CHAPTER 14

“A Workers’ Inquiry 2.0”: An Ethnographic Method for the Study of Produsage in Social Media Contexts*

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1 Web 2.0 and Critical Theory

User-generated content (UGC) and Web 2.0 sites and services have unleashed a torrent of creativity, ingenuity, and generosity on the part of their participants, who daily post, comment, and update content on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr. On Web 2.0 environments a shift has occurred in how individuals communicate with one another through the sharing of thoughts, ideas, likes, and dislikes. The rising popularity of Web 2.0 sites and services is at the centre of this shift and also shows no signs of abating. Data from 2010 indicates that email is being substituted – at least in Canada – for Web 2.0 services (Moretti 2010). In the 13–17 and 18–24 age groups, a total of 77% and 82%, respectively, are now using Facebook more than email. In these digital environments, ‘users’ become active participants, producing massive amounts of content free of the wage relation. What makes the study of unwaged immaterial labour, or what Bruns (2008) refers to as produsage, interesting is that ‘users’, a complete misnomer, are willing to produce content at no cost to the owners of these domains at the same time as these sites generate massive profits.

Bruns (2008) coined produsage in an attempt to differentiate between the industrial mode of production and the mode of ‘production’ responsible for the creation of digital content in Web 2.0 environments. According to Bruns (2008), the mode of produsage is “built on iterative, evolutionary development models in which often very large communities of participants make a number of usually very small, incremental changes to the established knowledge base,

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thereby enabling a gradual improvement in quality which – under the right conditions – an nonetheless outpace the speed of production development in the conventional, industrial model” (1). Various terms have been proposed to describe the nature and dynamics of this new form of work. Building on contributions made by Lazzarato (1996) in his coining of the term ‘immaterial labour’ and Hardt and Negri’s amplification of the concept in *Empire* (2000), Terranova offers the concept of “free labour” (2004) as a term meant to describe all of the unwaged immaterial labour undertaken by Internet ‘users’. Immaterial labour 2.0 (Coté and Pybus 2007), and informational labour (Fuchs 2011) have also been introduced as new concepts to describe these changes. What these concepts emphasize is that the absence of the wage relation does not negate the productive capacities of Web 2.0 ‘users’ nor does it preclude the presence of an exploitative relation. Expanding on the groundbreaking work of Smythe (1977), critical theorists Cohen (2008) and Fuchs (2009, 2011) argue that Web 2.0 sites and services are highly exploitative in that they profit from the work of ‘users’ and do not offer a wage in return for this labour. In fact, the above authors rightly stress that the absence of a wage actually intensifies these exploitative relations.

Part of the complexity of this situation and relationship is that we have yet to adequately grasp how the ‘users’ of Web 2.0 sites and services perceive their place in this socio-economic system. The study of the mode of produsage and of the unwaged immaterial labour taking place therein, then, requires an appropriate set of methods through which workers’ perceptions and opinions might be uncovered. Such a method can serve as the starting point to increase produser awareness of how their contributions are part of a new relationship between owners and workers unique to social media environments, yet still based on the exploitation of labour prevalent in the industrial era. Current methodologies, however, do not do justice to the complex relations that exist between Web 2.0 produsers, the sense of community engendered by the mode of produsage, and the exploitative relations between these communities and the owners of the sites. Moreover, a new complexity emerges in the study of produsage through the intimate links that obtain between produsers and the artefacts they produse. Thus, this chapter suggests that with each modification to the mode of production, there arises a need to develop new methodologies adapted to the particularities of these changed circumstances. The mode of produsage characteristic of Web 2.0 signals the need for such alterations. In turn and below, we detail the adaptations required to one research method of particular importance to critical communications scholars working within the Marxist tradition.