

The Social News Network: The Appropriation of Community Labour in CNN's iReport

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Abstract

In November 2011, Jack Womack, a senior vice president at the US-based cable news station CNN, announced that the network would lay off approximately fifty workers, in part because “new technology in desk-top editing and user-generated content and social media have made some editing and photojournalism positions redundant.” Within days of this announcement, CNN re-launched their citizen journalism website iReport.com. The site had been in operation for five years, collecting user-generated content in exchange for the promise to “take part in the news with CNN.” However, many people simply want to share with a small circle of friends or family. Newly-incorporated social networking elements thus emphasize participation within a community, disguising the generation of labour as socialization and play. By associating iReport with this community-driven ethos, CNN is able to guarantee the production of specialized content and capitalize on the immaterial labour of online iReport communities.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the ways in which shifting cultural understandings of the Internet—first as an egalitarian, democratic space and later as a site of personalization and socialization—have aided, and even been propagated by, traditional media institutions in order to generate profitable user labour. In the past, some academics and cultural critics such as George Gilder (1994) and Nicholas Negroponte (1995) predicted that the ability of users to create, distribute, and access user-generated content (UGC) using digital tools and networks would destabilize traditional, centralized mass media institutions, including television news networks. Using the US-based 24-hour cable news network CNN and its official citizen journalism portal iReport [1] as a case study, this article demonstrates that, rather than being threatened by the productive capabilities of users, some traditional institutions purposefully employ the rhetoric of internet democracy and empowerment in order to encourage the production and appropriation of user-generated content (UGC).

This approach has allowed CNN in particular to benefit from the unpaid labour of its so-called ‘iReporters’ who provide the network with content, often in the form of digital images or raw digital video. Originally launched in 2006 as a basic citizen journalism portal, iReport solicited contributions of user-generated content (UGC) from its so-called ‘iReporters’ in exchange for the ostensibly democratizing promise to ‘take part in the news with CNN’. The ‘democratizing’ potential of the internet has been the topic of significant discussion over the past few years (see, for example, Barney, 2000; Benkler, 2006; Bremmer, 2010; Bruns, 2008a; Castells, 2000; Dean, 2008; Gillmor, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Morozov, 2011; Negroponte, 1995; Shirky, 2008; Tapscott and Williams, 2006; Terranova, 2004). In this context, the November 2011 re-launch of iReport demonstrates that CNN is adept at responding to, appropriating, and benefiting from changes in social perceptions and uses of the Internet. Lila King, CNN’s Senior Director for Social News, describes the new iReport as a “social network for news, one that connects people with the stories and sources” (quoted in James, 2011). King’s description signals a shift in rhetoric concerning iReport away from democratic participation in the news (or CNN itself) and toward participation in a community.

This article uses a critical, neo-Marxist political-economic framework, with a particular focus on free digital labour, in conjunction with content and platform analysis to analyze the motivation behind the iReport rebrand. The new iReport now incorporates social networking elements such as the ability to ‘follow’ other iReporters, a personalized homepage, reward ‘badges’ for individual achievements such as having an iReport air on CNN, and topic-based group pages. The site employs not just a rhetoric of democratization, but also socialization and play, purposefully guiding—if not explicitly—the development of active online communities in order to capitalize upon their productive capabilities and immaterial labour. This model allows CNN to reduce its financial investment in staff and technology while simultaneously expanding its most profitable resource: CNN’s international presence.

Considered alone, iReport’s change in format from a citizen journalism website to a social networking-based structure might be interesting, but the rebranding initiative takes on added significance alongside another announcement from the network. Just three days prior, Jack Womack, a senior vice president at CNN, announced that the network would lay off approximately fifty workers—mostly media editors and photojournalists. In an e-mail to CNN staff, Womack rationalized the cuts by stating that new technologies, more efficient digital video tools, and user-generated media had made these positions “redundant” (Guthrie, 2011). In his e-mail, he explains:

We looked at production demands, down time, and international deployments. We looked at the impact of user-generated content and social media, CNN iReporters and of course our affiliate contributions in breaking news. Consumer and prosumer technologies are simpler and more accessible. Small cameras are now high broadcast quality. More of this technology is in the [sic] hands of more people. After completing this analysis, CNN determined that some photojournalists will be departing the company (Quoted in Guthrie, 2011)

Womack’s references to the impact of user-generated media, social networks, and iReport are surprisingly candid. While the updated iReport still incorporates much of the democratization-based rhetoric featured in its original iteration, the newly incorporated social networking elements emphasize participation within issue-based communities. It is recognized by CNN that a general hope for the democratization of an all-encompassing digital public sphere does not account for the

social complexity of internet communication. Internet users may wish to share with a small circle of family or friends, participate in issue-based networks with like-minded users, or discuss and publicize issues and events of personal significance. The recent rebranding of iReport as a social network represents an attempt to harness the productive capabilities of niche online communities.

The first section of this article outlines the establishment of CNN's iReport and demonstrates how the site's initial rhetoric about the internet as a democratizing space was designed to harness the collective digital labour and user-generated content of its unpaid iReporters. The second section considers a 'Web 2.0' environment that celebrates personalization, autonomous production, and user-led collaborative creation through an analysis of iReport's rebranding as a 'social network for news'. The circumstances of this rebranding and its importance to CNN's economic viability will be discussed. The operations of the new iReport suggest a complex dynamic between CNN and its unpaid labourers in which elements such as community, socialization, and self-improvement become deemed as 'payment enough' for the labour and content that users generate. The final section argues that users' references to democratization, self-improvement, and socialization represent a rationalization of the appropriation or even exploitation of unpaid digital labour.

iReport Origins: The Early Web and the Rhetoric of Democratization

Popular and academic discourse indicates the potential for user-generated content to be both democratizing and a form of exploitable unpaid digital labour. As I will show, these discourses can be mutually supportive; the rhetoric of democratization that some used to describe the early Web encouraged user participation and the generation of content that was easily appropriated by centralized capitalist institutions.

High Hopes for UGC

Whether intentional or not, Womack's use of the phrase 'prosumer' in the earlier quotation is a reference to Alvin Toffler (1980), who introduced the term - a portmanteau of 'producer' and 'consumer' - to describe what he saw as the central figure in the 'Third Wave' of society. Building upon ideas earlier suggested by Karl Marx, Marshall McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt, among others (see Ritzer et al., 2012: 379), Toffler famously predicted that modern technologies would intertwine production and consumption and mend the "historic breach between the producer and consumer" (11) that developed during the Industrial Revolution or Second Wave. In the words of Christian Fuchs (2012), the Third Wave marked "the arrival of a new form of economic and political democracy, self-determined work, labor autonomy, local production, and autonomous self-production" (143). A concurrent "de-massification" of media and audiences would lead to small groups sending and receiving a greater diversity of decontextualized images and texts - i.e. a "blip culture" rather than "mass mind" (Toffler, 1980: 165). This would result in an explosion of creativity, increased self-sufficiency, and the general betterment of society.

These predictions were amplified, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, by the shift to digital media platforms and the emergence of the World Wide Web. Writing in the early 1990s, George Gilder believed, as Jenkins summarizes, that "the computer has come not to transform mass culture but to destroy it" (Jenkins, 2000: 6). This observation appeared to affirm Toffler's predictions of demassification. Fred Turner describes how there was a pervasive belief that:

the Internet would bring about the rise of a new ‘digital generation’—playful, self-sufficient, psychologically whole—and it would see that generation gather, like the Net itself, into collaborative networks of independent peers....Ubiquitous networked computing had arrived, and in its shiny array of interlinked devices, pundits, scholars and investors alike saw the image of an ideal society: decentralized, egalitarian, harmonious, and free (Turner, 2006: 1).

Internet inventor Tim Berners-Lee proclaimed that the Web developed “from the grassroots up” (2011). Comments such as this encouraged a (mistaken) association of the early Web with 1960s counterculture. Many associated with this counterculture such as Stuart Brand, Howard Rheingold and Kevin Kelly went on to experiment with digital technologies such as the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link or WELL in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. However, their technological activities were largely *apolitical*. The creation of a new utopia online overruled engagement with real-world issues (Turner, 2006).

More recently, Axel Bruns (2008b) has argued that “the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into relative insignificance” resulting in a “new, hybrid, *produser*” (2, emphasis in original). Bruns distinguishes his produser from Toffler’s prosumer by arguing that produsage recognizes the shift from a linear form of production and feedback - producer to consumer and vice versa - to a networked, many-to-many form of production, distribution, and communication. He sees this as a potentially democratizing development since produsers can inform public debates. Henry Jenkins (2006) also espouses the potential virtues of this new “participatory culture” and claims that digital media support a “democratic urge to allow more people to create and circulate media” (258). Produsage is thus framed as a kind of political reform that shifts media power away from centralized structures and toward individuals. Both Bruns’ and Jenkins’ discussions of how digital media enable the production and democratization of user-generated content in ways that democratizes media production resonate with Toffler’s demassification thesis.

These hopes for democratization are particularly true for citizen journalism. As Luke Goode (2009) has observed, the term ‘citizen journalism’ can refer to a broad range of practices including blogging, photo and video production and distribution, and commenting, all of which can take place in traditional or alternative (independent, user-led) spaces. One of the major appeals of citizen journalism is that it “feeds the democratic imagination largely because it fosters an unprecedented potential, at least, for news and journalism to become part of a conversation” (Goode, 2009: 1294).

Dan Gillmor (2006), echoing both Toffler and Bruns, argues that Web 2.0-based citizen journalism not only blurs the lines between producers and consumers, it allows consumers to *become* producers. Communication networks thus become a “medium for everyone’s voice, not just the few who can afford to buy multimillion-dollar printing presses, launch satellites, or win the government’s permission to squat on the public’s airwaves” (xxiv). The emphasis on attaining social and political power through individual media production suggests that digital media allow the contemporary realization of what Walter Benjamin (1991: 1064) calls the *Urvergangenheit*, a mythic and romanticized - yet ultimately fictitious - egalitarian past.

iReport 1.0

There are many arguments against this utopian rhetoric, but as the following critique will demonstrate, appeals to the democratization of media production played a major role in the original

incarnation of CNN's iReport. The news network launched iReport, originally called 'CNN Exchange', in August 2006, partly because the lack of footage from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami forced many news networks to solicit amateur video through the postal services (Edelsburg, 2011). Efforts by CNN to collect and make use of user-generated content followed the development of a number of independent citizen journalism portals in the late 1990s. During this time, user-led sites such as *Indymedia* [2] and Korea's *OhMyNews* [3] emerged, followed by a host of blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, all of which seemed to threaten or even supplant traditional news media. Nick Couldry (2003) argued that it was to these "new hybrid forms of media *consumption-production* that we should look for change, since they would challenge precisely the entrenched division of labor (producer of stories versus consumer of stories) that is the essence of media power" (45). Citizen journalism site Indymedia is cited as a direct challenge to the gatekeeping powers of centralized, mass journalism.

However, CNN's iReport represents an early attempt to incorporate the contributions of users into *traditional* news broadcasting. The site served as a digital platform that actively sought out the contributions of users, some of which were incorporated into CNN's television news broadcasts. The potential for user-generated content to be featured on television was the basis for CNN's democratizing claims. Users new to the site, for example, were originally presented with the following message upon their first visit:

Welcome to iReport, where people take part in the news with CNN. Your voice, together with other iReporters, helps shape how and what CNN covers every day.

So you know: iReport is the way people like you report the news. The stories in this section are not edited, fact-checked or screened before they post. Only ones marked 'CNN iReport' have been vetted by CNN. [4]

This language emphasizes the ostensibly democratic nature of the site, the evocation of which leads Jean Burgess and Jonathan Green (2009) to observe that a general "excitement and energy around participatory culture was motivated by the possibility that those of us who have been limited to the role of the 'passive' audience could become producers, and therefore more 'active' participants in the media" (82). In the context of iReport, the ability for producers to submit user-generated content affords a sense of participation as well as the ability to shape CNN's broadcast content. Lindsay Palmer (2012), for example, in a study investigating the role of iReport during the 2009 Green Wave in Iran, argues that iReporters "manipulated" the service in order to "share their political messages with a larger public" (370). In doing so, these iReporters were able to provide personal perspectives that potentially contradicted the narrative being provided by CNN and other traditional news media institutions.

Democratization rhetoric and free digital labour

Others are not convinced that user-generated content actually lives up to the rhetoric of democratization. Mark Andrejevic (2004), for example, points out that participation does not "necessarily contest the media's social power to frame the issues" (121). Indeed, the news organization vets each submitted video and showcases only the 'most newsworthy' during televised newscasts. Participation therefore gains significance only when it is recognized by those who already have power. In a cogent analysis of the pre-rebranded iReport, Farooq A. Kperogi (2010)

suggests that dividing the site into sections such as “most viewed”, “most commented” and “most shared” suggests that the site’s “professed philosophy revolves around the acknowledgement of the arrogance of normative canons of news judgment by professional media organizations” (319). While those submitting videos to CNN are ostensibly participating in a democratizing activity, participation works to reinforce the hegemonic relationship with the television system it supposedly destabilizes; the network exerts authority over voluntarily-submitted user-generated content. This reaffirms the hegemonic relationship between mass media institutions and their viewers/users.

Digital labour is also a point of contention with user-generated content. Fuchs (2012) believes that Toffler’s concept of prosumption ignores how that process “is used for outsourcing work to users and consumers, who work without pay” (143). Fuchs’ argument recalls Tiziana Terranova’s (2000) discussion about the generation of ‘free labour’ in online environments. In her view, this form of labour is “a trait of the cultural economy at large, and an important, and yet undervalued, force in advanced capitalist societies” (33). Terranova cites Italian autonomist Marxists’ discussion of the ‘social factory’, which Antonio Negri (2005) describes as the process through which “work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine” (92). Labour is thus dispersed and deterritorialized; while “work” which had been confined to a certain space and time, is now “diffused throughout the entire society” so that the “whole of society is placed at the disposal of profit” (Negri, 2005: 78, 79). In other words, every moment, independent of location, is dedicated to the generation of labour and, therefore, capital.

Andrejevic (2008) argues that “the social factory coincides with the creation of an interactive consumer–viewer, one prepared to devote time and energy to developing the skills necessary to participate in an increasingly interactive media economy” (30). Interactivity is, of course, one of the defining characteristics of digital media - particularly networked media and their amalgamation of production, communication, and social interaction. The actions of users online are an example of the social factory in action, a form of “immaterial labour”, i.e. “labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication” (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 290). The online activities of prosumers - commenting on a message board, participating in a social network, or creating user-generated content—are commodified. As such, free, immaterial labour is potentially vulnerable to exploitation since it can be seen as a source of surplus value.

In a critique of autonomist Marxism, Edward Comor (2010) notes that it is “perhaps no coincidence” that utopian perspectives such as Toffler’s emerged alongside the popularity of theories from Negri and other autonomist scholars (316). He argues: “Whether or not what is produced/co-created benefits the individual or the group (i.e. society or the corporation), if the purpose and result of prosumer labor is the advancement of exchange values or profits, status quo relations will remain largely unchanged” (Comor, 2010: 320). Comor’s critique accords with Giorgio Agamben’s contention that communication has become a central element of capitalist production rather than the basis of democratic and political processes (cited in Dean, 2008: 105).

Fuchs (2012) notes that one commonly used method to facilitate the appropriation of free labour is to “give the users free access to services and platforms, let them produce content, and to accumulate a mass of prosumers that are sold as a commodity to third-party advertisers” (144). This system allows media institutions to “reduce their investment costs and labor costs, destroy jobs, and exploit consumers who work for free” (144). Indeed, it is worth noting that Tim O’Reilly (2005) describes the term ‘Web 2.0’ as a *business* model that allows corporations to “harness collective intelligence.” Mark Andrejevic (2008; 2009) identifies this process in regard to the online

discussion board Television Without Pity and the popular video-sharing website and social network YouTube. In the former case, some of the ‘TWOppers’ who write reviews and recaps of television shows do so with the belief that their participation will democratize production by allowing them “to have their voice heard within the confines of the sequestered site of production” (Andrejevic, 2008: 28). Their participation, however, generates surplus value that benefits media capital. Users promote the television shows they discuss and freely provide valuable market research. In the case of iReport, the site’s users are not sold to third party advertisers in the same manner as television audiences, nor do they generate value by promoting already-existing content. Instead, they generate value by taking on active production roles in the organization itself, thus saving CNN labour and technology costs. Users themselves provide raw footage using their own equipment (e.g. internet-capable mobile phones with integrated cameras). However, once those producers become viewers of CNN (whether through its domestic cable news service, its global CNN International programming, or its website), they are packaged and ‘sold’ to advertisers - thanks in part to the appeal of their own content.

Thus, while Palmer argues that iReport and other similar efforts represent an “anxious effort at maintaining the professional monopoly on meaning itself in an era where traditional journalism is indeed in crisis”, CNN’s collection and use of user-generated content suggests a rather savvy understanding of early internet rhetoric. In short, CNN was actively fomenting (and benefiting from) what critics referred to as ‘*das digitale Evangelium*’ or ‘digital gospel’ (Enzensberger, 2000), “cyber-utopianism” (Morozov, 2011: xiii), or a “digital utopianism” (Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, 2009). This kind of discourse “surfaces repeatedly as part of the DIY ideology of participatory culture, the valorization of amateur and community media, and hopeful ideas about the democratization of cultural production” (12). By feeding these ‘hopeful ideas’ associated with digital technologies, CNN guaranteed the production of valuable content. Perpetuating the mythos of the democratic Web became integral to CNN’s content production and procurement strategy.

From the start, iReport was designed to allow CNN to capitalize upon the free labour of users from around the world. The network masked this appropriation by adopting a democratization-based rhetoric that borrowed heavily from that used by so-called digital evangelists. The model that CNN introduced proved to be immensely successful, and other commercial news stations and even public service broadcasters in several countries mimicked the approach. Examples include FoxNews’ ‘uReport’ and MSNBC’s ‘First Person’ in the United States, German commercial news network and CNN-network affiliate N24’s ‘Augenzeuge’ (Eyewitness), Canadian public broadcaster CBC’s ‘Your News Community’ and the BBC’s ‘Have Your Say’ [5]. That said, it would be simplistic to adopt a wholly optimistic or pessimistic perspective on free labour. As both Terranova (2000: 33) and Andrejevic (2009: 416) are careful to point out, free labour is ‘free’ in two respects: it is both unpaid and voluntarily given. This dynamic is perhaps the reason CNN chose to incorporate phrasing that suggested a levelling of the playing field between professional and citizen journalists. The rhetoric promoting iReport fed upon a desire to produce that made participation seem meaningful, as was the case with hopes for the early Web. Without a sense of participation, recognition, and power, there would be no “excess productive activities that are pleasurably embraced” so that the users’ labour can be “shamelessly exploited” (Terranova, 2004: 78). Indeed, Palmer (2012) suggests that despite concerns about the exploitation of free labour, many iReporters simply “view the pleasure of production, as well as the resulting recognition, as compensation enough” (377).

Palmer's argument is indicative of an ongoing debate as to whether or not "exploitation" is an appropriate label for the appropriation of digital labour. A key consideration is what constitutes digital and media "work". For Fuchs, digital work involves "activities that create use-values that are objectified in digital media technologies, contents and products generated by applying digital media" (2014: 352). David Hesmondhalgh argues for a 'middle ground' definition of media work that "*would embrace workers whose work is affected by the fact that it makes a significant contribution to products that are conventionally defined as 'media'* - communication products such as television programs, films, newspapers, periodicals, books, musical recordings, and so on" (2005: 33, italics in original).

These two scholars differ significantly when it comes to determining whether or not the free labour common to social media sites and other participatory online outlets can be 'exploited'. Fuchs (2010: 183) argues, for example, that it is exploitation any time the surplus value generated by unpaid labour is appropriated and converted and 'realized' as money value. He sees Facebook (and other social media sites) as highly exploitative because it "commodifies private data that is used for public communication in order to accumulate capital that is privately-owned" (Fuchs, 2012: 147). David Hesmondhalgh (2015: 30), however, critiques Fuchs' interpretation and sees significant "definitional and conceptual problems surrounding the word 'exploitation'". He explicitly links exploitation to "*systemic unjust advantage and suffering*" (Hesmondhalgh, 2015: 33, italics in the original). He thus questions whether the use of the term 'exploitation' is appropriate when it comes to various forms of user-generated labour since the experiences of users on social networking sites are significantly different from "those who endure appalling conditions and pay in Indonesian sweatshops" (Hesmondhalgh, 2010: 271). In short, because contributions on social networking sites are voluntary and require little to no suffering or sacrifice, there is no exploitation.

In the case of iReport-as-social-network, however, Hesmondhalgh's dismissal of exploitation on social media sites is perhaps problematic. Andrejevic (2009) and Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) attest that although free labour can indeed provide users with some *semblance* of power or benefits, this does not preclude the possibility of exploitation. Hesmondhalgh himself sees the potential for freelancers and interns contributing to media production to be exploited. As he summarises

[M]edia representations and education offer carrots that help to induce an oversupply of workers (freelancing and internships are now integral to this) that suppresses wages and operates to the advantage of capitalists...Exploitation does not seem to be unreasonable as a term to describe much of what goes on in the media and cultural work of symbol makers and technical workers. (Hesmondhalgh, 2015: 36)

In this regard, iReporters are offered 'carrots' in the form of community, hope of future employment, participation, or recognition. The net result is an oversupply of workers that suppresses wages – or even eliminates the need for them entirely – and operates to the advantage of CNN, a capitalist institution. Thus, the rebranded iReport represents an attempt to collect and exploit the unpaid labour of iReporters.

From democratic to social internet

The internet and the Web evolved over time into increasingly personalized and social spaces, as exemplified by the emergence of review sites featuring user-generated content, such as Yelp or FourSquare, and social networking sites (SNSs), such as Friendster, MySpace, Facebook and

Twitter. On this development, Jürgen Habermas (qtd. in Jeffries, 2010) has stated that: “The internet generates a centrifugal force.... Its structure is not suited to focusing the attention of a dispersed public of citizens who form opinions simultaneously on the same topics and contributions which have been scrutinized and filtered by experts.” Habermas’ comment echoes the demassification of society predicted by Toffler and Gilder. Similarly, Jan-Hinrik Schmidt (2011) argues that the interactivity and personalization associated with Web 2.0 sites - such as Facebook, blogs, YouTube, and Twitter - have generated “personal public spheres” in which “topics and information are chosen and presented based on personal relevance, not on the basis of institutionalized news factors or, more specifically, a claim on society-wide relevance” (translated by the author). David Weinberger (2002) argues that the Web “consists not of a mass but of individuals joined in an enormous number of groups” (97). W. Lance Bennett (2003) refers to this tendency as a “collective individualism” that forms into “issue networks that offer more personal and often activist solutions for problems” (27). In short, people turn to online sources to seek out information of individual importance and discuss issues within a (relatively) small network of friends, family, and acquaintances. It is these personal connections and networked communities—rather than individual users operating autonomously—that are generating value on the internet (Morozov, 2011: 105). Indeed, *social interactions within communities* drive the production of information, data and content.

This tendency leads Terry Flew and Jason Wilson (2010) to argue that shifting away from a traditional newsroom environment and learning from user-led initiatives “will be an important part of what will define journalism as a professional practice in the 21st century” (143). As Goode (2009: 1301) argues, however, whether “a culture of – or demand for – ‘reflexive conversation’ matches up to the *potential* evident in the online news sphere” is still up for debate (1301). Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green (2012) suggest that news organizations are “still struggling to figure out what their new roles may be in an environment where the demand for information can be driven by affect and shaped by what happens within online communities” (42). The recent changes to iReport suggest that, in spite of these struggles, news organizations are actively engaging online communities in ways that benefit them while constraining democratic potential.

iReport 2.0

CNN’s iReport rebrand is, in fact, a prime example of a traditional news organization learning from (and actively seeking out) user-generated media. The site still incorporates some of the democratization-based rhetoric that influences the participation of some of the producers. An iReporter named Beth Alice, for example, says that she posts to the site because it “gives me a sense of independence to speak out, to say what I think matters” (qtd. in Edelsburg, 2011). While her comment hints at democratization, it also suggests that producers are inclined to create—not just select—content of personal relevance in online environments. The rebranded iReport is designed to capitalize upon this behaviour. Lila King, the participation director for CNN Digital, states that CNN hopes to “create a social network for news, one that connects people with the stories and sources....The new iReport invites people to participate in the reporting of stories that matter to them” (qtd. in Andrews, 2011). Clearly, CNN sees the social networking elements of the site as an important factor in the generation of content. A brief examination of the dynamics of social networks provides some support for this belief.

Alicia Iriberry and Gony Leroy (2009) define social networking sites as “online communities that take advantage of the new and improved social computing technology for interaction and multimedia information exchange” (13). They outline five different stages in the “life-cycle” of user-led online communities: inception, creation, growth, maturity and death. During the inception and creation stages, users conceptualize a community and then select the technologies or platforms that will support its realization - supposedly from the needs of its future members (Iriberry and Leroy, 2009: 19-21). Once an online community is established, it enters a growth period during which trust is nurtured through the “clear identification of operators, accessible member profiles, and, if available, sponsorships from reputable organizations” (Iriberry and Leroy, 2009: 23). Once matured, an online community needs “a more explicit and formal organization with regulations, rewards for contributions, subgroups, and discussion of more or less specific topics” (Iriberry and Leroy, 2009: 14). Without these elements, the result is the fifth, otherwise avoidable stage of death.

In all stages, the generation of content is key. Iriberry and Leroy cite Koh et al. (2007), who argue that leaders of online communities need to be aware of other members in order to develop the necessary “social climate” to stimulate the generation of content (70). Bruns (2008b) similarly argues that the survival of user-driven communities is dependent on the contributions of producers; if there is no production and exchange of content, there is no community. Not surprisingly, then, the newly-incorporated social networking elements of the new iReport emphasize community participation through content production. In order for CNN to obtain dividends from iReport, its operators must enable users to invest in the community so as to generate the production of content for the network.

iReport’s Social Networking Elements

One of the most prominent changes is the introduction of groups dedicated to specific topics with titles such as ‘Politics’, ‘Weather’, ‘Military’, or the Web 2.0-inspired ‘My Life’, which invites users to “[t]ell the world why your story matters and see what others have to share” [6]. Some CNN personalities such as Nancy Grace occasionally post in this group, which works to reassert the democratic nature of the site while fostering a sense of community among the network’s personalities. This development is, in part, a reflection of television news as a “customizable commodity” which “relies upon the implicit tagline, ‘...and that’s the way you want it’ – or even, ‘that’s the way you feel’” (Andrejevic, 2011: 605). In this case, however, iReport members are themselves able to express the way they feel for themselves by sharing videos, photos and stories related to their assignments with other iReporters (and CNN, of course). More importantly, the establishment of these groups indicates that issue-based subgroups are necessary for a community’s maturation.

Integrated on each group’s homepage is a list of assignments or suggested story ideas, which are individually accompanied by a short list of items or questions designed to set the scope of the submitted stories. While the old iReport site also included assignments, the division of the site into groups indicates CNN’s recognition of the fragmented, personal, issue-based nature of participation on the internet. Their intention here is to generate more content. King indicates as much in an interview concerning the rebranding, stating: “Our hunch is that we could pull in more participation in stories if we create a more personalized experience of iReport....The guiding principle we have been operating by is that we make iReport a bat-signal for participation” (qtd. in Weprin, 2011). In other words, the groups are designed to generate and capitalize upon the productivity of producers

in ‘personal public spheres’. Those who wanted to discuss a particular topic or issue might have done so through digital platforms such as Facebook or Twitter which allow them to easily connect with others already discussing that topic. Essentially, these social networks provide a ready-made community of interested subjects. The new iReport seeks to offer that same opportunity, but in a controlled - and easily mined - environment. Here, one can see the conflation of production, communication, and social interaction in the ‘complex machine’ of the social factory.

The changes to iReport can encourage production from those that have a desire to engage with particular social issues. An iReporter with the name lisahilton, for example, a self-described ‘Lyme Disease Activist’ [7], posted four iReports to the site within a month of joining in mid-May 2013. All four of her contributions concern Lyme disease awareness and two of her iReports have been featured on CNN. However, online participation and the production of user-generated content are often driven by less political or principled reasons. José van Dijck (2009) notes, for example, that “[m]any contributors to UGC sites are enthusiasts who make home videos for a small circle of family and friends” (51). This idea is something that the iReport redesign seems to recognize. Borrowing from Facebook and Twitter, iReporters can now ‘follow’ other site members, giving them another avenue to foster relationships and, in turn, providing them with a personal circle of people with whom they can share their work. Users are also provided with a new personal homepage that displays content based upon the iReporter’s group membership, which serves to reinforce feelings of community.

The new profile page also allows iReporters to put up information such as hobbies and profession, as well as “measures of an iReporter’s reputation within the community and stats like page views, the number of stories vetted for CNN, and how many followers they have” (Andrews, 2011). This resembles the observations of Fuchs (2012) and Alison Hearn (2008) in regard to social networking sites such as Facebook. There, users freely share information about themselves in order to establish a public persona and enable connections to others, a process Hearn calls the “phenomenon of self-branding” (210). She argues that self-branding “must always involve some form of labor in order to create a public persona that might be of practical or relational use” (Hearn, 2008: 213). Vincent Manzerolle (2010) argues that digital labour “increasingly demand[s] the maintenance of digital identities and social networks as a function of the highly competitive categories of so-called ‘creative’, ‘intellectual’ and ‘affective’ labor” (461). In other words, community building and socializing online are simply other forms of free labour that can be exploited. The relational and social aspects that Hearn and Manzerolle mention are increasingly important elements of the online economic environment. Self-branding not only augments the value of a user’s free labour by imbuing it with cultural capital, it also enables active participation in various communities.

An informal browse through these profiles reveals that a substantial number of iReporters describe themselves as freelance journalists or photographers, journalism students, or merely photo or video hobbyists. This suggests that some see participation in iReport as an opportunity to experiment and improve skills, while receiving support and constructive feedback from the community. It also appears that some freely provide labour in exchange for potential future earnings. For these participants, there is *future* value in participation, even if it is ultimately unrealized. Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas F. Corrigan (2013) refer to this type of participation as “hope labor”, and argue that the perceived future benefits of online, communal labour is “an understated motivation for social production” (10). The self-descriptions of iReporters validate this

notion even as they problematize the idea that user-generated content equates with the democratization of media production. Those iReporters who view online participation as providing a springboard for later professional engagement want to climb the established media hierarchy rather than subvert it. Here, it is important to appreciate that the free labour of these iReporters reduces the need for CNN to hire photographers, videographers, and journalists.

At the same time, a large number of personal profiles describe participation as a source of adventure, entertainment, or fun. An iReporter named Chris Morrow, a self-described “#1 CNN iReport SuperStar for many years”, lists her sole interest as “ADVENTURE!!!”, but she also lists her profession as “Freelance PhotoJournalist”. Others are invited to e-mail her with story ideas and are asked to “check out a girl documenting the world” and follow her profile [8]. With its complex juxtaposition of sociability, play, and professional practice, the new iReport increasingly resembles the professional social networking sites chronicled by John T. Caldwell (2011). These sites emerged once an abundance of freely available user generated content began to affect professional workflows and “displace the oversupply of film/video professionals into online activities and worlds that are already well travelled by lay users and fans” (297). In this case, however, those iReporters that describe themselves as professionals straddle the line between ‘displaced professional’ and the users responsible for that displacement.

The iReport rebrand also provides opportunities for users to earn more direct rewards for their participation, another of the elements identified as key to an online community’s maturation. Users can, for example, earn ‘badges’ for certain achievements - posting a certain number of videos or having a video vetted by CNN. These are prominently displayed on each iReporter’s profile page. The inclusion of these rewards represents the iReport’s ‘gamification’, a term used to describe “the use of video game elements (rather than full-fledged games) to improve user experience and user engagement in non-game services and applications” (Deterding et al., 2011: 2). In this case, content production is not an end in itself, but a task that must be completed in order to earn prizes (and the social capital that comes with them). This resembles the performance of tasks in a video game (e.g., collecting certain items, killing a certain number of enemies, clearing a level). Again, the goal is to encourage production of content by tying it directly to self-branding and socialization. The production of user-generated content becomes a game in which users seek out rewards that can then be shared with friends and family. An element of competition is also introduced through the inclusion of badges, and their accumulation can signify prestige and status within the iReport community.

Community Labour, Corporate Benefits

One can see how the generation of labour on iReport in the form of citizen journalism is disguised as socialization, community participation and play. Julian Kücklich (2005) coined the term ‘playbour’ to highlight the changing relationship between work and play. He was speaking specifically of ‘modding’ - the process in which video game enthusiasts design and distribute custom levels for commercial video games—but the same dynamic is visible here as well. As Fuchs (2012) succinctly summarizes, the term is meant to reflect the idea that “[p]lay time and work time intersect and all human time of existence tends to be exploited for the sake of capital accumulation” (146). Whether or not the iReport rebranding has resulted in the production of more user-generated content is difficult to determine - neither the site nor officials at the network provide statistics - but by associating iReport with a community-driven ethos, CNN clearly hopes to guarantee the

production of specialized content. The news network is then able to capitalize on the unpaid labour of online iReport communities while maintaining its traditional gate-keeping role by selecting which submissions will appear on television news broadcasts. This arrangement provides CNN with significant economic and ideological benefits. The network receives a vast amount of raw footage without providing any remuneration to iReporters beyond promises of badges, democratization and socialization, and saves on overhead costs such as equipment, transportation, and network services.

An idle iReporter does not cost the network a single cent in lost wages, and the reliance upon a global community of iReporters means there is very little (collective) down time. While some such as Palmer (2012) argue that iReporters will only operate if they get something in return and thus make CNN “work for them” (378), the desire of individual iReporters to produce is of little consequence to CNN. The network instead relies upon the social dynamics of the site to ensure a steady stream of old and new iReporters (and iReports) from around the world. The collection of global stories, imagery and footage is particularly important to CNN. As Emily Steel and Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson (Steel and Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2012) report: “CNN International accounts for 20 per cent of CNN’s global revenue... twice the contribution from US primetime ads”. Hiring enough reporters to ensure the breadth of content necessary to make CNN’s international arm viable would be a costly proposition. In this particular case, Fuchs’ claim that the reliance upon free labour destroys jobs is validated. The very nature of iReports’ user-generated content model contributed to the dismissal of several CNN photojournalists. In 2014, CNN announced it was having a “record year of profits”—even as it planned to cut another 300 positions (Sherman, 2014).

That corporations appropriate the free labour of users is not a particularly new phenomenon. What is different in this particular case is the visibility of that exploitation. The iReports that users submit are prominently featured on the network’s website and during broadcasts. This differs from Facebook, which “collects all private data and user behavior and commodifies both, while hiding these processes from the users” (Fuchs, 2012: 147). Social networks collect data on personal preferences, relationships and networks, and browsing behaviours generated by users as they participate on sites. This commodity is sold to advertisers, who use it to target advertisements to those same users. On iReport, however, the process of appropriation is flaunted such that producers have literally become a replacement workforce for waged labourers. The promise of visibility and, now, community effectively limits CNN’s need to provide monetary compensation. These promises act as a ‘free lunch’ - the ‘hook’ that induces users to generate content—in much the same way that Dallas Smythe (2006: 242) argues television content induces television viewers to generate value by watching advertisements.

Just as significant is the way CNN has involved itself in the process of online community formation. Whereas communities on the internet tend to form dynamically in response to the needs of community members (Bennett, 2003; Schmidt (2011) and Weinberger, 2002), iReport pre-defines communities or groups according to particular issues of interest to CNN. These groups, however, are designed to generate content on a particular theme or topic by encouraging iReporters to feel a sense of connection, not only with CNN but also with other iReporters and even the (CNN-selected) issues. The generation of affect – identification with others, the generation of status through communication, investment in a particular event or social issue – thus helps ensure the generation of content. The content generated by iReporters themselves provides CNN with valuable information that aids this process. It thus appears as if CNN is engaging in a form of “sentiment analysis”, which involves capitalizing on the “efflorescence of sites that allow users to post their

thoughts, reactions, feelings and ruminations about everything from politics to their social lives online". CNN then synthesizes this information in order to capture the "emotional pulse of the Internet" (610). As he further elaborates:

Sentiment analysis represents the commercial embrace and reconfiguration of the feedback that Jenkins associates with convergence culture: the ability for consumers to make their voices heard via interactive technologies. It creates ad hoc, astroturfed brand communities, built not by consumers with shared interests but by search algorithms that assemble conversations or posts about particular brands and topics. (Andrejevic, 2011: 610)

The kind of sentiment analysis Andrejevic describes here is most commonly associated with marketing initiatives that use automated algorithms to filter through user-generated content from social media or blog posts in order to aggregate feedback on particular products or brands. In this case, however, the 'astroturfed brand communities' are the groups, centred on particular (CNN-selected and approved) issues and events, that provide a platform through which people can share those 'thoughts, reactions, feeling and ruminations'. In return, CNN offers its users token benefits and rewards for their social participation while it capitalizes on the production of those communities.

Furthermore, the prominent relationship between CNN and iReport, something that was deemphasized early in iReport's existence, negates the need for the sponsorships from reputable organizations that Iriberry and Leroy argue are beneficial in an online community's growth stage. Social relationships are as much a prerequisite for the production of immaterial labour as an outcome of it - but the diversity of thought and opinion that demassification is supposed to generate is both curtailed and moulded in ways that benefit CNN (particularly through its institution of iReport groups and assignments). Thus, while Palmer (2012: 377), citing Terranova (2004: 77), argues that free labour "does not happen simply 'because capital wants [it] to,' but because of a 'desire for affective and cultural production which [is] none the less real because [it] is socially shaped", the re-branded iReport represents an attempt by capital to influence or disrupt that social shaping.

Participatory media: partnership or rationalization?

Tarleton Gillespie (2003) claims that digital media "negotiate a precarious relationship of allegiance, rivalry, dependence, and transcendence with the media that surround them" (117). Gillespie's description aptly describes the current media environment; that 'precarious relationship' - and the complicated role of the produser - is evident in the evolution of CNN's iReport into a social network. Edward Comor (2010) summarizes his deconstruction of what he calls the "fantastic prosumer" by stating, "Prosumption's 30-year ascent appears to be more about power's centralization than decentralization; more about the furtherance of hierarchy than its retreat; more about the perpetuation of alienation than a mechanism for self-realization and genuine freedom" (321). Examination of such a process at work in CNN's iReport suggests the same is true of produsage. The network centralizes the development of online communities that would otherwise evolve through the actions of users in other online environments. Thus, CNN is the beneficiary of a great amount of raw material generated for free by iReporters - now numbering over one million worldwide - but maintains its traditional gatekeeping and authoritative role. There remains a

“democratic deficit” that “lies in the non-transparency and over-determination of the story selection process and the incapacity for audiences to question or challenge those selections” (Goode, 2009: 1292). In other words, the social factory is indeed increasingly social, but it has not yet resulted in political activity or egalitarian outcomes.

It would be wrong to suggest that all users are oblivious to the economic value generated by their participation; much of the scholarly work referenced here indicates that many who generate content are able to extract other forms of value (e.g., pleasure, skills training, or a sense of political engagement). In the case of iReport, these are merely token benefits that encourage participation and reinforce the status quo. Indeed, even Jenkins, Ford and Green (2012) admit that the production of user-generated content “always involves some degree of ‘self-branding’, which can make the participants complicit in the systems of values through which commercial companies appraise their material” (59). Such a view suggests a creeping complacency with or even *rationalization* of the appropriation of the value inherent to user-generated content. Andrejevic (2004) touches on this when he states that “when the deprecations of capital become evident, they attain the status of a natural disaster: tragic, but inevitable” (185).

At the same time, iReport might point to another inevitability of modern broadcasting - the interoperability of mass and user-generated content in a digital economy that is increasingly dependent on the contributions of personal- and issue-based networks. This dependence opens up an opportunity for producers to counter the tragic but inevitable appropriation of their labour. Deuze (2007), for example, suggests that journalists today must realize that they are “just some of the many voices in public communication” (155-156). The changes CNN made to its iReport platform indicate that broadcasters have such an awareness and are attempting to reinforce existing hegemonic relations by appropriating and capitalizing on these other voices. Yet iReporters could, potentially, fully realize how critical their contributions are to CNN. The simple act of demanding financial compensation for their contributions - particularly those posted to the iReport website or used during television broadcasts - would be a positive step towards ending the cycle of appropriation and exploitation of user labour. This suggestion is no magic bullet - CNN would remain in an authoritative position as gatekeeper - but users would at least receive tangible recompense for their contributions. And CNN would still be able to gather material from around the world to sustain operations. Achieving that goal, however, will require users to view decades of rhetoric about the internet’s supposedly inherent nature with a critical eye. This task is especially difficult when users themselves actively participate in the rationalization of content appropriation.

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Endnotes

- [1] See <http://www.ireport.com>
- [2] See <http://www.indymedia.org/>.
- [3] The international version of this site is available at <http://international.ohmynews.com/>.
- [4] This message no longer appears on the iReport site, but did appear there before the site's relaunch in November 2011.
- [5] See <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18616878>, <http://ureport.foxnews.com>, http://www.n24.de/news/newsitem_55048.html, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/community/> and http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/have_your_say/, respectively.
- [6] See <http://ireport.cnn.com/group/life>
- [7] See <http://ireport.cnn.com/people/lisahilton>
- [8] See <http://ireport.cnn.com/people/ChrisMorrow>

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