14 Here are just two examples of recently launched widgets. Vizu.com creates polls for users to track various kinds of information and welovewidgets.com provides horoscopes that will be continuously updated for those who upload this software.

15 PimpMySpace [<http://www.pimpmyspace.org/>]; freeweblayouts [<http://www.freeweblayouts.net/>]; hotfreelayouts [[http://www.hotfreelayouts.com/layouts.php?index=myspace\\_layouts](http://www.hotfreelayouts.com/layouts.php?index=myspace_layouts)]; pimpyourpro [<http://www.pimpyourpro.com/>]

16 Silent Productions [<http://www.silentproductions.co.uk/>]

17 Tila Tequilla [<http://www.myspace.com/tilatequilla>].

## Conclusion

Immaterial labour 2.0 helps us understand the elision between producer and consumer, author and audience. However, this extension of the labour process into these new and vast coterminous fields – popular culture, ICTs, and the production of subjectivity – articulates a different kind of collective subject than with other forms of immaterial labourer in the tripartite model advanced by Hardt and Negri. For example, while MySpace users have certainly “become subjects of communication,” this process does not necessitate the same instrumentality of more ‘traditional’ immaterial labour where the worker must be “a simple relay of codification and decodification whose transmitted messages must be ‘clear and free of ambiguity’ within a communication context that has been completely normalized by management” (Lazzarato, 1996). The process on social networks is far more aleatory and subtle, as it is the variability of possible valorization processes that holds the secret abodes of surplus value for capital.

Furthermore, regardless of the management and techniques of capture invoked by MySpace, the social relations forged therein are ultimately based on affinity. So again the caveat: the concerted efforts to turn those social relations into capital relations does not negate the affect expressed nor does it limit the radical potential of the dynamic of affinity. Elsewhere we have written about the ‘Soft Revolution’ (Coté, 2005) – social transformation predicated on proliferating networks of relations animated by affinity, joy, and respect. The basic idea is that networked relations of affinity (and hence difference) are an emergent form of contestation of neoliberal globalization, elements expressed in everything from the Zapatistas to Tactical Media to independent music. Indeed, it is from the lyrics of an eponymous song by the Montreal band Stars that the term ‘Soft Revolution’ is taken.

Yet there is a profound ambivalence to many practices of this Soft Revolution, and for some, its immanence might politely be called slippage or, more aggressively, cooption. For example, virtually all the bands identified with the Soft Revolution (Broken Social Scene, The Dears, Wolf Parade) are users of MySpace. Indeed, such social networks have become important new circuits for musicians who wish to at least partially circumvent the major labels and commercial outlets. So once again, there is always something within MySpace that remains a refuge, albeit one always being surveyed by capital for enclosure. Because there is a profound power to the extension of social relations animated by affinity and facilitated by ICTs that can never be wholly contained.

As such, one possibility is to not look for a ‘pure’ outside, free of such contestation. Instead, we need to better understand the ways in which our lives are suffused with immaterial labour. Here we might recall how the historian Fernand Braudel emphasized the importance of the *longue durée* of geo-historical time: that nearly immobile history which was structurally stable and contained by the framework of geography. How might we apply it to the lifeworld of social networks to better understand the opposite – the instantaneous conversion (‘click time’?) of our social and cultural practices, of our communication and subjectivity into discrete quanta for the expansion of surplus value?

Here let us reemphasize what we see as the always already liberatory potential of immaterial labour – that creative and affective dynamic which must be captured by capital and then rearticulated into surplus value. This recognition allows us to conclude by returning to the beginning. For Lazzarato (2000) does the very same thing in unpacking the Foucaultian concept of biopower when he distinguished it from biopolitical production. If there is political potential here, it will be expressed in the discovery of forms of immaterial labour which are a modality of biopolitical production. This would be a dispositif distinct from biopower as relations of domination – the kind of imposition from above that News Corporation seeks to exercise over MySpace. But as we have already claimed, we cannot really understand immaterial labour unless we recognize the conceptual affinity it expresses between Foucault and the Autonomists – namely that *resistance always comes first*. In other words, the collective dimension of our immaterial practices are neither determined by nor reduced to such relations of domination. As Lazzarato (2000) notes, “Biopower is always born of something other than itself”, as is immaterial labour 2.0, at least in its form that is readily transferable into surplus value.

As always difficult challenges remain. Social networks offer unprecedented capacities for creating new forms of life and new relations of affinity. The question is how we can *renverser* immaterial labour 2.0 just as Lazzarato does with his “reversal of biopower into biopolitics, the ‘art of governance’ into the production and government of new forms of life”? (Lazzarato, 1996). In part, we can answer that question, to this preliminary inquiry into immaterial labour 2.0, with another question and an invitation to further dialogue. Recently in this journal, Akseli Virtanen, and Jussi Vähämäki wrote about the *Capturing the Moving Mind* experiment in possible organizational forms for new politics and culture. They described the combinatory relations of cooperation on that Trans-Siberian Express-based conference as follows:

When we come across something that is right for us, we link to it, combine with it and devour it. What we were before fuses with what we have encountered and become part of a bigger, more extensive subjectivity. (Virtanen and Vähämäki, 2005)

While MySpace may be moving along different tracks of ambivalence, can we not see its users combining in networks of relations under the very same logic? What other potential might be expressed in the pursuit of such a dialogue?

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