Digital Labour and the Use Value of Human Work

Prof. Dr. habil. Sabine Pfeiffer

COST-Action „Dynamics of Virtual Work“
Plenary Session WG3
Athens, 8th October 2013

Estimated growth of online purchasing. Amazing growth rates, still not too impressing share of GDP - and partly based on weird assumptions (BCG 2012)

Computerization resulting in decline of labour’s share of GDP (from the 70’s to 2008: 6% down) (Kristal 2013).

Two questions

1. Value creation in the Web economy: Where does it happen?


2. Value creation in the Web economy: Who/what makes it happen?


Most claim the Web introduces a new era of economy. Some celebrate profit growth and new business models, others criticize enhanced exploitation.

Both see new forms of global value chains.
substantial changes of work along the value chain

“anyone in the chain who produces and distributes knowledge products” and in between is found a steadily growing army of employees who “handle, distribute and convey information and knowledge” (McKercher & Mosco, 2010).

All those tasks are increasingly interconnected along the global value chain, and modularization and standardization are applied progressively so that these connections can be “managed as seamlessly as possible” (Huws, 2012:2).

This sort of standardization no longer just reaches into the production area, but meanwhile also impinges on the creative processes of innovation work (Pfeiffer, Sauer & Wühr, 2012; Pfeiffer, Schütt & Wühr, 2010).
How many knowledge workers are involved?

Who develops the marketing strategies?

How many spent how much voluntary time on trouble shooting the open source E-Commerce-platform?

Who are the well paid web designers?

What is the value of all Open Source web-based services used?

Who really pays for the deep sea cable and satellite infrastructure?

Who stitches and sews? Under what conditions?

Who programs the interface between Web and ERP?

Where and how does value “happen”?

We will never be able to analyze all these phenomena along virtual value chains.

But we can try to develop an analytical understanding of relevant dimensions. Let me introduce you to one possible analytical framework.

One general principle hereby is: where does value come into the picture?

The locale can split apart for the value generation and realisation processes (in real economy as well).

Different digital locales can be relevant for every step in the value generation and value realisation processes.

1st distinction: digital locale

General distinction

The actual process of producing new values; values that do not exist prior to their production process, before the application of human labour.

Value generation

Process by which the product that originated as part of value generation is valorized and successfully exchanged in the market for money or other values.

Value realisation

We will never be able to analyze all these phenomena along virtual value chains.

But we can try to develop an analytical understanding of relevant dimensions. Let me introduce you to one possible analytical framework.

One general principle hereby is: where does value come into the picture?

The locale can split apart for the value generation and realisation processes (in real economy as well).

Different digital locales can be relevant for every step in the value generation and value realisation processes.

1st distinction: digital locale

General distinction

The actual process of producing new values; values that do not exist prior to their production process, before the application of human labour.

Value generation

Process by which the product that originated as part of value generation is valorized and successfully exchanged in the market for money or other values.

Value realisation
In the web economy, value chains are changing dramatically, but it seems to be still human work which does the trick.

Marxists as well as traditional economists see human work as crucial. So, no news here.

And along the value chain we see more and more plain old exploitation: extracting as much as surplus value as possible, minimizing the costs of living labour. And we see new forms of exploitation using more and more commons.

But what exactly makes human work the ongoing source of value creation and value realisation? It’s easy to answer from a basal economic perspective.

If human labour still is the key, labour theory has to answer also questions like: What brings the Open Source developer to contribute voluntarily in her freetime? Why is the web marketing assistant working enthusiastically until his burnout?
One of many intellectual tools Marx’ theory provided us with is:


Capitalism commodifies human work. Therefore a critical perspective has to start with:

Acknowledging the quality side of human labour

Its ontogenitical core is not commodifiable (but ever more essential in globalized, flexibilized and thus on a everyday level imponderable work situations).

Human labour not only produces use value – it has/contains it.
The importance of human labour as producer of surplus is mainly of quantitative character.

The importance of human labour enabling the appropriation (Aneignung) of highly developed productive forces is of qualitative nature.

Although (and because of) deeply contradictional, the letter – work capacity / Arbeitsvermögen – is the precondition of the first – labour power.

Understanding labour as source of value creation in our ever changing, complex, globalized world and along its virtualized value chains needs a dialectical focus on work and its qualitative – subjectifying – capacity.