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# LABOR MESSAGING

## Practices of Autonomous Communication

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In April 2013, HootSuite Media, Vancouver's most acclaimed start-up and freshly crowned "Best Company to Work for in British Columbia" in 2012, vowed to end its practice of offering unpaid internships and compensate all past unpaid interns for their work. HootSuite's about-face came after an anonymous post on the social news site Reddit suggested that the company's ad for unpaid internships (which detailed expectations of a Monday through Friday, nine-to-five, three-month commitment) violated British Columbia's *Employment Standards Act*. Receiving more than four hundred comments overnight, the post added further fuel to the growing debate about unpaid internships in creative industries. The post also caught the attention of the recently founded Canadian Intern Association, which promptly added HootSuite to its Wall of Shame, a website that lists employers advertising internships deemed to have run afoul of labor laws. Mainstream media outlets picked up the story. The threat of such exposure for the hip, work-as-play image cultivated by HootSuite triggered a rapid change in the company's HR policy.

The circulation of information and controversy surrounding internships at HootSuite is a vivid illustration of the communicative dynamics of precarious labor activism in creative industries today. Many have noted the difficulties of organizing and advancing the interests of workers in the arts, media, and cultural sectors, including the prevalence of self-employment, the project-based organization of work, the informality of labor markets, the spatial dispersion of workers, ideologies of creativity and passionate work, and the persistence of union-averse attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Media scholars have pointed out that an additional hurdle facing organizers is the media environment itself, where labor's perspectives are frequently distorted, marginalized, or simply absent in mainstream media coverage.<sup>2</sup> Despite these challenges, this chapter argues that the flexible labor forces integral to the creative economy can and do exercise counter-power around livelihood issues, including, as the case of HootSuite demonstrates, through communication practices.

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Informed by a larger study on emerging precarious labor politics in creative industries,<sup>3</sup> this chapter identifies and illustrates three threads of communicative activism: collective identity, counter-publicity, and networked solidarity.

**Collective identity** concerns flexworkers' involvement in struggles over the meaning of their employment status and the labor they perform. Resisting individualizing conceptions of creative work and proposing collective identifications are foundational to the building of relations of solidarity among workers in precarious employment within and beyond core creative industries.

**Counter-publicity** encompasses the creation and online circulation of media that raise awareness about precarity, examples of which include intern activists' name-and-shame social-media tactics, the leveraging of celebrity in campaigns to improve labor standards, and the staging of creative direct actions and cultural productions.

**Networked solidarity** designates the role of the internet and other information communications technology (ICT) in aggregating and supporting mutual aid among dispersed workforces. Here, digital technologies are employed in the development of apps by trade unions, the counter-utilization of social networks during solidarity actions, and the use of cell phones within "mediated mobilization"<sup>4</sup> by workers and their allies.

These features of precarious labor politics challenge the argument that "communicative capitalism" neutralizes dissent, dissipates activism, distracts energies from institution building, and substitutes interpassivity for collective action.<sup>5</sup> So although we are mindful of the limitations of media activism in terms of disrupting prevailing ideologies and structures of power (see Qiu, this volume),<sup>6</sup> this chapter highlights the ambivalence of the competences and infrastructures undergirding contemporary communicative capital: cultural and media workers, who principally labor with language and other symbolic forms, develop media, perform, and inhabit a network milieu, have at their disposal resources that potentially amplify their voices and gather their powers on issues that a multitude of workers, not just media labor, confront today. With this in mind, we conclude the chapter by recasting collective identity, counter-publicity, and networked solidarity as practices of *autonomous communication*, which contribute to the building of infrastructures of dissent in the face of spreading precarity.

### Collective Identity

Despite the lingering view in some sociology circles that "consumption has replaced production" as a touchstone of identity,<sup>7</sup> one of the occupational hazards that is most remarked upon in recent scholarship on labor in the media and cultural industries is "over-identification of the self with work."<sup>8</sup> The notion that creative labor is a means to self-fulfillment—and that its products are a measure of its makers' self-worth—helps to account for the intensive forms of attachment to such labor that in turn exacerbate the worry that, as Angela McRobbie put it in a related context, "[work] incorporates and overtakes everyday life."<sup>9</sup> No longer reserved for artists, the fusion of work and identity has become an ostensibly democratizing injunction: "do what you love" is shorthand for an ascendant discourse inviting workers to "believe their labor serves the self" above all, obscuring the systemic division between labor and capital, soft-pedaling





self-exploitation, and disqualifying the legion of workers for whom doing what you love is a distant class privilege.<sup>10</sup>

Cultural theorists and media studies scholars have taken up questions of identity through entry points including professional identity formation in specific media sectors,<sup>11</sup> the alignment of workers' frames of reference with managerial objectives via the disciplinary mechanisms of corporate culture,<sup>12</sup> and personal branding performed online in a bid to optimize employability in a competitive labor market or maintain visibility in professional networks of peer assessment and perceived opportunity.<sup>13</sup>

Collective efforts to contest dominant identities have received little attention in this current of research. Widening the optic to include resistance is important because the meanings attached to and the perceptions of certain groups of workers and types of work can profoundly affect workers' material conditions. Struggles around identity have particular relevance to the labor forces and sectors central to our research. Precarious workers typically lack formal representation in their dealings with employers or engagers, which means that practices of self-representation through extra-institutional channels are essential for communicating grievances, asserting demands, and building support. Moreover, several creative industries carry connotations and traditions that do not serve workers' recognition, rights, and remuneration well, from the "mist of enchantment"—glamour, celebrity, fetishism—that "[encourages] us to forget about the work in culture,"<sup>14</sup> to the accounting logic of the "cultural discount," according to which gratifying work is a rationale for lower pay,<sup>15</sup> to the "ideology of creativity," whereby the cachet of an industry and its attendant lifestyle seem to anchor worker identity more so than the content of the jobs themselves.<sup>16</sup>

These features of cultural work overlap with some of the theoretical underpinnings of identity outlined by Stuart Hall. Understanding identity vis-à-vis interpellation, Hall conceptualized identities as "points of temporary attachment" to a given "subject position."<sup>17</sup> More than being "hailed," he wrote, "the subject invests in the position," which is to say, there is identification.<sup>18</sup> For Hall, identities arise not only from the "narrativization of the self"—the do-what-you-love script, for instance—but more specifically from a "process of articulation."<sup>19</sup> It is the latter that factors into the fluid rather than fixed character of identity. Significantly, the articulation of meanings to positions is a terrain of conflict: entrenched articulations can be disputed, alternative ones forged. After all, identity's conceptual "*irreducibility*," proposes Hall, derives from it being so bound up with "agency" and "politics."<sup>20</sup>

There is no guarantee, then, that the prevailing identity of a sector, occupation, or group of workers will go unchallenged. Indeed, our research shows that the "construction of contentious identities"<sup>21</sup> is one of the ground-level activities of emerging collective organizations fighting precarity in the creative industries. To mention just a few organizational examples, the Model Alliance<sup>22</sup> is pushing for higher labor standards in modeling; W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy)<sup>23</sup> is advocating for the adoption of minimum fees in galleries; Arts & Labor is engaging in solidarity activism across occupational strata in the art economy; and a surge of groups, from Intern Labor Rights to the Precarious Workers Brigade,<sup>24</sup> are rallying against unpaid internships in the arts, the media, and beyond.

There are many differences between and among these groups in terms of their constituencies, strategies, and objectives. One of the things they share in common, however, is addressing a subject-position—model, artist, intern—that is normatively regarded as exceptional as far as labor is concerned. Put simply, these are not considered





to be *bona fide* “workers”: the model leads a charmed life, the artist is fortunate to engage in non-instrumental activity, and the unpaid intern lacks the experience necessary to be a full-fledged member of the paid workforce, and so on. To the extent that such discourses do shape public perceptions and self-conceptions of, in our examples, models, artists, and interns, their organizations must not only make claims for workers’ rights and compensation, but also perform the more basic identity-formation work of connecting these subject-positions to labor as such. As Francesca Polletta and James Jasper observe, “changing identities is often a primary movement goal,” not solely for the sake of recognition, but because the reframing of positions is often a condition for political action.<sup>25</sup>

As noted in our introduction, there remain familiar barriers to acting collectively where flexible labor is concerned, ranging from laws that prevent the self-employed from unionizing to spatiotemporal fragmentation that makes it difficult for workers to establish the bonds that undergird solidarity. Sociologists have worried about the diminishing “possibilities for basing identity on long-term employment relations.”<sup>26</sup> In a discussion of media and cultural work specifically, where project-based work is widespread, Mark Deuze and Nicky Lewis write: “Lack of stability and comfort in the current position one is in present further obstacles to establishing a more or less coherent sense of professional identity. . . .”<sup>27</sup> Approaching the question of identity in liquid labor economies from a less professional-oriented or inward-looking perspective, the research project that informs this chapter has focused upon solidarity-seeking forms of “collective identity,”<sup>28</sup> the source of which is not necessarily a single profession or sector, but rather shared precarious employment status.

We highlight two examples. The first is the set of interventions that were promoted under the banner of “precarity” and the “precariat” in several European cities in the early 2000s. Activists in Italy circulated the lexicon of precarity both to counter a dominant neoliberal discourse endorsing greater labor market flexibility and in a bid to aggregate a collective subject differentially affected by the precarity that comes with flexibilization.<sup>29</sup> In the Italian context, public events like the EuroMayDay parade and the activist creation of “San Precario” (the so-called patron saint of the precarious) fueled a mediated culture of protest, which spread the term precarity and rendered visible precarious workers whose plight had been marginalized by the most established unions.<sup>30</sup> The second example is the Urban Worker Strategy, a bill proposed by a Canadian Member of Parliament in 2013.<sup>31</sup> Informed by evidence of growing precarious employment, the bill, created in consultation with precarious workers’ associations, called for a bundle of federal legislative initiatives to redress the insufficient social protections for the precariously employed, whom the bill labeled “urban workers,” including interns, temporary agency workers, adjunct professors, and the self-employed.

Understanding communication as a process of “[making] common to many,”<sup>32</sup> terms such as precarity and the urban worker are communicative devices oriented toward the formation of collective identity. These terms not only put forward points of possible mutual identification, but also invite workers in heterogeneous precarious working and living situations to explore their common ground and act together politically. Such semiotic strategies are not without their critics, however. Activists have taken the language of precarity to task for flattening differences of social location and obscuring concomitant power differentials. Politically, however, Isabell Lorey argues that the “fundamental aspect” of the European mobilizations that have sought commonality within precarization is precisely “conflict,” including “permanent debates about what





counts as the common.”<sup>33</sup> There is an organizational dimension to this as well. Protests around precarity and the urban worker campaign, for example, have gone hand in hand with efforts to build alliances, however tenuously, involving often-unconnected groups of workers that span sector and class location, reflecting the potential in “certain broad identities . . . to link diverse organizations.”<sup>34</sup>

Tied to the argument that shared interests based on a common structural position are not necessarily a sufficient basis for galvanizing collective action, it has been suggested that political mobilization and collective identity are mutually constituted.<sup>35</sup> The activist tactics adopted by a particular group of workers, for instance, will be enabled or constrained by the group’s collective identity. From another perspective, the formation of politicized collective identities among precarious workers is entwined with affective conditions of possibility for intervention, from indignity to confidence. Ultimately, if identity can be conceptualized, in part, as meanings that individuals attach to or “invest” in a particular subject-position, then the examples noted here are suggestive of counter-interpellation, that is, a process whereby one is “hailed,” albeit in a dissident direction, to inhabit a dominant position uncomfortably, if not always antagonistically—to refuse to “invest” in a position, to take critical distance from it, to de-individualize it, or articulate it to power structures that can be disputed, challenged, and transformed. Contesting dominant identities and constituting new collective identities among precarious work in creative industries depend, however, on practices of representation that we consider under the heading of counter-publicity.

## Taylor & Francis Counter-Publicity

The creation and circulation of counter-publicity is a vital component of cultural worker activists’ repertoire of communication<sup>36</sup> and has been a core method of enabling the formation of labor-based identities. From grassroots agitprop to glossy print publications, labor activists in the cultural industries are putting their communicative capacities to alternate ends by creating media messages that fuel labor struggles. The websites, social media messages, and publications cultural workers produce through and for collective organization are part of an explicitly interventionist form of symbolic production that aims not only to make visible labor issues in industries where labor is sidelined, but also to create a counter-public sphere, “where marginal . . . groups may not only articulate their exclusion from and opposition to other groups, places or views, or their solidarity with each other, but also engage in discourse and build strategies that can overcome exclusions.”<sup>37</sup> Counter-publicity, in this instance, serves as a way for cultural workers to simultaneously make sense of precarity, to amplify concerns to a broader public, and to mobilize cultural workers to act collectively for change.

Utilizing their production skills, cultural workers produce solidarity resources, texts that serve to connect to and empower one another and also to advocate and agitate.<sup>38</sup> For example, *Intern* magazine launched in 2013 to showcase the creative work of unpaid interns and to “initiat[e] a long overdue and frank debate about the current state of the intern culture, and its potential implications in both the short and long term for the creative industries.”<sup>39</sup> In what is becoming a niche genre of journalism, freelance journalists are penning articles that lay bare the difficulties of earning a living in what is pitched as a fulfilling, if no longer glamorous, career. Articles published in media ranging from personal blogs to *The New York Times* rail against low wages and the escalating demand to produce writing for no pay.<sup>40</sup> In a comic titled “Unpaid Internships Must Be





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Destroyed,” artist Matt Bors illustrates a tale of mounting lawsuits filed against companies whose interns are entitled to minimum wage and links internships to inequality, class mobility, and wage theft.<sup>41</sup> A Canadian duo published a zine called *Freelance as Fuck*, because, they write, “We’re interested in actually talking about work, its impact on our lives and the concrete ways we can organize to improve our working conditions.”<sup>42</sup> The zine features a conversation between two friends that describes the material difficulties and ideological underpinnings of freelance employment in the arts and discusses prospects for collective organization.

While these examples illustrate how professional media skills are deployed to attract a wider audience, other solidarity resources are focused more explicitly on circulating information among workers, particularly information geared toward action. Texts include the Carrot Workers’ Collective’s *Surviving Internships: A Counter Guide to Free Labour in the Arts* and the website Art Leaks, an online platform curated by art workers as a “response to the abuse of their professional integrity and the open infraction of their labor rights.”<sup>43</sup> The site collects information to build cases against galleries not paying workers, funding cuts to the arts, censorship, and copyright violation.

In counter-publicity practices, media texts and technologies can be viewed as tools for broadcasting messages about precarity. But communicative technologies are also “the field of action where movement concerns are articulated and struggles played out.”<sup>44</sup> When radio workers in Saint John, New Brunswick, struck against their employer, they launched Radio Free Saint John to independently air music, build support, and encourage listeners to boycott their employer’s stations. This continues the increasingly common practice of striking media workers creating autonomous communication to build community support and speak collectively to management.<sup>45</sup>

One of the burgeoning intern rights movement’s most successful counter-publicity tactics has been to name-and-shame companies that publicize postings for unpaid internships. This practice ranges from using Twitter to call out companies that post ads for unpaid internships to more concerted efforts by intern activist organizations to track and dissect postings for unpaid internships as a way of building public pressure and discourage unpaid internships, of which the swift online response to HootSuite demonstrated. The Canadian Intern Association,<sup>46</sup> which runs a counterpart Wall of Fame to highlight paid internships, reports a 50 percent success rate for its Wall of Shame: half of the postings that are publicized are converted into paid positions. Gus Baker, organizer with the UK’s Intern Aware,<sup>47</sup> describes such counter-publicity tactics as creating “mini-scandals” that attract media coverage and, in the UK in particular, have been successful in altering the climate of acceptance of unpaid internships. When a large corporation advertised for an unpaid intern, Baker sent an e-mail pointing out the momentum and press coverage Intern Aware had gained from campaigns. The company immediately apologized and the internship became a paid position.<sup>48</sup>

And while cultural workers do engage in demonstrations and protest, for media savvy activists like Baker, campaigns for cultural worker rights are being more successfully waged in the sphere of discourse and media messaging than amassing people in the street. Take, for example, the strategy of Dancers Alliance, which in 2012 won a decades-long campaign for a contract for music videos. In a story relayed via a video on its website, Dancers Alliance chair Galen Hooks explains how dancers won their contract, which includes provisions such as access to water, chairs, and proper meal and rest breaks on set. The Alliance ran a video campaign featuring prominent dancers and choreographers, and held a flash mob dance performed to Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” in front of





Sony's LA offices, which Hooks notes was "the most public and aggressive action that Dancers Alliance had done."<sup>49</sup> When record labels wouldn't budge in negotiations, the Alliance and the performer's union SAG-AFTRA launched a social media and video campaign that threatened a "no contract, no work" order, which would mean that no performer could work on a music video unless it was under a union contract, anywhere in the US. The "virtual picket line," as the Alliance called its strategy, worked, and record labels conceded to negotiating the historic contract. The Dancers Alliance's campaign demonstrates the utility of social media for "choreographing assembly," or the process of symbolically constructing public space<sup>50</sup> and using communicative capacities to circulate critiques, outline demands, and build networked solidarities.

### Networked Solidarity

As well as countering dominant narratives of creative labor and launching critiques of flexexploitation, cultural workers and their allies are elaborating tools and techniques of resistance through digital technology itself. We refer to these practices of developing, repurposing, and circulating ICT for the goals of labor as *networked solidarities*. In these activities, the internet and other ICT become the technical infrastructure for constructing apps, expanding social networks, and building informational hubs geared toward forms of aggregation and mutual aid for workers in the creative industries and beyond. Such experiments point to the importance of information technology as a tool through which the recomposition of the disconnected, flexible, yet altogether digitally adept labor force might be achieved.

The "cloud labor" sector offers a striking example of the challenges faced by twenty-first century media workers in pursuing such a goal. The most notorious broker of outsourced micro-tasks in an online labor market recently estimated at US\$1.2 billion is the Amazon-owned company Mechanical Turk (MT). MT links employers (called "requesters" in its parlance) and sellers of digital work through a technical interface that, according to one journalist, is "built on the idea of dispensable labor, which appears when it's needed and disappears when it's not."<sup>51</sup> The "algorithmic management" upon which the MT platform operates has been criticized for enabling wage theft, driving the cost of labor below the minimum wage, and enforcing a unidirectional ratings system in which workers are assigned a score by their employers upon satisfactory completion of the job, yet capital's end of the labor relation remains opaque.<sup>52</sup> It is this panoptic quality that allows MT to turn its distributed workforce into "a system that doesn't talk back," according to Lilly Irani, a professor at the University of California at San Diego.<sup>53</sup>

An ex-user-experience designer at Google, Irani has in recent years collaborated with M. Six Silberman on the development of Turkopticon, a piece of software designed to at least partially level the MT virtual labor market. Originating as a "tactical media art project," Turkopticon crystallized out of informal surveys with the "Turker" community revolving around the question of imagining a workers' bill of rights.<sup>54</sup> The result is a browser extension for Firefox and Chrome that allows workers to create and share reviews of past and prospective "requesters." Turning the tables on the unidirectional ratings system inscribed in the MT interface, Turkopticon overlays a worker's view of the available jobs with insights other workers have provided into employers, who are rated on communicativity, generosity, fairness, and promptness. As Irani and Silberman point out, the technological scaffolding constructed upon the MT system "allows





workers to make their relationships with employers visible and call those employers to account.”<sup>55</sup> As of 2013, Turkopticon received one-hundred thousand page views a month and has been installed over seven thousand times.

As “a tool and platform for workers to engage in mutual aid and express issues,”<sup>56</sup> Turkopticon offers a compelling example of software designed to enable horizontal communication and aggregation among an otherwise disconnected, disempowered, and virtual workforce. Such software and data tools, as with many of the media stunts, campaigns, and demonstrations organized by precariously employed workers, are often united by the urgent need to achieve horizontal visibility and recognition of, and among, fragmented and hyper-temporary labor forces.

A further example along these lines is the *Stories of Solidarity* project, a social media platform developed for North American workers aiming to create a “visualization of narratives” of low-wage, temporary workers on the continent.<sup>57</sup> Offering another instance of software designed for workers by allies in the academy, the tool harnesses web, mobile app, or text messaging as a means for the low-wage workforce to upload accounts of exploitation and struggle, which are then plotted in a developing map on the website.

Trade unions have also taken note of the potential tool for mobilization presented by digital technologies. The Rights for Interns app, launched by the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) in 2012, is a resource for low-wage and unpaid interns to use within and against the unequal employment relations they often face. The app includes a calculator so that interns can see how much they are owed if they claim the minimum wage, as well as a tool that evaluates how an internship rates on its conditions of employment. And while skeptics might point out that such apps harbor the potential to substitute the depersonalized info-delivery of member services for organizing and militancy, another piece of mobile software developed by the TUC is conceived with action-oriented application. Developed for “a future that works” rally in the UK against government austerity measures in 2012, the TUC released an event app that contained information and resources for protesters, such as a map of the route, information about the campaign, and live updates highlighting issues like congestion at certain tube stations.

While alternative mobile applications of this kind are in their infancy, at the unorganized, self-organized, and allied fringes of the trade union movement, well-established corporate IT, infrastructure, and services are being harnessed for the horizontal sharing of information and the reinvigoration of collective organizing. The Occupy Wall Street-derived group 99 Pickets, for example, uses mobile technologies to “revitalize the picket line.”<sup>58</sup> Through a text loop and blog, allies are alerted to demonstrations in New York City. Among the recent causes targeted by this activist group is that of 23 Brooklyn Cablevision-Optimum workers who were fired for unionizing through the Communication Workers of America. Galvanizing community pressure, including a march by workers and trade unionists on Cablevision headquarters, 99 Pickets participated in solidarity actions that eventually led to the reinstatement of workers, who describe themselves as the “Cablevision 99%.”<sup>59</sup>

The counter-deployment of IT has also featured among the vast workforces in China, assembling the very technologies through which media texts and personal communication circulate. Labor researcher Jack Qiu describes how during the recent wave of labor-capital confrontation triggered by the spate of worker suicides at Foxconn, the “tools of everyday connectivity” such as SMS, weblogs, and QQ (a Chinese instant





messaging and weblog service) “were converted, almost instantly, into the tools of labor solidarity.”<sup>60</sup> Workers and their advocates circulated hundreds of poems and messages of solidarity on the suicides through mobile communication technologies, generating what Qiu calls a “deluge of UCC [user-created culture] in textual, audio and visual formats that were shared throughout Chinese cyberspace at a time when mass media reports were banned by the authorities.”<sup>61</sup> In this and other recent examples of media technology development and repurposing by media workers, there is visible the blending “of message and channel, material and social, means and ends, offline and online” that characterizes what Leah Lievrouw calls “mediated mobilization.”<sup>62</sup>

### Conclusion: Autonomous Communication

This chapter’s survey of precarious labor messaging in creative industries is a contribution to the broader scholarship on independent or alternative media.<sup>63</sup> The chapter also adds to the growing literature on the conditions and experiences of media and cultural labor a perspective that puts resistance at the forefront. Researching cultural work from below, the broader project informing this chapter has theoretical and political anchoring in autonomist Marxism, a tradition marked by an emphasis on the autonomy of labor vis-à-vis capital.<sup>64</sup> It is with this perspective in mind that we conclude by proposing that the core themes of this chapter—collective identity, counter-publicity, networked solidarity—can be understood as practices of *autonomous communication*.

The concept of autonomous communication encompasses four overlapping points. First, many of the interventions that we have discussed in this chapter are the work of self-organized initiatives located outside established unions. Business unionism and top-down union structures contrast sharply with the grassroots participation and horizontality that characterizes many practices of autonomous communication. Second, autonomous communication fundamentally involves struggling over the meanings of work, employment, and occupations—a field of conflict animated by a baseline capacity to individually and collectively define employment realities independently of the dominant discourses surrounding creative industries and independent work.

Third, autonomous communication is supported by “autonomous media,”<sup>65</sup> encompassing heterogeneous practices of media-making that support labor and other social movements by giving voice to groups and perspectives marginalized in corporate-controlled outlets, by making information accessible in non-commodified form, by sharing information relevant to struggles, and by mobilizing platforms that nurture the aggregation of disparate individuals and groups in “network struggles.”<sup>66</sup>

This dovetails with a fourth, and broader, point that cuts across collective identity, counter-publicity, and networked solidarity. As post-Fordist capitalism has grown increasingly reliant for its reproduction on network infrastructure and communicative labor, so too has it provided technical platforms and fostered competences that can be turned to alternate ends, namely, to engage in and widen the terrain of labor struggle. Underscored here is the autonomy of immaterial labor, of which media and cultural work are subsets, in the sense that its potential exceeds and escapes the parameters of accumulation within which capital would prefer to confine it.<sup>67</sup>

The wider significance of the sort of practices of autonomous communication described in this chapter is their relationship to what social movement theorists have called “infrastructures of dissent.” Cautioning us against celebrating isolated symbolic interventions or periodic direct actions, the idea of infrastructures of dissent puts the





emphasis on durability and duration, broadly referring to the “accumulated resources available to social movements in going beyond spontaneous expressions of protest to build sustained mobilization and dissent.”<sup>68</sup> In the context of precarious labor politics, the infrastructure of dissent includes but is not limited to collective organizations, from trade unions to activist groups; policy proposals, from calls for more inclusive social protections to universal basic income; and institutions of mutual aid, from benefit societies to worker cooperatives. Each of these components has its own history, which is materialized in and preserved by infrastructures of dissent.

Experimenting with collective identities, disseminating counter-publicity, and participating in networked solidarity are among the communicative activities that contribute to the reproduction of infrastructures of dissent. They generate languages, texts, archives, platforms, and stories vital to the production of subjectivities that are committed to building these larger infrastructures, which, writes Sears, are “a means to develop collective capacities for memory (reflection on past struggles), analysis (theoretical discussion and debate), communication (outside official or commercial channels) and taking action.”<sup>69</sup>

In their autonomous communication practices, media and cultural workers reclaim the tools and skills of their trade to raise the profile of issues that endanger not only their livelihoods, but also those of a much wider swathe of workers in a political-economic climate of generalizing precarity, characterized by high unemployment, austerity, intensifying competition, diminishing social protections—and, ultimately, growing inequality. Amid the seeming cacophony of precarious labor messaging is, then, the running subtext of the binary code of labor and capital. What remains to be seen is whether workers in the creative industries have this order in sight.

## Notes

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