

Interview

INTERVIEW WITH BROOKE ERIN DUFFY: LOVE AND ASPIRATIONAL LABOR IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

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Brooke Erin Duffy is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Cornell University. Her specific areas of research include digital and social media industries; gender, identity, and inequality; online self-presentation; and the impact of new technologies on work and labor. Her research and writing have been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Wired*, *Vox*, *Quartz*, and *Times Higher Education*, among others. Her most recent book is entitled *(Not) Getting Paid to do What You Love: Gender, Social Media and Aspirational Work* (Yale University Press).

Moment Journal interviewed Brooke Erin Duffy, when Ergin Bulut was attending the Media Industry Studies Conference in April 2018. Melike Aslı Sim helped with the transcription of the interview.

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We want to start with your biography as a scholar. What does it mean to be a feminist scholar today? How has being a feminist shaped you as an academic?

To me, it means being sensitive to power, privilege, and inequity at various levels, including in media representations, the organization of the cultural and technology industries, and in the Academy itself. Of course, it's important to go beyond mere gender inequalities [by] also thinking about intersectionalities with race, class, age, ability, and so on. My research draws upon various traditions of feminist thought, and there's a lot of important work being done by newer generations of scholars from communication/media studies, STS, and what we might call "digital culture" studies.

Being a feminist also shapes my experiences as a teacher. In my 'Gender and Media' seminar, I talk not about feminism, but about feminisms (plural) in order to highlight some of the tensions and nuances in these perspectives. But it's important to address the topics of power and privilege in other courses, too, to expose a broader audience of students to these ideas and make their implications relevant. So, for instance, I teach in a communication programme where the majority of students are female; I don't believe this is unique to the institutions where I've taught. I think it's important to draw their attention to pervasive inequalities in the media and tech industries in which many hope to work. So we talk about #metoo, tech industry discrimination, algorithmic bias, etc. and collectively think about forms of support, solidarity, and restructuring.

So following up on that statement, intersectionality is not one of those perspectives that you can regularly run into in media studies. And that has also been the case here in this conference. So how do you try to achieve that in your scholarship and in the classroom?

So, I'll start with the classroom part of the question because I tried out a really interesting exercise this past year in my Gender and Media course. I sought to encourage my students to think about the multiple and intersecting forms of oppression and, conversely, privilege that shape their own experiences of the social world. For the exercise—which I prefaced with the statement that they aren't required to share—I instructed them to, "Write down on a sheet of paper all the ways you are privileged and all the ways you are disadvantaged, going beyond visible markers of gender, race, ethnicity." Most of the students *wanted* to share what they came up with, and it was really striking to hear about these invisible markers that structure their experiences: religion, political affiliation, class, athletic ability, field of study, and so on.

What an intersectional approach looks like in my research is not all that different: I draw attention to the role of privilege and inequality in the media, culture, and technology industries. For the last ten or so years, there's been a great deal of enthusiasm about our more "democratic" digital media environment. At the same time, I've found, many existing inequalities are being exacerbated, including markers of privilege that shape access and opportunity in contemporary media industries.

So, now moving to the book, please could you tell us how you ended up writing this book, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*? What made you write this book and how does it relate to and build on your previous work?

The backstory to this book is that I was working on my previous monograph examining how the women's magazine industry was evolving in the age of digital and social media. And my interview participants continued to draw my attention to the competition they were facing from user-generated content, amateur content creators, and bloggers. This was around 2010-2011, when the blogosphere was still unfolding, Instagram was in its infancy, and nobody used the term "Influencer" in the way they do now—so it was a very different digital landscape. Given my wider interest in the topic of "digital labor," I was struck by the lack of research on exactly what these "new" content creators were doing and *why*. I also wanted to draw attention to the gender dynamics underpinning new forms of social media production like fashion blogging and beauty vlogging; as Laurie Ouellette usefully pointed out in an *International Journal of Communication* piece, "the subject implied by much scholarship on digital labour is male." So to me, studying the culture of production across the social media landscape was also a way to interrogate the promises of "digital empowerment."

Could you tell us a few things about methodology? How did you do this research?

Absolutely. As a qualitative, critical researcher, I find it useful to learn about people's activities and experiences in their own voices. So, the primary research upon which the book is based is an analysis of more than 50 in-depth interviews with (mostly female) content creators across various fields and levels. I also engaged in participant observation by going to a whole host of networking conferences aimed at bloggers, tech enthusiasts, and young women interested in creative careers. Finally I drew upon professionalization resources aimed at aspiring social media content creators—websites

and books and online career manuals. Often these resources encourage people how to brand themselves online, which is a key discourse I explore in the book.

In the book and in your previous work you build on, you deploy the term “aspirational labor”. Could you define what that concept means for those who haven’t read the book yet?

Absolutely. Aspirational labor describes content creators’ belief that their (mostly) unpaid work, motivated by passion and the infectious rhetoric of entrepreneurialism, will eventually provide respectable income and rewarding careers. At the same time, it requires participants to engage in the consumption and promotion of branded goods. Here, I trace the lineages between aspirational consumerism as a future-oriented, consuming self and aspirational labor, where one’s status is linked to their dream job. It’s based upon the seductive idea that “anyone can get paid to do what they love.”

What kind of conversation do you have with many concepts like digital labor, hope labor, immaterial labor? How does aspirational labor speak with these alternative concepts in the field?

So, I am teaching a media and cultural production class this semester; it focuses a lot on issues of work and labor in digital contexts. We had a really interesting discussion about how to theorize and differentiate the various conceptualizations of labor, including the ones you mentioned--hope labor, venture labor, and immaterial labor—as well as relational labor, affective labor, aesthetic labor, emotional labor, invisible labor, and so on. There are certainly a lot! We tried to plot out a Venn diagram of sorts and found that often, these terms come from different research sites, cultural contexts, as well as from different disciplines--psychology or sociology or feminist media studies or autonomous Marxism—which helps explain some of the variance. I would love to see more attention to similarities and divergences in these concepts.

In the book, I contend that aspirational labor is a particular, gendered version of what Kuehn and Corrigan call “hope labor,” because it’s forward-looking and compensated in an oft-deferred promise of exposure. The feminized element (and I mean qualities associated with femininity rather than a naïve, binary idea where women engage in it; men don’t) was really central to what I was finding and is presumably based upon historical, industrial constructions of women as consumers, above all. After all, it’s commercial brands that encourage so many young women—and all of us, in some capacity—to engage in these laboring activities, which often require

their participation in the commodity marketplace. In other words, participants are expected to consume and promote the goods among their networks. But that requires time, energy, and often, economic resources.

We kind of started addressing the following question which was about this temporality of hope labor and aspirational labor. So how does future orientedness and this temporality figure in the book and the experience of fashion bloggers? How do they relate to the future by engaging with technology, social media based on all kinds of privileged or may be non-privileged class backgrounds?

In the present moment of economic precarity, there's widespread uncertainty about what the job market looks like—and where it's going. That's something over which people have very little control. What they *can* control – and this is certainly a very neoliberal idea– is how they can prepare themselves for an imagined future. And that often involves engagements in technology and social media that require forms of privilege—the knowledge of self-branding, and the time to invest in one's "future self." But, as you know, the realities often look very different from the promises out there. I don't want to suggest this stretched out worker temporality is new. Companies have long made deferred promises whether it is through freelance careers, or unpaid internships or the earlier apprentice model. What's different is that the promises of digital media really amplify the investments that are required.

What do you think studies of creative labor and studies of creative industries can learn from feminist theory? Based on how my own research experience with respect to video game production, I do think that creative industry studies has to communicate with feminist theory, not shy away from this. What kind of conversation do you think should creative industry scholars have with feminist scholars?

I love that question. I think as you mentioned, it is central to take seriously the kinds of invisible and devalued labor that have long been associated with "women's work and how these are translating in the digital media economy. Kylie Jarrett has a really fantastic book on what she calls "the digital housewife" and thinks about how digital laboring activities on...

You mean the second chapter on "My Marxist Feminist Dialectic Brings All the Boys to the Yard"?

Exactly. What I learned from content creators is that they feel compelled to invest time and energy in what Nancy Baym calls “relational labor”—building connections and relationships while growing their brand persona. Much like earlier forms of “emotional labor,” such activities are rendered invisible and both socially and economically devalued. Such devaluing helps to explain why fashion blogging and Instagram influencing are not always taken seriously. For women, in particular, these careers entail showcasing themselves physically, and emotionally (as well as professionally) and feeling compelled to express a traditionally feminine subjectivity.

There are larger patterns of rendering certain forms of work incredibly valuable and others invaluable—and these tend to map onto a traditional gender binary. So I have been increasingly thinking about the tension between hyper-visible labor and invisible labor in digital media contexts. You know, how do different jobs assume value? How does this value get circulated among larger publics? And to what extent does this map onto various social inequalities? Take the case of social media industry/employment: those creating the *content* on social media tend to be women; they occupy lower-status and paid jobs. Compare this with those creating the code on social media—they tend to be male (think Silicon Valley), and are highly paid and supremely valorized in our culture.

So, another question that I am interested in is how the whole literature on creative industries and creative labor relies on recurring dichotomies such as pleasure/pain, commerce/creativity. Would you agree that there is this recurring dichotomy in the first place? If so, how can we go beyond them? Many ethnographies will reveal the same two dichotomies, commerce/creativity or pleasure/pain. But how do we go beyond these dichotomies? What are some of the things that we should do as scholars? Because I could find myself seeing processes of exploitation, pleasure, empowerment etc. but what else is going on?

Moving beyond dichotomies is an enduring research challenge, as you point out. When I began the project, I was using the framework of *empowerment vs. exploitation*, but my findings just didn’t fit neatly into either of these categories. The framework was too reductive and failed to account for the range of participants’ experiences that emerged from my interview data. So, then, how can we go beyond either-or thinking to understand the conditions under which something becomes empowering or exploitative? What sorts of relationships or other patterns exist to explain what leads to

pleasure, what leads to empowerment, what leads to exploitation, and so on. I see tremendous value in such nuances.

One thing I really enjoyed about your book is the parallels between academic work and aspirational labor. I feel very ambivalent whether I want to tweet in academic conferences or not to tweet. So can you say more about what kind of parallels you draw between academic labor and aspirational labor?

Writing the epilogue of the book (on the aspirational labor of an academic) was a very self-reflexive experience. Here's the backstory: I was interviewing a content creator and she was talking about the timing of her tweets, and I was thinking, "ooh why don't I do that?" It was a jarring thought: *Why should I care?* But I think it's a reality of a precarious academic labor market that, especially as junior scholars, we feel the demand of the pressures to marketize ourselves. Whether or not we participate in academic self-branding or not, we should at least acknowledge these pressures and their potential implications.

There are other parallels between my experience as an academic and the reported experiences of my interview participants: I don't necessarily need to have robust social media presence, but other metrics play a role in my career--whether it is H-index or number of citations. And while I don't need to a consistent self-branding statement that will appeal to marketers, I do need to produce a consistent career trajectory for tenure review. The conferences have a similar function, too. At ICA a few years ago, Mark Deuze noted how academic conferences are a curious blend of networking and non-networking--much like what creative workers do. I would encourage others to pay attention to how many of the activities and impulses that shape our experiences as academics also shape those of today's creative workforce.

So, finally as far as the academic solidarities are concerned, coming from Turkey, and also seeing the backlash against progressive academics in the U.S... Would you have thoughts or recommendations in a time of "great recession" where neoliberal, anti-feminist, white supremacy has strongly resurfaced? What tools and strategies do we have to improve and expand the opportunities for critical and feminist scholarship? What is to be done?

What is to be done? That's the million-dollar question! For many critical scholars, myself included, there is a lot of room to critique powerful social media platforms for their role in negatively impacting civil society, for challenging democratic values. Such

critique is important and necessary, I think. But I also acknowledge the role they play as tools for connection and collective solidarity. I have been conducting research about social media editors, and I was struck by their use of secret Facebook groups to talk about issues on fair compensation. The Instagram community also engaged in this really fascinating act of resistance through “comment pods,” which were used to push back against the platform’s algorithmic curation system. These examples show that the same tools that have been used for commercial purposes can also allow people to congregate and communicate. I think it remains to be seen whether these new community formations can ever supplant the kinds of collective representation that took place where people were assembled on the factory floor. You know I am less hopeful that new forms will completely supplant that, but I think it is a good starting place.

Thank you very much for your time Brooke.