

## How The Internet Has Changed The Way We Work

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An examination of the fake ways of working the Internet has made possible.

The idea that technology destroys jobs is an over familiar refrain. But advances in technology have also created new kinds of jobs, though their increasingly non-productive nature may be eroding our collective understanding of what work is.

In the U.S. there are more than 144 million people with jobs of some kind, but what those jobs are meant to do, and the way they are valued has become increasingly abstract and difficult to measure. In an essay for Strike!, anthropologist David Graeber notes that between 1910 and 2000, the percentage of directly productive jobs shrank dramatically, replaced by a new wave of "professional, managerial, clerical, sales, and service workers," categories that now account for close to three-quarters of the total job market.

Today, work doesn't mean the making of a material necessity, but maintaining an administrative position in a system of theoretical undertakings. Companies like Netflix run a service that reaches more than 30 million people, for instance, though it employs only a little more than 2,000. In theory, pass-throughs like Netflix have value not because of their actual work building servers or making bulk-rate deals with the U.S. Post Office, but because they support the secondary industry of film production.

This shift seems logical on the surface but weakens the bonds between the people in an industry and those who patronize it. Gone are the days of John Waters driving film platters from town to town in the midwest, flyering for midnight shows, greeting audience members in the movie lobby, and watching his movies in the same space with the audience.

Instead, one makes a movie in isolation, lucks out on a low-fee distribution arrangement to stream over Netflix, and then searches through Twitter hashtags and customer reviews to try and sense the impact of what one has made. Instead of just making something another person wants, companies make money today by making things they expect other people will use to make money. Yet, because these digital pass-throughs narrow the scope of the social and physical processes that bring about a complex phenomenon like a movie screening into being, they seem drained of value and less likely than ever to be worth paying for.

Ironically, the working conditions to the digitally-minded bureaucrats have come at the expense of structural security for those involved in physically productive disciplines. A study by the Cato Institute in the mid-80s foreshadowed much of what has come to pass in the subsequent three decades, arguing that "workers harmed by technological advancement are those who have been receiving wages in excess of the amount they would receive in a fully competitive labor market." In a fully competitive labor market, those responsible to moderating and maintaining the market are more valuable than those actually in the market, and systemic efficiency is used to then strip this excess wage from the inefficient workers preventing the system at large from working as efficiently as possible.

This pathos is visible in San Francisco, a city most disfigured by the influx of techno-capitalists. In a story this week for *The New Yorker*, Nathan Heller reports on the horrors these efficiency jockeys have loosed on the city. Heller's story opens with a view of Johnny Hwin, an unaligned entrepreneur operating in an old automotive repair shop in the once working class Mission District, now turned into an incubator for app designers and people interested in "pushing culture forward." Hwin earned his fortunate lifestyle of being a full-time daydreamer by designing a quiz app for Facebook that improbably attracted 15 million users. Then he created a marketing tool that would let mega-musicians like Lady Gaga profit from their massive fan bases by using them to promote products.

This culture is one of eliciting short-term excitement for untested ideas, luring investors with the blueprints for theoretical businesses whose primary value is potentiality. Once an idea has been concretized into an actual company with employees and obligations, its growth potential withers away. "By the time a company goes public, there's no money to be made, in my eyes," investor Jude Gomila told Heller. One profits by existing outside of the system one plans to tweak, tighten, and exploit. Once one has a role as a humble worker within the system, one becomes what Cato described as a wage renter, someone taking more out of the system in wages than they put back in through productive efficiency. In this economy, the most valuable job is the architect of ideas—or bullshit artist in Graeber's phrasing—someone able to bring seemingly pointless widgets to life out of a belief in the virtues of the marketplace those widgets plug into.

John Maynard Keynes' prediction that gains in productivity from technology would eventually reduce the work week to 15 hours wasn't wrong, but it didn't account for the bizarre expansion of the definition of work to reclaim all of the leisure time won from those gains—the pleasure of drawing becomes the stress of design and advertising; the joys of socializing become the toil of social media specialists and brand evangelists.

There is a hidden politics in all of this, which doesn't reward all forms of bullshit peddling, but only that which embraces the values of one class of people, those prone to romanticizing abstract systems like MySQL instead of concrete systems like a combustion motor or belt sander.

Productivity today is whatever is necessary to keep people like Hwin suspended in their digital imaginariums, chasing ideas that are meaningful so long as they don't actually exist. Like landowners in Tsarist Russia, we are all bullshit artists now, swept up in a generational effort to

maintain the impression of value and purpose in undertakings that increasingly seem to have none.