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Title: Co-Creative Labour

Introduction for Special Issue of International Journal of Cultural Studies

John Banks & Mark Deuze

Banks Author Bio:

John Banks is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, Queensland University of Technology, Australia. His research focuses on emerging co-creative relations and user-led innovation in the creative industries, with a particular interest in videogames. His background includes working in the videogames industry as an online community manager. He has published widely on research grounded in these areas.

Address: Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, Z1 Level 5, Queensland University of Technology, Musk Avenue, Kelvin Grove 4059, Queensland, Australia. Email: ja.banks@qut.edu.au

Deuze Author Bio:

Mark Deuze holds a joint appointment at Indiana University's Department of Telecommunications in Bloomington, United States, and as Professor of Journalism and New Media at Leiden University, The Netherlands. Weblog: <http://deuze.blogspot.com>. Postal address: 1229 East 7th St, Bloomington, Indiana 47405, US. Email: mdeuze@indiana.edu.

Abstract

This article introduces a special issue on the topic of co-creative labour. The term co-creation is used to describe the phenomenon of consumers increasingly

participating in the process of making and circulating media content and experiences. Practices of user-created content and user-led innovation are now significant sources of both economic and cultural value. But how should we understand and analyse these value-generating activities? What are the identities and forms of agency that constitute these emerging co-creative relations? Should we define these activities as a form of labour and what are the implications and impacts of co-creative practices on the employment conditions and professional identities of people working in the creative industries? In answering these questions we argue that careful attention must be paid to how the participants themselves (both professional and non-professional, commercial and non-commercial) negotiate and navigate the meanings and possibilities of these emerging co-creative relationships for mutual benefit. Co-Creative media production is perhaps a disruptive agent of change that sits uncomfortably with our current understandings and theories of work and labour. The articles in this special issue follow and unpack the often diverse and contradictory ways in which the participants themselves use and remake the social categories of work and labour as they seek to co-ordinate and contest co-creative media practices.

Key Words: Co-creation; labour; cultural work; cultural industries

Consumers increasingly participate in the process of making media as co-creators of content and experiences across professions as varied as journalism, advertising, public relations, marketing communication, television and movie production, fashion, and game development (Deuze, 2007). Over the past decade we have seen the emergence of consumer-created content and processes of user-led innovation as significant cultural and economic phenomena influencing and in part explaining the production of culture worldwide. In *The Wealth of Networks* (2006) Yochai Benkler proposes that such commons-based forms of peer production networks are no longer marginal cultural or economic activities, but are moving from the periphery to the core of contemporary economies. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argue that value is increasingly *co-created* by both the firm and the customer. Today, media consumers, fans and audiences are redefined as “the drivers of wealth production within the new digital economy: their engagement and participation is actively being pursued, if still imperfectly understood, by media companies” (Green and Jenkins, 2009: 213; also see Jenkins, 2006; Hartley 2009a, 2009b; Von Hippel, 2005; Grabher, Ibert and Flohr, 2008).

A 2007 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report titled “Participative Web: User-Created Content”, after acknowledging the cultural and economic value-generating potential of user-created content, notes the disruptive force and implications of these transformations in the relations among producers and consumers. Based on research among particularly young EU citizens, the report suggests that a more participatory media environment pushes changes in the media content industries towards models of “decentralized creativity” and “organizational innovation”. Co-creative activities of producers and consumers in constantly shifting roles challenge and reshape our understanding of how the media work, and generate exciting new ways of creating and marketing compelling content and experiences. But all of this begs the question to what extent these trends turn consumers into workers for the industry, and whether the labour market for professional producers thus gets

diminished – both trends that primarily seem to benefit the firms and companies that control the distribution of (and access to) such content and experiences. In December 2006 *Time Magazine* celebrated the millions of people contributing to social network platforms that draw on user-created content such as Youtube, Wikipedia and MySpace by announcing ‘You’ as the person of the year. But this creative participation was not figured as simply play, consumption or entertainment. The *Time* article noted that these activities position creative consumers as “working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game” (Grossman, 2006). It is in this particular context of work and labour that we seek to address the shifts and transformations in recent years, occurring across all major media content industries, from the production of content to the increasingly interlinked control of distribution and provision of access (Schiller, 2000; Miller et al, 2005). For this special issue on “Co-creative Labour” we bring together research from a variety of disciplines and perspectives that aims to come to grips with the conditions and opportunities of consumer co-creative practices through the frameworks and perspectives of labour and work.

Understanding and analysing the practices of media consumers as a form of labour is not new. Dallas Smyth (1981) and Miller et al. (2001), for example, describe how the attention and activity of consumers generates value for the media industries, and they use the category of labour to frame the politics that shape these exchanges. In the context of new media, Lev Manovich (2001) argues that a defining feature of new media digital objects includes a mode of representation in which we are interpellated as users rather than just viewers or readers (16-17). He then proceeds to suggest that these features of new media objects encourage an overlap between producers and users and asks how these dynamics are perhaps functioning to shift labour from the company to the customer and may therefore indicate a significant change in the relationship between the domains of work and leisure, the professional and the amateur (44, 199). Manovich, however, does not assume that these shifts in the identity of consumers and producers are in any sense necessarily liberating, democratising

or exploitative. He carefully opens for our consideration a terrain of difficult and demanding questions without finally resolving or settling them.

Much of this co-creative activity takes place in the context of commercial platforms and media products owned or controlled by global new media companies, such as Google, Sony, Electronic Arts, and Yahoo!; user-created content gets deliberately incorporated into the practices and products of these media companies – and not necessarily wholeheartedly embraced by the professionals involved (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008; Banks 2009). Critical scholars propose that rather than only constituting greater consumer agency, the harnessing of user-created content by media businesses involves the extraction of surplus value from the unpaid labour of the consumer co-creators as a form of outsourcing, and may therefore contribute to the precarious employment conditions of professional creatives (Terranova, 2000; Scholz, 2008). Andrew Ross (2009: 22) argues that in social network content production platforms such as Youtube, Flickr, Twitter and MySpace “the burden of productive waged labor is increasingly transferred to users or consumers” and asks us to consider what happens to labour and the labour conditions of professional creatives in the context of amateur created content. Ross comments that this “free or cut-price content” is

... a clear threat to the livelihoods of professional creatives whose prices are driven down by, or who simply cannot compete with, the commercial mining of these burgeoning, discount alternatives.”

(2009:22)

By framing this activity as “work” questions are raised about the motivations and incentives of the consumer participants. Why are they contributing content to these commercial platform providers? Are they in effect working for free? Is this an outsourcing strategy through which media enterprises harness the surplus value generated by the work of these consumers-turned-producers? If so, are such media enterprises exploiting activities that more properly belong to a non-market and non-commercial gift-economy?

At the core of these transformations and disruptions associated with co-creative relationships is the question and problem of the participants' identities. What are the modes of agency constituted and produced through these relationships that blur and unsettle the division between media production and consumption? Furthermore, if we define these co-creative activities as a form of labour, then what are the implications and impacts of these practices on the working conditions and professional identities of people employed in the creative industries? User-created content may well disrupt the relations of cultural production that defined the broadcast era by unsettling the expertise, employment, and identities of established media and knowledge professions. Consumer co-creative participation today is part of media professionals' every day work environment – whether they like it or not. Their work practices and routines are unsettled and challenged by the need to integrate and involve increasingly demanding and unruly users in the process of making and circulating media content. The very identity of professional media workers is therefore at stake in these co-creative media networks (Deuze 2007 and 2009). The success of media production may increasingly rely on effectively combining and coordinating the various forms of expertise possessed by both professional media workers and creative citizen-consumers, not displacing one with the other. This requires media companies to both recognize and respect the contribution of media consumers' expertise in the context of a co-creative relationship for mutual benefit (Banks, 2009; Burgess and Green, forthcoming). Rather than a zero sum game in which a gain for participatory consumers is figured as a loss for professional creatives, can these co-creative dynamics be more helpfully approached as a non-zero sum game growing benefits and opportunities for all participants?

Scholarly perspectives on user-created content and its circulation within social networks generally fall along classical *development* versus *dependency* theories, as much work can be characterized by debates and discussions between those

scholars emphasising consumer empowerment and recognition of fandom, and those who tend to be more sceptical of the unequal power relationships that remain between a handful of media corporations and the multitude of consumers. Authors such as Jenkins (2006), Bruns (2008), Hartley (2009a, 2009b) and Benkler (2006) generally foreground the democratising potential of this increased user participation, although in very different ways; they suggest that participatory culture trends may empower consumers by providing them with control over media content. Jenkins (2006: 19), for example, argues that

convergence requires media companies to rethink old assumptions about what it means to consume media, assumptions that shape both programming and marketing decisions media producers are responding to these newly empowered consumers in contradictory ways, sometimes encouraging change, sometimes resisting what they see as renegade behavior. And consumers, in turn, are perplexed by what they see as mixed signals about how much and what kinds of participation they can enjoy.”

Authors such as Terranova (2004), Scholz (2008), Scholz and Lovink (2007), and Andrew Ross (2009), however, are concerned that such assessments overlook the political economy implications of media companies’ endeavours to extract considerable economic value from these consumer participatory practices.

Critical perspectives on the use of creative users are often proposed and explored in terms of labour and work. Allen (2008), for example, argues that these participatory culture relations advanced under the catch-phrase Web 2.0 “validates a kind of advanced, promotional entrepreneurial capitalism that binds users to profit-making service providers via the exploitation of those users’ immaterial labour”. Questions are also raised about the characteristics and nature of this subjectivity or identity constituted through our participations in these co-creative networks. Are these participations generating compliant and flexible neo-liberal working subjects, well suited to the demands and requirements of a post-industrial, informational and networked global capitalism?

Kylie Jarrett (2008) provocatively suggests that “participatory media can thus be associated with the *production* of flexible subjectivities, aligned with the needs of the culturally intensive capitalist industries associated with neoliberalism or advanced liberal economies”.

These co-creative relationships, however, cannot easily be reduced to one of simple manipulation at the hands of corporations and firms, and critics such as Ross and Jarrett seldom reduce the problem to one of straightforward exploitation. In *No Collar: The Humane Workplace and its Hidden Cost*, an ethnography of Razorfish, a new media company in New York’s Silicon Alley, Ross (2003) offers a compelling study of the informational economy workplace. He maintains the tensions, uncertainties and contradictions in the creative workers accounts of both the potential to reinvent the meanings and experiences of work in a more creative and empowering direction, alongside the realisation that this simultaneously may explain the fact that people find themselves often working incredibly long hours, invading and disrupting their non-work lives. Ross describes the problem that as work becomes “sufficiently humane, we are likely to do far too much of it, and it usurps an unacceptable portion of our lives” (225). The strength of this account is that it foregrounds the participants’ complex negotiations of how the meanings, values and experiences of work and labour are changed and unsettled. In this context, Ross also notes that companies benefit from this blurring of work and leisure as they draw on the digital content produced by the “voluntary labor of amateur users” (217).

Even a cursory reading of Terranova’s much cited article, which is a key reference for many of the articles in this special edition, “Free Labour: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy”(2000; 2004) finds that she foregrounds tensions and contradictions as these “productive activities ... are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited” (2004: 216). She carefully maintains the complexities shaping co-creative relations by pointing out that this affective labour is neither directly produced by capital, nor developed as a direct

response to the needs of capital. The process should not be understood as a straightforward incorporation or appropriation of the free labour of an otherwise authentic fan culture. Rather, as Terranova proposes, these dynamics reconfiguring relations between production and consumption are played out within a field that “is always and already capitalism”; they are immanent to the networks of informational capitalism (2004: 80). This free labour has not been seamlessly appropriated but voluntarily given. The relations are much more nuanced and complex than the language of manipulation or exploitation suggests. Terranova writes “... such processes are not created outside capital and then reappropriated by capital, but are the results of a complex history where the relation between labour and capital is mutually constitutive, entangled and crucially forged during the crisis of Fordism” (2004: 94).

The complex history that Terranova refers to should also remind us of the disciplinary and institutional history and politics through which these categories of labour and work are articulated to the problem of co-creative praxis. A pressing issue in all of this is whether these particular theorisations of labour and work provide us with explanatory traction and power as we grapple with the various problems associated with co-creative media relations. Transformations in the relations among media producers and consumers, as well as between professionals and amateurs, may indicate a profound shift in which our frameworks and categories of analysis (such as the traditional labour theory of value) that worked well in the context of an industrial media economy are less helpful than before (Banks and Humphreys, 2008). Even after taking into account that ideas of immaterial labour, affective labour, free labour and precarious labour have been reworked through an engagement with the work of theorists such as Maurizio Lazzarato and Hardt and Negri, one has to question to what extent such reworkings give us precise tools to come to grips with the ongoing transformations in post-industrial and network capitalism.¹ As Mark Poster (2006) suggests, neo-Marxist production-based models of the economy may in the end

simply and comfortably return the critique of capital to the labour process although that process is now expanded and redefined.

Part of the problem in all of this is perhaps the critical imperative itself. These critical approaches often position consumer participants as in some sense unaware that their participation is a productive practice from which economic value is extracted. If the participants express their pleasure or enjoyment in these exchanges this is then cited as just further evidence of their seduction in which the affective works to perhaps even more effectively entangle consumers in these webs of corporate servitude (Jarrett, 2008; Scholz, 2008). In their analysis of the videogames industry, Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter (2003) argue that celebratory accounts of the democratisation of producer-user relationships too conveniently overlook the complexities and contradictions surrounding the interests of corporations and consumers. In their analysis the gamers are “at best, only very partially aware” (19) of these manipulative commercial and promotional dynamics. They add that, “Indeed, one of the main objectives of the games industry is to make sure that the player does not reflect on these forces” (19). Their central argument is that any empowering democratising or participatory potential is “shaped, contained, controlled, and channelled within the long-standing logic of a commercial marketplace dedicated to the profit-maximizing sale of cultural and technological commodities” (21). In all of this the critic seems to be guaranteed a position above the fray and blessed with an ability that is denied to the participants themselves, of seeing through the charade and identifying the ‘real’ nature of the unfolding relations. Even the far more nuanced account by Andrew Ross in *No Collar* (2003) uses this rhetoric of blindness – most explicitly in the book’s subtitle referring to a “hidden cost”: hidden to all but the critical scholarly observer. The implication would seem to be that the account of the critical ethnographer reveals or discloses these costs that would otherwise remain undiscovered. The critical imperative can work to reduce the actors to informants who need to be disciplined and taught what they really are and what the contexts really are in which they are situated. At the crux of this

kind of analysis is a traditional understanding of the academic as uncovering what is going on – lifting the veil from the eyes of otherwise hapless participants. Such critical stances and posturing often tell us very little about the material complexities, tensions and opportunities of these co-creative practices. The rhetoric of opposition and resistance can all too often ignore that it is precisely through these commercial networks that both consumers and media professionals explore the possibilities for participatory empowerment and emancipation (Hartley, 2009b).

It must be clear that co-creative relationships in the global cultural economy of the media industries are a significant object of investigation, and that one needs to be aware of both the promises and pitfalls of deploying perspectival frameworks that are grounded in more or less traditional theories of value, markets, and labour. As guest editors of this special issue we do not claim to represent a synthesis to such narrowly conceived and problematic oppositions between political economy critical analysis and neo-liberal or neo-classical equilibrium economics. Nor do we want to reduce the critical eye of the academic to one that functions solely to reify the privileged position of the observer over the observed. We do advocate, however, an approach to producer-consumer collaboration in the creative industries that maps the various iterations of such co-creative practices with an open eye to what these activities in fact bring to the people involved. We also need to be attentive to the capacities and competencies of the participants, both professional and non-professional, commercial and non-commercial, to negotiate and navigate the possibilities of these emerging co-creative relationships for *mutual benefit*. One direct consequence of such a perspective is the realisation that what tends to drive media professionals in their work – peer review, reputation metrics, and a manufactured authenticity (Nixon, 2006) – may not necessarily differ all that much from what fans, prosumers, produsers, or Pro-Ams claim their motivations are.ⁱⁱ This suggests that the categories of capitalism (such as value-added, monetary gain, market size and audience) perhaps are not the most useful

concepts when trying to put the phenomena under investigation in this special issue in a meaningful context. Co-creative media production practice is perhaps a disruptive agent of change that sits uncomfortably with our current understandings and theories of work and labour.

Bruno Latour (2005) reminds us that in situations of controversy “where innovations proliferate, where group boundaries are uncertain, when the range of entities to be taken into account fluctuates...” then we must not

limit actors to the role of informers offering cases of some well-known types. You have to grant them back the ability to make up their own theories of what the social is made of. Your task is no longer to impose some order, to limit the range of acceptable entities, to teach actors what they are, or to add some reflexivity to their blind practice (11-12).

A common theme and concern across the articles of this special issue is how the actors themselves, both professional and non-professional, navigate and define these relationships that we are describing as co-creativity. Consumer co-creators and media professionals are often competent and canny participants navigating the tensions between the costs, risks and rewards of their participation (Banks and Humphreys 2008). As Latour (2005:16) proposes, we should deploy controversies about what constitutes these social relations by refusing to restrict in advance the categories and materials that the actors themselves use. In this way we may have a chance at discovering the unexpected actors and resources that emerge on their own terms. We therefore agree with Gill and Pratt’s (2008: 18-20) recent provocation that when considering questions of creative work and labour we need to pay more attention to the *meanings* that cultural workers give to these activities themselves. We would extend this to the meanings co-creative consumers also give to these activities, and suggest that we perhaps also need to consider how these activities and their meanings can be understood parallel to (or beyond) categories such as work and labour. Our aim with this special issue on co-creative labour is to approach these categories and identities of labour and

work as a site of controversy about what they are made of. We aim to keep the controversies open and not rush to settle them. It is our purpose with this special issue to follow and examine the diverse and contradictory ways in which these social categories of work and labour are used and evoked by the participants themselves as they seek to negotiate and co-ordinate these co-creative relations.

In “Amateur experts: International fan labor in Swedish Independent music” Nancy Baym and Robert Burnett argue that we need to move beyond thinking of consumer co-creation as either inherently liberatory or exploitative, and to develop “better understandings of ... the logics that motivate and sustain it, and its personal, social, cultural and economic consequences.” They demonstrate how this might be done in a particular context through a case study of the interactions between music fans and various players in the Swedish independent music industry. Baym and Burnett foreground how the fans understand and negotiate the various tensions and contradictions between the costs, rewards and risks of their co-creative practice.

Hector Postigo continues his earlier work analysing the case of America Online volunteers (AOL) in “America Online Volunteers: Lessons from an Early Co-Production Community” to critically examine debates about immaterial and free labour. He considers the various factors that contributed to the success of the co-productive relationship and develops the concept of “passionate labor” to describe the structural conditions of co-creative work.

In “Working for the Text: Fan Labor and the New Organization” Ryan Milner analyses how gamers perceive and understand their co-creative contribution to the process of game development through a discourse analysis of material from the official *Fallout 3* forum. He argues that fans readily acknowledge that this labor is uncompensated, but regard their loyalties as resting with the text rather than with the game development company. He proposes that the concept of the New Organization – harnessing the power and connectivity of self-motivated

knowledge workers providing immaterial labour - provides a fresh understanding of co-creative labour.

In “The Mediation is the Message: Italian Regionalization of US TV Series as Co-creational Work”, Luca Barra offers a study of the role of co-creational labour in adapting and translating media products for Italian consumers. He carefully describes the co-creative production routines that contribute to this process of “Italianization” and how they mediate the meanings of the texts. Barra argues that this co-creational practice produces a new text through the professional practices of the traditional dubbing system and grassroots fansubbing communities.

Mervi Pantti and Piet Bakker describe how professional journalists in the Netherlands are negotiating and responding to the increasing co-creative phenomenon of citizens participating in the provision of media content. In “Misfortunes, and sunsets: Non-professional images in Dutch news media” they unpack the implications of non-professionals increasingly supplying news media organizations with photo and video materials. They carefully examine how professional journalists assess the value of amateur content, and they also address the journalists’ understanding of the impacts that these co-creative practices may have on professional journalistic practice.

In her essay “All for Love: The Corn Fandom, Prosumers, and the Chinese Way of Creating a Super Star” Ling Yang explores the way fans of the Mainland China artist Li Yuchun, winner of the 2005 season of the immensely popular reality television show *Super Girl*, reflect on and give meaning to their so-called ‘Corn’ fandom as both supporting a female singer’s aspirations to become a superstar without being dependent on the favors of a male-dominated corporate culture industry, as well as contributing to the commercial success of that very same industry. Yang even explores how the fans at some point discuss the option of forming corporation themselves, thereby challenging the control of the major

players in the entertainment industry – while at the same time reproducing the same power structures of that industry.

These articles (and the many more that were submitted for review and inclusion in our special issue) offer an inspiring and exciting look at participatory media cultures around the world in a wide variety of media. All of the authors successfully refuse to be sucked in by either critical detachment or fan-like embrace, nor by either development or dependency theories of co-creation. Instead, this special issue stirs the pot of controversies around co-creative practices, which may lead to more nuanced, rich, and fun work in the currently exploding field of study in media, cultural, and creative industries.

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ⁱ See the recent issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* 2008 25(7-8) for a series of articles that discuss and analyse the ideas of precarious labour and immaterial labour in the context of cultural work. Rosalind Gill's and Andy Pratt's introductory article, "In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work", provides a helpful overview of recent debates surrounding these ideas.

ⁱⁱ <http://deuze.blogspot.com/2007/10/fandom-and-media-work.html>