

## **What is the Immaterial Labour Union zine?**

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To put it very shortly, the Immaterial Labour Union is an ongoing project which enquires about the possibilities for politically organising corporate social networking labour.

### **Why did I think this was a necessity?**

The concept of playbour is essential to understand immaterial labour within the context of corporate social networking platforms. It refers to the blurring lines between work and leisure. An example is how activities such as liking a friend status on Facebook or uploading a picture to Twitter become monetised.

### **How so?**

In the 1970s, Dallas Smythe wrote that our services, as audiences, are sold by mass media of communications to advertisement agencies. These advertisers pay for specific audiences who, at a predictable time and in predictable numbers, will be paying attention to either a TV channel, a newspaper, a radio station etc. Christian Fuchs and Sebastian Seignani pick up on Dallas Smythe's definition to argue that in corporate social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram et al profits are derived from selling user data for targeted advertisement purposes.

### **Why is this work?**

Marx's definition of work refers to the action of the human upon objects and instruments of labour for the creation of a product with use-value. Fuchs and Seignani adapt this definition to the digital space of commercial social networks, where the objects are human experiences and online information, the instruments are the brain, the hands, the social network platform itself and speech. The products are social relationships and experiences, who satisfy the users' need for social interaction. This becomes 'problematic' once this product acquires an exchange-value. Marx, Fuchs and Seignani see a distinction between work and labour, where the second refers to work occurring under a capitalist mode of production - that is, alienated work. These processes occur simultaneously, and at the same time as the product of our social media labour satisfies the users' needs, it satisfies also the platforms' need for profits.

### **How 'immaterial' is 'immaterial labour'?**

Very dangerous to obscure the material basis of 'immaterial' labour. Most obvious examples: Open air mines in Congo, Foxconn assembly lines. Also, 'immaterial' conceals users' very material needs.

## Unite?

If we are working willingly, though not always knowingly, why are we not organising? Plenty of challenges:

- We don't feel corporate social networking's painful strain the way factory, office, public service and all other sorts of waged and non-waged workers do. However, more dangerous effects we might not feel due to relatively privileged position: from real names policy, which has more than once discriminated against sexual and ethnic minorities to authoritative states making use of facial recognition software to identify protesters in photos users post on these networks.
- Who to address? What to demand?
- Historic challenge: How to demand better working conditions whilst advocating for alternatives? How to avoid reproducing a deeply flawed system by following the same path many unions have followed (institutionalization and bureaucratic management)?

## Unite!

More hopeful perspective. Engels and Marx (who were both harsh critics of institutionalized unions "Too exclusively bent upon the local and immediate struggles with capital, the Trades' Unions have not yet fully understood their power of acting against the system of wages slavery itself."Marx, 1866) defense of the unions as vital instruments in the transition to real existing communism ("they must now learn to act deliberately as organizing centers of the working class in the broad interest of its complete emancipation. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks."Marx, 1866). Unionism as revolutionary praxis which falls under what Vincent Mosco and Katherine McKercher call Social Movement Unionism, urgent under knowledge and information economy a call for traditional labour unions to drop bureaucratic management and join forces with other forms of labour organisation, grassroots activist organisations and other social movements in the fight against capital.

## What is the purpose of this zine?

Strategy used to tackle the different challenges consists in the elaboration of smaller projects in an attempt to mobilise and organise demands, campaigns and actions. First project was the creation of a zine which offers a low-barrier entry level for contributors to express their views on social media labour, but also a low-barrier entry level for those wishing to become acquainted with these debates. It tries to gather existing knowledge and debates, but also to open up that debate and create new discourses of user organisation and expression. It brings together personal rants, academic texts, poetry, photo montages, collages, drawing, etc.

- Division into themes which constitute smaller particles of labour on social networking platforms and comparison of those particles with traditional workspace artifacts.

### **Terms of Service**

Terms of service regulate the data exchange between users and the platform. These documents can be conceived as the data labour iteration of an employment contract.

For example, as Facebook employees we are to keep our contact information accurate and up to date, impeccably curated so we don't provide any false personal information - the more accountable we are, the more profits we derive for our employee. We are also to agree with the use of our name, profile picture or other personal information in connection with commercial or sponsored content.

There is no real option to discuss these terms, either we accept or we are out. While this is certainly a viable option, in most cases the 'network effect' ensures that it is not the most feasible option for the vast majority. The 'network effect' is present whenever a service is the more valuable the more users it has.

Their ambiguity leaves plenty of space for both confusion on the employees' side, and creative interpretation from the employers' perspective. Their own little social experiments are usually conducted on the grey areas of such terms. For example, in 2014 [major outrage broke from the scientific community](#) at the news of a study, conducted in 2012, by Facebook researchers. The [study](#) consisted in filtering out approximately 700,000 users' news feeds by means of two tests. One test reduced the positive content on users' news feed, whilst the other reduced negative content. Not having asked any permission to the community, such study constituted a violation of the principle of "informed consent" and actively tinkered with users' emotional health, leading to changes in behavior. This latter is nudged and guided through page, friends and group suggestions, under constant scrutiny for more accurate market profiling.

### **Advertisement**

Here we go back to our previous exposure of Smythe's audiences as commodities. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and such derive their profits from selling your interests in movies, music, books, companies and people to advertisement agencies which then are able to better 'serve' you. Having Adblock installed might indeed protect users against plenty of unwanted advertisement, but there are certainly plenty of other ways to advertise: recommended pages, corporate pages that function almost as normal user pages, pictures of friends using certain products, contests where you can only vote if you first like a company's page, campaigns sponsored by brands, etc etc.

A [report](#), commissioned by the Belgian data protection agency and conducted by researchers of the Centre of Interdisciplinary Law and ICT, the University of Leuven and Vrije Universiteit Brussels, had been published recently. It denounced the company's abusive practices in regards to the tracking of user data for targeted advertising purposes. These practices extend beyond the platform itself and apply to any website making use of Facebook's services such as Share and Like buttons. These buttons place cookies on the users' browser which then retrieve their online behavior information. There are options offered for opting-out of advertisement on diverse online platforms, Facebook included. However, as the report shows, for EU citizens that just means the placing of a new cookie on the user's browser.

### **Social Graph**

The Social Graph was initially introduced within the context of Facebook in 2007. Harry Halpin and Yuk Hui trace the social graph's origins back to the sociogram, an instrument developed by the psychologist Jacob Levy Moreno in the late 1930's. Moreno's intervention was solicited at the New York State Training School for Girls Hudson where the runaway rate was very high. Moreno started his intervention by conducting a survey which consisted of questions regarding the girls' preferences towards each other - who would they rather work with, or live in the same dormitory with, for example. Moreno then devised several diagrams of the girls' social network in terms of nodes and links, where every node represents a person and every link represents a relationship. On the basis of such observations, Moreno diagnosed the problem as one embedded within the existing dormitory arrangements - the position held by a girl within the community might increase her runaway risk. Juxtaposing these socio-technical charts upon current dormitory arrangements, a better functioning, more productive network emerged.

For the sake of our comparison, we will attribute the Social Graph the role of the manager, whose function is to organize its employees in the most efficient arrangement possible. The Social Graph has now expanded to become an attempt at the graphical representation of relationships between everybody and everything on the internet. This representation is done in terms of nodes (users, pages, etc) and links (relationships) between them. It has become the largest social network dataset in the world.

We can look at the Social Graph from the point of view of social engineering. The mainstream definition of social engineering characterizes it as a discipline in social science regarding the efforts undertaken by governments, media or other private groups to influence public opinion and attitudes. To put it simply, it is an instrument at the service of economical reproduction. This seems to be the case here: your position in the graph largely determines which content you see, so whichever friends you interact with the most will be the ones whose content will be more likely to show on your feed. This is, of course, a great way to combat unprofitable idiosyncrasy and unpredictability.

Illustrating this particular point, is [yet another delightful Facebook study](#) conducted weeks before the US elections in 2012. 1.9 million Facebook users saw the number of hard news stories increase on their news feed, which resulted in an increase in civic engagement and voter turnout.

### **User Profile**

A user profile might be the equivalent to a curriculum vitae. It is a selling point wherein we market ourselves to possible investors - of either time, money, etc. Just like with CV's, there's a pressure for our user profiles to be carefully managed and curated so that we appear in the light we consider the most favourable.

### **Like buttons**

Affirmative discourse, happiness in the work place. On a contribution to the zine, Mercedes Bunz maps Facebook's affirmative discourse to global power tendencies of stifling critique.

### **Emoji / Reactions**

Reactions were actually implemented to give an answer to popular demands of a "dislike" button. Or at least that is what they say. Let's go by parts:

#### *Emoji*

The Emoji ('picture' + 'letter') was developed in 1999 in Japan as a solution to deal with heavy MMS traffic, which put too much strain on mobile operators. Developed by scientists, the emoji corresponded to a single character, thus offering the perfect solution to an overloaded network infrastructure. So how did the Emoji travel to the West? During a promotional visit to Japan, [Steve Jobs](#), who wanted to expand the iPhone market to Japan, managed to strike a deal with mobile operator SoftBank : In return of a piece of the Japanese market, the following iPhone model should include emoji.

#### *Reactions*

In February 2016, the Reactions were added to Facebook as an extension of the Like button. Now users would also be able to react with "love", "wow", "haha", "sad" and "angry" to their friends' posts. With guiding principles in mind to ensure the wide usage and universality of the Reactions, [<https://medium.com/facebook-design/reactions-not-everything-in-life-is-likable-5c403de72a3f#.rl09r82yp> a group of Facebook scientists and designers] rummaged through anonymized datasets of users' exchanges in order to determine the most commonly expressed emotions. Besides, the research group conducted international surveys and even worked with Facebook's internationalisation team! According to Geoff Teehan, a member of the Reactions' development team, narrowing down the possibilities was imperative, for "the more reactions we offered, the less likely they would all be universally understood".

### *Universal?*

Isotype, Emoji and Facebook Reactions have all made the same claim of universality. Scientists and designers working for ICT giants developed and designed what is supposed to be the new international language. With its ability to connect and communicate globally, the emoji has already been used on countless marketing campaigns. It is not like language itself is a neutral artifact, detached from the socio-political structures which inform it and through which those structures are mirrored and perpetuated. But it is also not like the emoji is the language of the masses which has been shamelessly appropriated by capital. The emoji has been designed within that context, and as a global language it is not convincing it should have been developed by cybernetic capital. International, in this case, means western by default, as with many other "international" languages (english, esperanto, etc). Shouldn't we be more wary of profit seeking monopolies controlling - even more, that is - the way we communicate, designing our language and setting up a template for human interaction?

Workflow - 30 min

- Launching the open call through several mailing lists and the occasional social network

- Contacting possible contributors with existing material on the subject and give them the option to either reutilise or produce something new

- Licensing

- Editors, co-editors, possible futures

- My role as editor/co-editor/contributor so far

- The wiki backend and to-do list for workflow optimization (right now the script only converts the wiki content to html, when time is on my side it should also produce pdf (both for screen display and for booklet printing) and epub)

Question/Discussion time - 25 min