Review Essay

Knowledge Workers of the World! Unite?

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Scholars writing about communication and information have increasingly turned their attention to the changing nature of work and of worker organizations. This is a welcome development as there are important issues to address and because it provides some balance to the emphasis that has traditionally been placed on content, including the companies that produce it and the audiences that consume it. These two books provide valuable contributions in two specific areas: the history of information labour and the ways contemporary workers are using communication and information technology to improve their position in the workplace.

Labour that is based on the use of communication and information, or what is increasingly called knowledge labour, has captured the attention of writers for quite some time. In the West, Henri comte de St. Simon (1952) established a tradition of serious reflection in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by arguing for a shift in power to the technology-based thinking professions. His work influenced Karl Marx (1974) whose idea of the “general intellect” foreshadowed talk of an information society, and on Charles Babbage (1961) whose “difference engine” and the “attendants” who worked it would literally power this transformation.

It was not until the end of World War II that a critical mass of scholars focused their interest on the increasing growth in communication, information, and service occupations. These included Jean Fourastié (1954), Fritz Machlup (1962), and Marc Uri Porat (1977) who produced important statistical analyses of the changing occupational structure and their work led to theoretical and critical

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work that examined its significance. It is indeed interesting to observe that in the early 1970s just as the post-war boom was coming to a close, a trio of scholars provided very different responses to the questions arising from the growth of knowledge labour. For Daniel Bell (1973), it meant a shift in power from those who control industrial capital to a class of scientists, engineers, and technical workers whose training gave them control over what he called a new dominant axial principle in advanced capitalist societies: technical knowledge. While not guaranteeing an expanded democracy, this development did enhance the potential for building a genuine meritocracy even as it raised troubling questions arising from what he observed to be the growth of hedonism in Western culture. For Herbert Schiller (1973) it meant not the transformation but rather the concentration of power in a set of institutions that were able to turn information and communication resources into marketable commodities and thereby build powerful cross-media, global conglomerates. These would bring together control over the means of production with control over the means of communication to extend the power of information-age companies beyond what was possible in the industrial era. Finally, Harry Braverman (1974) wrote about the concentration of power at the point of production, as companies took advantage of the immaterial quality of informational production to deskill its workforce by separating conception from execution, giving power to a narrow class of knowledge managers who would use the stop watch of “scientific management” to discipline and cheapen the work of the growing mass of information and service workers.

While this research set the major terms of debates that persist today, there remained important work that was inspired by the recognition that workers were not just organized by the technological and institutional forces unleashed by post-industrialism, they also organized themselves to respond at the point of production and in their own organizations. Among this more recent work, Ursula Huws (2003) has led the study of the gendering of knowledge work in the office and the home; Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda (2004) provide a rich ethnography of the high tech workplace; Nick Dyer-Witheford (1999) describes the resistance of worker and other social movements that make use of new media; and David Pellow and Lisa Sun-Hee Park (2002) describe chains of exploitation and resistance in the division of high tech labour that has remade the state of California (see also McKercher & Mosco, 2007).

The two books under review generally follow their lead. In essence, they maintain that it is as vital to study how workers respond to this transformation as it is to examine how post-industrialism or informationalism has changed work and the labour that produces it. Blok and Downey’s book does so by concentrating on the rise of informational labour throughout the history of industrial capitalism as well as in the more recent period when information technology has been ascendant. Taras, Bennett, and Townsend take up the contemporary workplace, particularly by focusing on how workers are using the new technology to defend their interests and make their own workplaces.

_Uncovering Labour in Information Revolutions_ starts from the premise that we have been far too hasty in drawing the conclusion that the last two to three decades have brought about a radical disjunction in the nature of capitalism,
transforming it into a post-industrial, information, or network society. This stems from a focus on technological devices, “to a, sometimes very explicit, lack of interest in any historical comparison” (p. 3), providing a limited role for labour, often completely denying it the agency that is so generously proffered to consumers. Blok and Downey seek to remedy this by featuring research on the role of labour in various historical manifestations of knowledge work. They begin with Rosenhaft’s research on clerical labour in the eighteenth century that takes up the ways pen and paper were used to generate, store, and move bits of information in the course of which patterns emerged around the dialectic of professionalization and proletarianization. This theme is followed by an intriguing paper on the creation of virtual communities in nineteenth India through the use of the telegraph, culminating in a general strike of telegraph workers in 1908. Again, we can observe the tension between the managerial interest in standardization and control over telegraph work and the opposition of those who would use their literacy and technology skills to resist.

These articles are enormously suggestive of the research that needs to be done to uncover the creation of a working class of informational workers in the industrial era. They are closely connected to two subsequent articles on the making of computer workers in the early years of that industry and to two papers on the role of informational labour in the transformation of the industries that ship material goods. These are particularly valuable in documenting how managerial control and the self-organization of information workers are inextricably linked in the building and rebuilding of entire industries. Finally, the book takes us into the present era where the lines are blurring on what constitutes labour, documented in a study of America Online’s “volunteers” who helped build a major and profitable computer network outside the wage labour system. The AOL case provided one of the first major examples of how value production on the net continues to be hidden, a situation that has exploded in Web 2.0 with Goggle’s purchase of YouTube, viral marketing’s use of social networking sites, and the growth of wikis and blogs. A similar blurring is taking place in the organizations that represent workers. Benner documents this in an overview of unions and worker associations that have taken root in the hostile environment within the high tech industry. The book concludes with a very perceptive analysis of its contents in the context of a map of the literature that demonstrates the importance of writing a labour history of communication and information technology by making workers the units of analysis and using that history “as a lever for wider societal changes” (p. 261). Modestly, Downey acknowledges that the book is just a starting point in a long-neglected field, and it is encouraging to turn to Information Technology and the World of Work, which deepens and extends some of the central issues raised in the Blok and Downey volume.

This volume is the product of six symposia that brought together scholars and labour policy analysts and whose results were published in the Journal of Labour Research. Like the Blok and Downey book, it is interested in examining how workers and their organizations acted both defensively and offensively to structure their work and build their own associations, in this case especially through the use of communication and information technology. The book is particularly
adept at addressing this without losing a sense of the power of employers to set the conditions within which worker action takes place, including the evolution of employer techniques to deskill workers by regimenting tasks, to use the new technologies to expand surveillance of workers, and to attack attempts to organize high tech labour into worker associations and unions or to expand existing ones. But the focus of this book is on workers beginning with a revealing look at how the National Education Association faced hard lessons when they tried to make use of cyber technologies in their union activities. This is an especially important case study because teachers are often left out of analyses of knowledge work, and here we have a detailed account of what academic workers can learn about building an organization in a computer rich environment. The book includes chapters on how other unions are using information technology, how worker associations like WashTech and Alliance@IBM are organizing in cyberspace, and how workers face specific challenges of access and privacy when trying to mobilize in a hostile environment. The book is particularly good when it focuses on concrete cases, which provide rich empirical detail, but suffers when it shifts to the more ethereal such as Mark Poster’s piece on “Workers as Cyborgs,” which is thoughtful but does not fit the specific theme of the volume. The empirical detail is especially valuable because it challenges simplistic but popular views that workers have little recourse but to “just do their jobs” in the face of powerful corporations and a weakening labour movement. The book also demonstrates that workers are responding creatively and that their organizations are taking new forms and adopting new strategies, sometimes aggressively, to face up to a changing workplace.

*Uncovering Labour in Information Revolutions* and *Information Technology and the World of Work* both demonstrate the value of paying serious attention to the labouring of communication and information technology. There remain many questions to address, including defining knowledge labour and the nature of the society in which it is becoming ever more important. Is knowledge labour best limited to the so-called creative workers who produce content? Does it extend to the distributional work of the call centre employee working from a tech support script? Should it encompass the entire chain of production that would include, as Pellow and Park suggest, the immigrant women in the US and the developing world who produce high tech components in an unsafe environment? And what name should replace Bell’s concept of “post-industrial”? Is this plain old capitalism with a new set of technologies? A revised capitalism, perhaps preceded by the adjective “informational” or “digital?” Or has capitalism itself become so transformed that the name must be replaced with another—the information society? the network society? There is a great deal of research to be done. One way to start, as these books imply, is by replacing the very popular question: “What will be the next new thing?” with one that bears weightier significance and not a little historical resonance: “Will knowledge workers of the world unite?”

**References**


