

Working Hard or Hardly Working? A Postmodernist Critique of Opinions on Digital Labour

In the digital age, the workforce has undergone a significant transformation. With digital labour assuming a central role in the lives of many, much of the discourse surrounding online work tends to idealize it. Thus, presenting several jobs as straightforward paths to financial success. However, underneath this shiny exterior, there lies a complex network of skills, challenges, and literacies that often go unnoticed. In this essay, I will adopt a postmodernist perspective to unravel the predominant narratives in Internet forums and in the workplace surrounding specific occupations in the online workforce. Drawing insights from theorists such as Tiziana Terranova and Michael Foucault, I will critically examine how the glamorization of digital labour conceals the effort and technical skills required for individuals to achieve monetary success in digital industries. Thus, indicating a need for those in non-digital sectors to recognize the unique challenges that are faced by web developers, graphic designers, and freelance writers.

The reality of digital labour is too often misunderstood. For the purpose of this essay, I will define digital labour as “the emergent forms of on-demand, paid work mediated (or enabled) by a digital platform” (Gandini, 2020). With the proliferation of so-called digital nomads taking over social media, and side-hustle culture centred around remote work positions, it’s easy to see why so many non-digital labourers view digital work through a glamorized lens (Terranova, 2013). Unfortunately, what most people miss, is that working in a digital field doesn’t always mean you get to do what you want, when you want, or work from the beach as social media might suggest.

Since the 1990's the way that people create graphics, entertainment, and marketable products has shifted away from traditional analog practices and towards a more technology-centred process (Macdonald, 2014). This became more apparent after the COVID-19 pandemic when the vast majority of workers were forced to adopt a work-from-home (WFH) routine. However, once the pandemic saw its end in 2021, there remained several workers who maintained their WFH positions. This ultimately redefined what the modern-day workplace is to look like. While the digital age allowed people to communicate and collaborate without being in a cubicle during the pandemic, it also made apparent the divide in digital literacy. People who barely touched a computer were forced to rely on one in order to make a living. Not only this, but they also needed to learn new software like Zoom. At the same time, those who struggled to find the motivation to work while in the comfort of their own home collected paychecks without outputting the same quality of work that they once did. After the pandemic, many workers who were forced to work from home were quick to blame the digital tools for their poor output, tired demeanour and blurred boundaries between work and life (Richter, 2020). However, what many workers failed to account for in their associations with digital work is the fact that the online nature of the tools was not the root of the problem. Instead, it was the stress and exhaustion that came as a result of the pandemic (ibid).

Between social media influencers promoting false realities about remote work and COVID-19's negative influence on the digital labour scene, it is evident why digital workers must fight for their legitimacy. By challenging these fallacies, non-digital labourers and their digital counterparts can work more collaboratively together.

Applying a postmodernist framework is useful in analyzing the aforementioned truth claims about digital labour. Postmodernism explores the formation of truths and their emergence through language and social discourse. Thus, highlighting the narratives propagated by media and culture.

Internet studies theorist, Tiziana Terranova's concept of free labour is rooted in postmodernist ideals, presenting a lens through which I can examine the inherent exploitation in digital fields. The notion of free labour is centred around work done by individuals without an expectation of immediate compensation (Terranova, 2013). An example of this can be seen in professions like web development and graphic design where labourers often go beyond their formal work agreements to meet clients' expectations. Thus, extending into the realm of free labour. Additionally, digital labourers will regularly need to prepare or pitch new ideas to clients without being guaranteed monetary payment. It is also worth mentioning that the modern-day job market for digital labourers generally requires them to present a portfolio of their work in order to gain employment. The time it takes to craft a portfolio or build a brand to meet these expectations is yet another instance of free labour.

Further scrutiny can be applied to this phenomenon by taking into account the Foucauldian framework of power dynamics. Michel Foucault's theories regarding power can be applied to the digital labour scene where the client often has unrealistic conjectures about what a vendor can achieve (Foucault, 2012). Similarly, a client may assume expertise when a vendor fails to meet their expectations; or expresses the need for additional monetary compensation. Therefore, this often results in the exploitation of the digital labourer.

As someone who works in the field of digital labour doing freelance work, specifically writing and graphic design, I have first-hand experience of the trials and tribulations often faced by myself and colleagues. As a copywriting professional, non-digital labourers assume that the work I complete is trivial. However, they often fail to account for the research required for each article, the ability to switch between a variety of disciplines and knowledge of search engine optimization (SEO); all of which need to be executed and organized in a timely manner. At the small business that I work for, the owners often express their frustration with clients who assume that their work (designing logos, building and managing custom websites and creating graphics) can happen with a few clicks of a mouse. However, a high level of digital literacy is needed to carry out these tasks from a professional standpoint (Brookfield Institute, 2019). For example, in order to design a custom logo, you must be familiar with the Adobe Suite. Similarly, if you were to build or manage a website you must be familiar with the complex nature of computer programming, know how to work with a database, and be able to test and debug on all respective platforms (Indeed, 2023). Overall, to have any sort of economic gain from participating in digital work, one must be proficient with a variety of platforms (Rheingold, 2012).

The experiences and sentiments felt by my colleagues and myself are not unique to us. Rather, in analyzing popular online forums such as Reddit, the discourse surrounding digital labourers' experiences with working in a digital environment reflects many of the same patterns outlined above. In a Reddit forum called "What seems like an easy job, but is actually really difficult?" several users responded with their troubles of working in a digital field. One user by the name of MacheteDont responded to the thread by saying:

[About Graphic Design] "– Lol, all u do is click a few buttons!" often said in a condescending tone with a side of "Lol why should I pay [so much] for this?"

Sure, I do click a few buttons or more at some point. That's typically part of using a computer as a tool of the trade. What I also did – and still do is [spend] a considerable amount of money on my education, not to mention books+equipment, spending thousands of hours reading about, and practising my stuff to become as good as I am at what I do, because I actually respect design and I wanna be really good at what I do – but yeah, let's reduce that shit down to the clicking of a few buttons as if a computer can also magically explain the intricacies of visual language perfectly among many other seemingly invisible things phew. (MacheteDont, 2019)

This user's frustration exemplifies the lack of understanding from non-digital labourers about what digital labourers do for work. In this case, it is immediately assumed that the computer is responsible for the brunt of the work and the labourer is merely overseeing the production. However, this is not the case. As the user outlines, a great deal of education and technical proficiency is required to work within the digital realm. Although this example focuses solely on graphic design, the idea can be applied to other disciplines. Take for example the freelance copywriter who works from home: they must conduct research online, optimize content for search engines, work within multiple different software programs, manage their time and communicate with clients. Nevertheless, as highlighted by another user named Kitchen_Knight_3456 in a Reddit forum titled "I hate when people assume that working

remotely means you're not really working," they expressed, "I have been a freelancer for over 3 years and despite the growing popularity of freelancing and remote work, there are still many people who believe that working from home or working online is not as legitimate as traditional office-based work" (Kitchen_Knight_3456, 2023). Thus, indicating that the general dialogue surrounding freelance work, often digital, remains seen as negligible. In the same forum, a different user responded by saying, "[f]rom my perspective people who work from home are lazy and entitled. Just go into the office. Everyone else has to" (bradcbrown92, 2023). Evidently, the misunderstanding of digital labour extends beyond the immediate circle of my colleagues and I. In analyzing these forums, it is clear that there is a gap in knowledge between digital labourers and those who work in traditionally analog fields.

To truly understand the ins and outs of digital labour, it is necessary to delve into the specific technical skills and digital literacy needed to accomplish tasks that are often perceived as simple, such as logo design or copywriting. The often-unseen efforts that go into digital work are a key tenet of Terranova's concept of free labour (Terranova, 2013). The time spent to practise, learn and perfect these skills constitutes a form of unpaid labour. Digital workers invest a substantial amount of time and resources in order to meet the expectations of their clients and continue to generate new business. However, the perception that jobs in this sector are leisurely or casual, overlooks the demanding efforts invested to stay on pace with rapidly evolving technology. Thus, contributing to the narrative of free labour in the digital workforce. Moreover, examining these skills from the perspective of Foucauldian power dynamics brings to light the challenges that so often arise from clients' assumptions of expertise (Foucault, 2012). While

many individuals may think that accomplishing work in a digital space happens with a few clicks, as seen in the Reddit forum, this is seldom the case (MacheteDont, 2019).

In short, the misconception that digital labour is easy originates from a lack of digital literacy. By educating non-digital labourers about the intricacies of digital work, the ability to challenge prevailing narratives can finally occur. As outlined by Michelle Rodino-Colocino, communications scholars and students are in a unique position to close the gap in digital literacy in society (Rodino-Colocino, 2006). Researching new ways to solve problems of digital participation and access will help pave the way for a more inclusive public sphere both on and offline (ibid). This understanding is critical for both digital and non-digital labourers to foster collaboration and mend the gap in comprehension within the changing landscape of the modern workforce.

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