



What Is Digital Labour? Reflections on the Conceptual and Morphological Debates

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Abstract

Digital labour represents an emergent modality of labour that has arisen alongside the proliferation of digital information technologies and the internet. Distinct in both characteristics and manifestations from traditional industrial forms, it is conducted under conditions of digital technology, treating data as its direct labour product and achieving capital valorisation through the relentless processing and transformation of data into novel commodities. The idiosyncratic organisational paradigms and intricate operational mechanisms of digital labour have sparked fierce contention among domestic and international scholars regarding its forms and ontological nature. These debates not only underscore the intrinsic complexity of the concept and modalities of digital labour, but also elucidate the existential condition of human beings in the digital era. As a novel human mode of existence, the unique and complex nature of digital labour dictates that only by situating it within the expansive horizon of Marx's materialist conception of history can we comprehensively grasp its features, manifestations, and operational dynamics. Such an approach enables an incisive critique of the coupling mechanism between capital and technology, thereby unmasking the operational logic of the labour process and the modalities through which surplus value is realised.

Keywords: Digital labour; morphological debates; conceptual clarification; materialist conception of history; human mode of existence.

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Introduction

President Xi Jinping observed that 'digital technology, with its new concepts, new business forms, and new models, is comprehensively integrating into all areas and the whole process of human economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological civilisation construction, bringing extensive and profound impacts to human production and life' (Xi, 2022, p. 362). As core digital information technologies—such as 5G, big data, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence (AI) increasingly permeate the fabric of social production and reproduction, humanity has unequivocally entered an era of 'digital existence'. Whilst fundamentally reshaping human modes of production, digital information technology has simultaneously inaugurated a profound transformation in modes of labour, generating organisational modalities markedly distinct from traditional industrial work. Indeed, humanity's transition into an information-driven era stands as an objective historical fact. Within this informational trajectory, the practical modalities through which human beings apprehend and transform nature and society have undergone a qualitative leap, precipitating commensurate shifts in

human modes of labour and existential conditions. The revolution in digital information technology has propelled human society from the epoch of conventional industrial labour into that of ‘digital labour’. Novel communicative apparatuses have dismantled the demarcation between labour time and leisure time; labour has transcended temporal and spatial constraints, rendering work omnipresent. Consequently, digital labour has increasingly established itself as the hegemonic form of labour in the digital informational age. Within this paradigm, individuals enjoy unprecedented convenience and efficiency; paradoxically, chronic busyness, virtuality, and anxiety have emerged as quintessential existential and psychological states of contemporary life, subjecting individuals to escalating internal and external pressures. As Marshall McLuhan presciently remarked, ‘Electric technology is directly encountered in our culture, and we have been numbed, deaf, blind, and mute in its encounter with the Gutenberg technology’ (McLuhan, 2019, p. 109). As an emergent modality of labour in the post-industrial era, how does digital labour manifest empirically? What salient characteristics distinguish it from traditional labour? How should we rigorously demarcate its conceptual boundaries so as to comprehend digital labour and perceive changes in human existence? These questions demand urgent theoretical reflection. Grounded in a comparative evaluation of contemporary Western scholarly debates surrounding the modalities of digital labour, this article systematically examines the concept of digital labour, explicates its divergence from conventional labour, and exposes the emerging landscapes of alienation and mechanisms of exploitation within the digital economy. In doing so, this study establishes an ontological foundation for interrogating the organisational structures, operational dynamics, and capital logics of digital labour, offering theoretical orientation and normative guidance for harnessing digital labour to empower economic development and optimise human existential conditions.

1. Controversies over the Modalities of Digital Labour

The theoretical lineage of digital labour can be traced back to the ‘blindspot debate’ of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Initially, the term broadly denoted audience labour within the political economy of communication, with the Canadian political economist Dallas Smythe serving as its pioneer. In his seminal paper, ‘Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism’, Smythe (1977, p. 7) argued that a crucial ‘blindspot’ of Western Marxists was their persistent failure to recognise that the audience constitutes both a critical constituency of mass communication and the primary source of economic value for commercial media. Synthesising the political economy of communication with the Marxian critique of political economy, Smythe formulated the ‘audience commodity’ thesis, illuminating the structural nexus linking audiences, mass media, and commercial advertisers. He rigorously demonstrated that under the hegemony of liberal capitalism, Western Marxists fixated exclusively on the ideological apparatus of the media, obscuring the pivotal role played by advertiser-supported media in capital accumulation. As Smythe noted, commercial mass media sell audiences as commodities to advertisers while simultaneously transforming them into consumers, thereby enabling capital to extract surplus value (Smythe, 1977, p. 7). From Smythe’s vantage point, the media essentially produce audiences: the audience is not merely an indispensable commodity, but in the process of viewing programmes, it continually expends its labour power; media institutions aggregate and package audience attention data to sell to advertisers, operating as mere ‘hunter-gatherers’ of audience attention (Smythe, 1977, p. 12). Media, audiences, and advertisers thereby constitute an integrated circuit of value production, co-generating commodities and surplus value. Smythe maintained that audiences generate labour value through mass media, while mass media serve as an institutional conduit to the capitalist market, functioning as instruments for the extraction of audience labour. Under this audience-production regime, mass media not only capture audience attention but also systematically discipline and stimulate consumer desires. Consequently, advertiser revenue realisation traverses a linear trajectory: ‘advertising broadcast—desire induction—purchasing conversion’. Mass media deploy precision targeting to deliver advertisements; audiences, upon viewing, develop consumer desires that culminate in actual purchasing acts. According to Smythe, audiences are rendered instrumental, their needs manipulated by advertisers and mass media to achieve capital valorisation. Audience labour constitutes a distinct form of labour diverging from industrial production: it commodifies its own viewing capacity—analogue to a labourer selling labour power—serving as the foundational prerequisite for the media economy. As Fuchs and Mosco synthesise, audience activity (watching, listening, browsing, and clicking) generates value that is appropriated by capitalists, exchanged merely for an ostensibly ‘free lunch’ comprising diverse cultural content (Fuchs & Mosco, 2017, p. 403).

If Smythe’s ‘audience commodity’ thesis inaugurated the embryonic stage of digital labour research, the Italian post-structuralist theorist Tiziana Terranova substantially broadened its theoretical horizons. In her essay ‘Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy’ (2000), she first put forward the concept of ‘digital labour’ — though the concept she actually introduces and elaborates in that essay is ‘free labour’ (Terranova, 2000, p. 37), observing that free labour is ‘the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited’. Terranova employed a broad definition of free labour to conceptualise digital labour, equating digital labourers metaphorically to ‘net slaves’. She argued that internet users’ activities—including browsing web pages, replying to comments, and dispatching electronic mail—fall under the rubric of free labour (Terranova, 2000, pp. 33–58). This unremunerated labour unfolds seamlessly as users engage in communicative or productive activities across social media platforms. Users appear to derive genuine pleasure, yet they remain oblivious to the digital traces, knowledge, and information they bequeath to platform intermediaries. It is

precisely these proprietary data that furnish internet platforms with gratis assets, sustaining the operational viability of the internet economy. Terranova maintained that under capitalism, digital labourers endure disparate forms and degrees of capitalist exploitation. Her intervention sparked widespread intellectual reverberations, precipitating a proliferation of scholarship across media studies, political economy, and cultural studies. A critical appraisal of this corpus reveals both profound convergences and sharp theoretical schisms, the most contentious debates revolving around whether digital labour can be subsumed under the category of ‘immaterial labour’.

Historically, one of the earliest and most representative theoretical perspectives addressing this debate emerged from Maurizio Lazzarato of the Italian Autonomist Marxist tradition, who formulated the category of ‘immaterial labour’ (*lavoro immateriale*). Drawing upon Marx’s conceptualisation of productive labour and the ‘results of the direct production process’, Lazzarato distinguished between two forms of productive labour: material labour and immaterial labour, mobilising the latter to diagnose the socio-economic mutations of contemporary capitalism. Within Lazzarato’s analytical matrix, immaterial labour encompasses two distinct dimensions: firstly, the ‘informational content’ of the commodity, ‘which refers directly to the changes taking place in workers’ labour processes in big companies in the industrial and tertiary sectors, where the skills which are required of direct labour are increasingly skills of cybernetics and computer control’; and secondly, activities constituting the commodity’s ‘cultural content’, activities that ‘are not normally recognised as “work”’ (Lazzarato, 1996, as cited in Luo, 2006, p. 139). In his view, immaterial labour refers to the labour in which subjects deploy new information technologies in the workplace, signifying ‘all labour that participates in the production, processing, and communication of information, labour that directly manipulates symbols to produce original knowledge, and even the labour performed by librarians, postal and courier employees, or workers assembling computer circuits and components’ (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 133). Its defining attribute is the intractability of calculating discrete labour time and the blurring boundary between life and work, wherein the domestic and the professional interpenetrate and coalesce. Lazzarato posited that the primary essence of immaterial labour resides in the production and reproduction of social relations—namely, the configuration of linkages among innovation, production, and consumption. He further argued that the economic value of this practice hinges fundamentally on whether the production of these social relations succeeds: this activity renders visible what remained hidden in material production, demonstrating that labour produces not merely commodities, but first and foremost capital relations themselves (Lazzarato, 1996, as cited in Luo, 2006, pp. 143–144).

While Lazzarato approached the problem through cultural content production, locating free activity and immaterial labour within consumer practices, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt advanced, revised, and expanded the theory of immaterial labour via the analytical categories of intellect, information, knowledge, and affects. Conceptually reconstructing the category of the ‘general intellect’ found in Marx’s *Grundrisse* (1857–1858), Hardt and Negri mobilised Lazzarato’s category to argue that, with the rapid ascent of informational technologies, traditional manual labour has been peripheralised within contemporary capitalist production, superseded by labour that produces immaterial goods—namely, immaterial labour characterised by intellect, affect, knowledge, and linguistic services. In their analytical framework, immaterial labour is demarcated into three principal forms: firstly, communicative labour reliant on information networks within industrial manufacturing; secondly, interactive, analytical labour oriented toward problem-solving; and thirdly, affective labour entailing the production and manipulation of human feelings and passions (Hardt & Negri, 2010, p. 30). In *Empire*, they offered a systematic critique of emergent labour forms grounded in the ‘general intellect’ under post-Fordist capitalism, deploying ‘immaterial labour’ to critique contemporary capitalism’s structural contradictions and imperial hegemony within economic globalisation. Negri contended that the concept of immaterial labour attempts to articulate a novel conception of value and labour, explicating the dynamics of production, productivity, creativity, exploitation, and valorisation in post-industrial society. As he asserted, contemporary capitalist production does not merely manufacture surplus value or material goods; it produces a social form, a normative value system, and an overarching structure of social experience (Negri, as cited in Luo, 2006, p. 61). Within this context, Hardt and Negri posited that the hegemony of immaterial labour reflects not only the subsumption of production by capital and its global market expansion, but also a sovereign power apparatus through which capital commands, governs, and exercises biopolitical control over human subjects. They underscored that humanity confronts the subjugation, oppression, and exploitation of culture, tradition, and affect by capital and its networked institutional extensions, constituting a creative transformation and reconstitution of traditional mechanisms of domination (Hardt & Negri, as cited in Luo, 2006, pp. 14–15). Notwithstanding its provocative insights, Hardt and Negri’s theoretical edifice remains fraught with contestation; to an extent, ‘immaterial labour’ functions primarily as a rhetorical polemic against internal contradictions of capital. Although their contribution lies in identifying emerging modalities of labour driven by intellect and innovation, their reading of Marxian political economy exhibits theoretical distortions—most notably in declaring the obsolescence of Marxian categories and substituting them with fragile speculative assertions. Confronted with academic critique and the inability of ‘immaterial labour’ to resolve contemporary structural impasses, they retreated into Michel Foucault’s paradigm of ‘biopolitics’ to interpret capitalist relations of production. This conceptual retreat exposes their profound theoretical limitations. As Slavoj Žižek perceptively remarked, they failed to reproduce Marx’s foundational insight under contemporary conditions—namely, that the prospect of revolutionary emancipation remains immanent to the internal contradictions of the capitalist mode of production itself (Žižek, as cited in Luo, 2006, p. 85).

Following the Autonomist Marxist attempt to construct immaterial labour through cognitive, linguistic, and affective rubrics, Christian Fuchs systematically theorised ‘digital labour’ as an emergent modality of *material* labour. Grounding his analysis firmly within the Marxian critique of political economy, Fuchs illuminated the intrinsic nexus between digital labour and the imperatives of capital valorisation. Firstly, he demonstrated that ‘immaterial labour’ is an epistemologically misleading concept; in an authentic Marxian sense, digital labour remains firmly rooted in material labour, entirely amenable to scrutiny through the labour theory of value, the theory of surplus value, and historical materialism. Secondly, Fuchs argued that defining digital labour narrowly impedes any comprehensive, longitudinal analysis of its global circuit. The browsing, sharing, and clicking activities of internet users represent merely the visible tip of the digital labour iceberg. To fully decipher the exploitative logic of digital capital, scholars must adopt an expansive, comprehensive definition. In this vein, Fuchs conceptualised digital work and digital labour as encompassing all forms of human labour necessary for the capital accumulation that underpins the production and reproduction of digital media technologies and content (Fuchs, as cited in Scholz, 2013, p. 212). For Fuchs, any activity entailing the generation, processing, analysis, and circulation of digital informational content across social media architectures qualifies as digital labour. Finally, Fuchs laid bare the alienating realities, operational mechanics, and systemic crises of digital labour. In *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*, Fuchs drew on typical case studies from around the world, taking hardware assemblers in labour-intensive industries and unpaid social-media prosumers as his typical empirical subjects, probing in depth the structure of exploitation along the global capitalist ICT value chain, revealing the hazards of illness this exploitation brings to labourers and even its profound impact on their mode of existence, and on this basis constructing a systematic Western Marxist critique of digital labour (Fuchs, 2020). In sum, while post-structuralist, ideological, communication political-economic, and cultural-critical perspectives examine digital labour through disparate lenses, they share a unifying imperative: the deployment of Marxian critical theory to decode emerging modalities of labour and systematically erect a critical political economy of digital labour.

2. A Conceptual Clarification of Digital Labour

Digital labour embodies an emergent manifestation of labour within contemporary digital capitalism; any meaningful critique of contemporary digital capitalism hinges upon this core category. However, what precisely constitutes digital labour? What theoretical affinities and divergences distinguish digital labour from traditional industrial labour? Contemporary scholarship remains fractured on these questions. Theorists approach digital labour from divergent analytical paradigms; whilst this pluralism enriches our intellectual vantage point, it also risks profound conceptual ambiguity. As a theoretical construct translated into the Chinese academic vernacular from Western scholarship, digital labour necessitates semantic and etymological dissection to establish conceptual clarity and erect a robust theoretical framework.

From a semantic perspective, the composite term ‘digital labour’ resolves into two discrete constituents: ‘digital’ and ‘labour’. In lexicons such as the *Longman Dictionary*, terms such as ‘figure’, ‘number’, and ‘digit’ converge upon mathematical and informational meanings, often translated as ‘information’, ‘digits’, or ‘data’. The digital denotes not merely the technical encoding of human beings and objects into binary signals, but signifies humanity’s parameterised representation of itself and the objective world through technological mediation. Meanwhile, ‘digitalisation’ represents a structural paradigm born of computational advances, big data, the Internet of Things (IoT), 5G networks, and artificial intelligence. Digitalisation converts linguistic texts, auditory signals, images, and visual recordings into quantifiable data, which are subsequently structured into programmatic algorithms and stored computationally. Digitalisation constitutes a profound socio-industrial transformation, precipitating radical alterations in human living and producing. As Hu Yong (2020, p. 6) observes, ‘For those at the technological frontier, it entails quantum computing and AI-driven innovations; for the majority of ordinary people, it merely corresponds to embracing tools that render work and life more efficient and intimately connected’. Throughout the twenty-first century, the ontological relation between digital technology and human society has shifted decisively. Operating as the fundamental medium of digital labour, digitalisation subverts traditional industrial labour conditions and stands as the defining emblem of a new productive era.

The term ‘labour’ functions variously as a philosophical, economic, or sociological category. Defining labour requires a preliminary demarcation between ‘labour’ and ‘work’. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt (2009, p. 1) classified human activity into three distinct spheres: labour, work, and action. For Arendt, labour corresponds to the biological processes of human existence; work fabricates an artificial world of enduring artefacts distinct from natural surroundings; and action corresponds to the human condition of plurality. The condition shaped by labour is life itself. Proceeding from etymology, Fuchs argued that the German word for ‘labour’ (*Arbeit*) used by Marx differs etymologically from ‘work’, and that Marx’s German words for ‘work’ and ‘labour’ are sometimes subsumed under the single word *Arbeit*. To dissolve this conceptual ambiguity, Fuchs parsed Marx’s usage: Marx conceptualised *work* as the qualitative production of use-values, whereas *labour* denotes the historical, quantitative expenditure of human energy generating abstract value (Fuchs, 2020, pp. 33–34). Consequently, Fuchs proposed that ‘work’ designates the concrete creation of use-values, whereas ‘labour’ signifies the abstract production of exchange-value—that is, equating abstract labour with labour, and concrete labour with work (Xia, 2018, pp. 37–47). This demarcation provides the theoretical groundwork for Fuchs’s

critique of digital labour. Fuchs argued that user data generation across the internet represents an archetypal form of digital labour. Users act concurrently as platform users and advertising audiences. Viewed through the political economy of communication, this digital labour embodies audience labour: within advertising-funded platform ecosystems, users function simultaneously as consumers and labourers, consuming cultural content while fabricating proprietary data commodities. Platforms such as Sina Weibo, Meta (Facebook), and X (formerly Twitter) commodify these user data to sell to advertising clients. On Meta, for instance, continuous browsing, sharing, and content creation generate a torrent of data that accumulates in direct proportion to user screen time. These data are covertly harvested, algorithmically structured, and sold to corporate advertisers without users' conscious awareness or consent. Advertisers then utilise predictive algorithms to segment audience demographics and execute targeted marketing. In short, 'these data are sold to Facebook's advertising clients, which allows the latter to present targeted advertisements to users based on their profiles' (Fuchs, 2018, p. 14). Although platform users create tremendous surplus value for digital monopolies, they receive no compensatory remuneration. On the contrary, their digital traces serve as the indispensable raw material for corporate capital accumulation and valorisation.

Building upon these etymological reflections on the 'digital' and 'labour', an adequate inquiry into digital labour requires situating the concept within Marx's materialist conception of history. Therefore, digital labour must be unpacked through Marx's foundational categories: 'real individuals', 'the production of material life', and 'labour'. Digital labour can accordingly be delineated across three dialectical registers. First, at the level of the *productive forces*, digital labour represents the product of advanced internet and information communication technologies. Its technological substrate comprises cloud computing, 5G, distributed ledgers, and algorithmic automation; 'general data' has emerged as the cardinal factor of production, vigorously appropriated by capital. Driven by predictive algorithms, a digital mode of production has taken shape, establishing the digital economy. In this sense, the empirical manifestation of digital labour corresponds precisely to what Fuchs identified as mental and manual labour mediated through digital media technologies. Second, at the level of *factors of production*, the inputs of digital labour consist predominantly of information, data, and cognitive knowledge—immaterial products that diverge sharply from traditional physical raw materials. Third, at the level of the *human mode of existence*, digital production modes governed by algorithms have fundamentally reconfigured human working and living. Labour has shattered the barriers of time and space, penetrating every crevice of human life, intertwining labour time and life time. Round-the-clock connectivity has transformed into an inescapable existential reality. In summary, digital labour can be defined as an emergent modality of labour conducted under digital technological conditions that treats data as its immediate labour product, constantly developing and transforming data to achieve value valorisation, thereby yielding novel commodity forms.

3. Characteristics of Digital Labour

As an emergent labour form within post-industrial society, digital labour encompasses heterogeneous manifestations. The labouring subject has undergone profound mutations, using virtual networks and digital media as its operational terrain, exhibiting characteristics that diverge fundamentally from traditional industrial labour.

3.1. Multiplicity of Labourer Identities and the Universalised Breadth of Participating Subjects

Compared to the standardised, fixed wage labour of the industrial era, the defining subjectivity of digital labour manifests in the multiplicity of labourers' identities and the universalised scope of participating agents. Digital technologies have dissolved the spatio-temporal boundaries, organisational boundaries and identity barriers of traditional labour, reshaped the existential form of the labouring subject, and dismantled the single, fixed occupational identity of workers in industrial labour, becoming an important marker of the transformation of labour forms in the digital economy era. First, the multiplicity of digital labour identities manifests in the superposition of labour roles within a single subject and the diversification of labour relations. In classical industrial production, workers participated as full-time wage employees with unambiguous responsibilities and identifiable institutional boundaries. Under digital conditions, however, labouring subjects assume composite roles; complex 'digital identities' serve as the symbolic marker of the contemporary digital labourer. The enactment of digital labour dissolves fixed structural identities: participants experience overlapping subjectivities—virtual and physical, consumer and producer, economic and affective, permanent and precarious—frequently alternating among them within a singular digital interface. Unlike traditional industrial employment, the transformation of digital production modes has dissolved standard employment contracts, supplanting permanent industrial jobs with contingent, precarious, platform-mediated arrangements. Fuchs observed that digital labour under ICT networks exhibits far looser, more informal employment ties than Fordist factory regimes. This dynamic is acutely evident in audience labour: digital media conglomerates and online platforms construct social, commercial, or entertainment enclosures to capture user attention. These online users or audiences maintain no formal employment relationship—or at best an ultra-flexible, contingent tie—with media conglomerates or network platforms; nonetheless, they generate data and produce immense profits for these digital intermediaries without receiving any economic remuneration whatsoever. In Chinese scholarship, such labour modalities are generally conceptualised as 'unremunerated labour', which predominantly encompasses two manifestations: audience labour and 'playbour'. Secondly, the breadth of participating subjects reflects lowered barriers to entry and the universalisation of the labouring collective. Industrial

labour depended upon localised factories, specialised machinery, and formal qualifications, restricting participation to a credentialed industrial working class. Conversely, the ubiquity of smartphones and platforms has universalised the means of labour, neutralising barriers of age, occupation, geography, and educational attainment. From professional IT engineers and new-media practitioners, to platform gig workers such as food-delivery riders and livestreaming bloggers, and further to ordinary netizens with no fixed occupation — all are now drawn into digital production. Because digital labour encompasses all activities linked to digital content creation and data harvesting, ordinary everyday activities are subsumed under the category of labour. The labouring subject has thus expanded from a professional industrial proletariat into a universalised populace. In short, identity multiplicity and subject universalisation mutually reinforce one another, thoroughly deconstructing the standardised form of the labouring subject of the industrial age. They have expanded the boundaries and dimensions of labour while also bringing new problems such as blurred labour relations and hollowed-out labour rights, driving the transformation of labour and production relations in the digital age.

3.2. The Duality of the Nature of Digital Labour

Within Marx's labour theory of value, labour possesses a dual character. As concrete labour, it represents an eternal 'condition of human existence' and the 'father of material wealth', producing 'use-values adapted to human wants'. Concurrently, under capitalist social relations, labour operates as abstract labour, functioning as a value-creating activity that generates commodity value. Within digital capitalism, digital labour exhibits this same dialectical duality. When internet users generate information across network platforms, their concrete labour produces use-values that satisfy human communicative, informational, and aesthetic needs. Simultaneously, digital platforms appropriate and commodify these aggregated user data, selling them to advertising enterprises. In this respect, user activity functions as abstract labour—an expenditure of human brain, nerve, and muscle that crystallises into the value of data commodities. Stated differently, while target users retrieve required informational services from digital platforms, they unconsciously and gratuitously surrender their immaterial products: personal data. As user platform engagement lengthens, the volume of affective, economic, political, and cultural data harvested expands exponentially, multiplying advertising inventory. Platforms monitor browsing duration, behavioural choices, and personal affinities, subsequently aggregating, parsing, and transmuting these data into proprietary assets for sale to advertisers and brokers, thus achieving capital valorisation through the structural exploitation of digital users (Chandler & Fuchs, 2019, pp. 64–66). Departing from traditional physical labour, digital labour thoroughly scrambles the boundary between work, domestic life, and leisure. The digital platform operates simultaneously as an amusement park and an electronic panoptic factory—a shared space where workers enact creative expression alongside capital exploitation.

Furthermore, the convergence of 5G networks, big data, cloud computing, and AI has accelerated algorithmic transformations across education, remote labour, automated manufacturing, and smart governance. As production and decision-making systems in every industry move towards digitalisation and intelligence, the commercial value of data has shown explosive growth. The word 'data' traces its etymology to Euclidean antiquity, signifying known facts from which propositions are deduced; its Latin root *datum* designates 'a thing given' or an established fact. Today, data encapsulates the systemic description, recording, computational analysis, and algorithmic restructuring of the world. Data serve as an indispensable asset for commercial enterprise and scientific discovery. As Viktor Mayer-Schönberger observed, the authentic value of big data resembles an iceberg floating in the ocean: one initially discerns only its visible tip, whilst its vast bulk remains submerged. Cloud computing constitutes the generative engine for plumbing these ocean depths. The contemporary digital epoch—anchored by social networks, e-commerce, and mobile telecommunications—has propelled human society into a data era characterised by petabytes of structured and unstructured information (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2012, p. 1).

3.3. Autonomous Labour and the Concealment of Exploitation

According to Marxian praxis philosophy, space and time represent the two constitutive axes of human existence, with human labour serving as the unifying practice that conjoins them. Informational networking fundamentally reconfigures human praxis, transforming the spatiality and temporality of traditional labour. As human labour transcends physical constraints, traditional physical factory floors are supplanted by ubiquitous, decentralised 'digital network factories'. André Gorz provided an incisive critique of this labour regime, explicating how immaterial labour evolved into the dominant productive paradigm and valorisation source of contemporary society. Gorz argued that immaterial labour is founded on an ideology of entrepreneurial self-realisation, wherein individuals and life itself are mobilised for work and exploitation. Human life becomes capital's 'most precious asset'. The demarcation between work and non-work vanishes, not merely because both deploy shared communicative faculties, but because living time is subsumed under value extraction (Gorz, as cited in Fuchs & Mosco, 2017, p. 414). Similarly, E. P. Thompson observed that task-oriented labour obscures the divide between working and living, dissolving the boundary between necessary labour time and free time, thereby cultivating an illusion of autonomous choice. On the one hand, spatial mobility produces labour market precarity through hyper-flexible temporal arrangements. In the virtual arena of digital media, 'time-space distancing'—as a constitutive hallmark of modernity—finds its consummate articulation. In labour practice, standard hourly wages are widely displaced by algorithmic piece-rate systems, granting workers nominal autonomy over their

working schedules while intensifying existential precarity. On the other hand, digital labour exhibits radical spatial deterritorialisation. Network technologies dismantle architectural constraints: workers need not be physically assembled within a Panopticon-style factory. Provided they possess basic terminals and network connectivity, individuals execute labour and generate data commodities from any location. The decentralised immediacy of internet networks and the immateriality of informational assets permit digital labour to unfold ubiquitously, evading fixed working schedules and factory walls. Viewed systematically, the digital valorisation process consumes not merely socially necessary labour time, but cannibalises workers' living time. With the transformation of the mode of production brought about by information technology, traditional labour space has been expanded by the virtual space constructed by information technology and internet platforms. Most factories dependent on machinery have been replaced by the virtual space of the digital age, and large-scale concentrated cooperative labour has been continually dissolved. Digital labour merges employment into life, compelling the labourer's entire lifespan to minister to capital accumulation.

Crucially, while digital labour transcends architectural boundaries and geographical enclosures, it remains tethered to the extraction of surplus value, generating handsome super-profits for monopoly capital. Moreover, the intensity of this labour has been steadily increasing; exploitation has become more concealed and has penetrated every domain of production and life. Because human life activity is comprehensively subsumed by capital, digital labour remains structurally subordinate to capitalist valorisation, dramatically extending the frontiers of capitalist accumulation.

3.4. The Prosumption Dynamic in the Labour Process

The execution of any labour process entails the dialectical interaction of three foundational elements: the labourer's personal activity, the instruments of labour, and the subject of labour. Under digital capitalism, structural shifts in labour spaces alongside technological transformations have reconstituted the traditional architecture of productive forces and transformed the social division of labour. Human economic configurations have evolved from 'production for use' to 'production for exchange', arriving finally at contemporary 'prosumption'. As Alvin Toffler presciently noted in *The Third Wave*, the mature Second Wave social order is disintegrating under Third Wave transformations, and another characteristic change has begun — production shifts back to the first sector of the economy, and consumers are drawn into the production process (Toffler, 1983, p. 309). Toffler maintained that the rise of information technologies would accelerate consumer integration into production, dissolving the rigid boundary separating producers from consumers. Across contemporary digital media platforms, the demarcation between consumer and producer has largely dissolved into the hybrid figure of the 'prosumer'. This historical convergence reunifies production and consumption: prosumers consume digital services while generating the data commodities that fuel the digital marketplace. Digital labour thus renders production and consumption coterminous. Furthermore, the elementary constituents of the labour process have undergone radical qualitative mutations. In traditional industrial labour, the subject of labour comprises physical raw materials extracted from nature. Within algorithmic platforms, however, the subject of labour is no longer brute physical matter; rather, it manifests as human existential experience, subjective affects, and social communication. Texts, images and videos, together with the thoughts, emotions and experiences they convey, can all serve as the object of digital labour. If material labour designates an objectifying praxis wherein workers transform nature, digital labour represents an intellectual, cognitive processing of human intersubjectivity and affective life. Simultaneously, the instruments of labour have been thoroughly overhauled: automated software algorithms, distributed networks, and mobile terminals have displaced physical industrial machinery. Compared to agricultural implements or industrial assembly lines, contemporary society has constructed an integrated digital infrastructure comprising cloud computing centres, big data mining protocols, IoT architectures, and ubiquitous personal computational hardware. Consequently, relentless digital innovations render production within the digital economy increasingly sophisticated, continually expanding the hegemony of prosumption.

In summary, compared to the industrial era, the digital information revolution of post-industrial society has restructured human modes of production, cognition, and social intercourse, generating entirely novel existential conditions. Although the application of digital information technologies transcends the temporal and spatial limits of industrial labour—acting as an engine of socio-economic development digital labour under digital capitalism has not yet broken out of the operating mechanism of the logic of capital and remains, to some extent, in the grip of that logic. As the primary mode of contemporary existence, digital labour's structural duality, prosumption dynamics, and spatio-temporal flexibility reflect a concealed exploitative architecture generated by the structural coupling of capital and technology, inaugurating novel landscapes of alienation across the digital economy.

4. Conclusion

In the late 1990s, the political economist of communication Dan Schiller observed that informational capitalism represented the emerging modality of the digital epoch, with digital technologies penetrating political, economic, and cultural spheres to constitute the structural pillar of a new social formation: digital capitalism (Schiller, 2001, pp. 28–30). Within the contemporary digital economy, a new technological revolution spearheaded by Web 2.0, big data analytics, cloud computing, and AI is overhauling online communicative architectures while transforming prevailing socio-economic development models. Anchored by the IoT and digital infrastructure, mediated through digital platforms, and

driven by data as a core factor of production, the digital economy is accelerating global economic development and reshaping production relations, labour regimes, psychological subjectivities, and human social intercourse. If industrial society took machine technology as its productive base, then the mode of production based on digital information technology in today's society has shaped society's networks of production and life, and has become a new mode of production for our era. Human society has stepped decisively into the condition of 'being digital' depicted by Nicholas Negroponte: computing is no longer merely about computers; it governs human survival itself (Negroponte, 2017, p. 61). Digitalisation has established itself as the defining feature of contemporary socio-economic life, heralding an era whose empirical signature is the pervasive deployment of information technologies and the ubiquity of digital labour. This emerging labour form diverges diametrically from industrial labour in its institutional organisation, systemic features, and valorisation circuits, dictating the existential realities of contemporary subjects. Confronted with its idiosyncratic organisational structures and intricate operational dynamics, scholars must ground their critique in Marx's materialist conception of history. Only through this theoretical optic can we comprehensively grasp the concept, modalities, spatio-temporal dynamics, and surplus-value mechanisms of digital labour, ultimately unmasking the coupling dynamics and operational logic between capital and technology.

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