Playlist

Work

Nicole Cohen
University of Toronto

Introduction

Work has plagued us during the COVID-19 pandemic. Essential work. Work from home. Being worked to death. Some have had no work; others have had too much. Some of us longed to work as children clung to us (I tried and failed multiple times to write this article during numerous COVID-19-related school and daycare closures). Front-line workers. Remote workers. The Great Resignation reflects great resignation.

Early in the pandemic, researchers surveyed 500 workers in Ontario and found that work had already become "harder and more stressful" (Ross & Lewchuk, 2021, para. 6) and required more tasks and effort, especially for women. Rather than being a "great equalizer," as we were told in those early days, the pandemic exposed longstanding truths about contemporary work and deepened already deep divisions between low- and high-waged workers, between women and men, between people who can work from home and those who cannot, between Indigenous Peoples and settlers, and between racialized and white workers (Alook, Block, & Galabuzi, 2021). Millions of workers in Canada have been laid off since the pandemic began—one million in March 2020 alone (Statistics Canada, 2020)—as lockdowns and restrictions have roiled almost every sector. Millions lost hours and wages and had to rely on inadequate, difficult to access emergency social benefits. Globally, write Jennifer Cohen and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers (2021), the pandemic "exacerbated inequities related to the gendered and racialized work of production and social reproduction" (p. 2). Going to work has become increasingly risky, and that risk is distributed unevenly along racialized, classed, and gendered lines. Workers in many sectors, including manufacturing, service, and food processing, work in close proximity to one another without proper personal protective equipment and ventilation, contract the virus, and bring it home to their families. Without paid sick days, the virus spreads. The explosion of Omicron in late 2021 led to mass staff absences, as workers across many sectors were out sick, including in the chronically underfunded healthcare sector. And the pandemic rages on.

But still, we work. By 2021, over four million of us had set up home offices in bedrooms and at kitchen tables (Statistics Canada, 2021). In 2022, we are fighting Zoom fatigue and "presence bleed" (Gregg, 2011, p. 15). Digital technologies continue to intensify work, pushing our jobs into all crevices of our personal lives, subjecting millions to managerial surveillance as "bossware" enters our homes (Coworker.org, 2021). And as we dream of different futures, we face multiple, competing narratives of post-pandemic work: mass refusal, as we recognize how much of life work steals from us; individual "pivots" to new careers vaunted in the media; the tantalizing possibility of universal social benefits; the cruel reality that a return to "normal" means a return to exploitation, inequality, and the daily grind of capitalism. We want to work less. We want flexible work. We want a four-day workweek. Facing stagnating wages, poor conditions, and pandemic risks, workers across the continent are collectively organizing into unions, building solidarity, and waging successful strikes and job actions, including baristas, graduate students, video game developers, journalists, and warehouse workers. To understand the current moment, we must attend to work.

What have Canadian communication scholars, media theorists, and researchers of technologies told us about work? In their introduction to a special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* (*CJC*), "The Labouring of Communication," Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco (2006) observed that communication studies scholarship has tended to neglect labour in the study of media, messages, and audiences. Yet, they argue, "intellective and physical labour are required to produce messages and the technologies used to disseminate them" (p. 493), encouraging a turn to labour in media and communication studies that has produced a rich and dynamic body of literature examining work and labour as it intersects with media, technology, and culture.

A search of the *CJC* archive using the terms *work* and *labour* results in many articles on a range of work-related issues, a selective index of which could read:

- care work (labour, technology-mediated work)
- creative and cultural industries (working conditions, contracts, collective organizing, policy)
- gender and technology (deskilling, intensification, power)
- journalists (professional routines, working conditions, unions)
- knowledge work (theories of, ideologies of, gendered divisions, deskilling, surveillance, rationalization, resistance)
- labour, unions, strikes (media coverage of)

This playlist features four articles that hold enduring lessons about work for the pandemic and beyond. In addition to being topical, these pieces tackle theo-

retical debates about work and labour; offer empirical insight into working conditions in media, culture, and technology; and, vitally, articulate clear-eyed views of how technologies are used to shape and reshape work. This research has proven prescient as struggles over work intensify—not because authors could predict the future but because the *CJC* publishes research attuned to critical frameworks, structuralist power dynamics, and sustained relations of gender, race, and class. The articles on this playlist stand out as relevant to questions of work and technology that we face now; each sheds light on a pandemic-era example of the myriad ways work plagues us—and how we push back.

Playlist

Article 1
Edge, Marc, & Hardt, Karl. (2006). Doing It for Themselves: Striking Newsworkers Publish the *Castlegar Citizen*, 2000–2005. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *31*(3), 581–598. doi: 10.22230/cjc.2006v31n3a1770

In June 2021, editorial staff of the venerable *New Yorker* magazine were on the verge of a strike. The media workers' union—one of hundreds formed since 2015—had been negotiating a first contract with media empire Condé Nast for two-and-a-half years and held escalating actions to pressure management. A final action helped settle the contract: the union circulated a "sneak peek" of a strike issue of the magazine "written, edited, fact-checked, designed, and produced by" union members (New Yorker Union, 2021). The cover was an image of people working to prepare a strike issue of the *New Yorker*, polishing the logo and hoisting bold red letters spelling "union" into place. The strike issue is a longstanding tool in labour's arsenal.

In their *CJC* article, Edge and Hardt provide an insightful history of strike papers, or "strike sheets," independent publications produced by journalists while on strike or locked out, aimed at pressuring management to settle a labour dispute. While most are short-lived, some have long lives; many high-circulation newspapers, including the *Toronto Star*, were born from labour struggle. This article tells the story of the *Castlegar Citizen*, a newspaper produced by eight journalists on strike from the weekly *Sun* newspaper—owned by Sterling Newspapers, part of publishing giant Hollinger Inc.—in Castlegar, B.C. On strike over wages, *Sun* journalists were encouraged by community members to start the *Castlegar Citizen*, which soon began to out-compete the *Sun*. Rather than returning to bargaining, Sterling closed the paper, but workers continued to publish until, due to workload and uncertainty, it closed. Their focus on "editorial neutrality," rather than generating space to engage with labour and union issues, challenges positioning the *Citizen* as alternative media, yet research on the strike paper as a political form of media production remains vital.

As the New Yorker Union members demonstrated with their strike issue, media workers have a strategic advantage in labour struggles: the ability to turn communicative capacities integral to their daily work toward politicized ends.

Article 2

Brophy, Enda. (2006). System Error: Labour Precarity and Collective Organizing at Microsoft. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *31*(3), 619–638. doi:10.22230/cjc.2006v31n3a1767

By all accounts, 2021 was a banner year for organizing among tech workers. Most notable was the formation of the Alphabet Workers Union, which represents over 800 (and counting) workers at Google, including contractors and temporary workers. The so-called minority union, which represents a small part of the company's workforce, aims to engage in worker activism rather than to bargain a collective agreement, as its wall-to-wall model includes workers outside of the standard employment relationship. The union is affiliated with the Communication Workers of America's innovative Campaign to Organize Digital Employees project. This experiment in tech worker unionizing has roots in the Washington Alliance of Tech Workers, which Brophy examines in his *CJC* article. Launched in 1998 by temporary workers at Microsoft and supported by the Communication Workers of America, WashTech is an early example of union experiments in alternative forms of non-workplace-based organizing in tech.

As futurists celebrated the ascendance of the knowledge worker, Brophy tracked the labour struggles of Microsoft "permatemps," whose collective response precipitated intensifying labour conflict and collective organizing in big tech (and a corresponding rise in tech labour research). The article grapples with the terminology and conceptual approaches useful for studying communicative work. It foregrounds critical concepts that embody struggle and resistance, such as immaterial labour and *precarity*, a term that picked up steam in the mid-2000s, travelling from Italian autonomist social movements to mainstream media to describe "the growing insecurity brought on by the flexible management of the global work force within post-Fordist capitalism" (p. 621).

In this case, Microsoft imposed flexible management on its workforce in the 1990s, and by the 2000s had hired thousands of contract workers via temporary employment agencies, benefiting from a triangular employment relationship that denied workers access to benefits, job security, or healthcare. Forced to wear orange badges (to distinguish from the blue badges worn by full-timers), permatemps were not allowed to access perks such as sports fields and launch parties. After launching and winning a class-action lawsuit, workers formed WashTech. Brophy critically assesses the possibilities and limitations of organizing precariously employed tech workers and argues that even workers in non-standard employment and with subjective barriers to collective action will continue to collectively organize. He writes: "History shows us that it happens again and again—that collective organizing is al-

ways already part of any labour relation within capital. It merely means that it will take different forms, that those forms are unpredictable before they happen, and that they will invariably respond to the barriers facing the old ones" (p. 633).

Article 3

Ladner, Sam. (2008). Laptops in the Living Room: Mobile Technologies and the Divide Between Work and Private Time among Interactive Agency Workers. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *33*(3), 465–480. doi:10.22230/cjc.2008v33n3a1981

In November 2021, the Ontario government passed Bill 27 (Government of Ontario, 2021), amending the *Employment Standards Act* to require workplaces of 25 or more employees to establish a "disconnecting from work" policy, which means "not engaging in work-related communications, including emails, telephone calls, video calls or the sending or reviewing of other messages, so as to be free from the performance of work" (§21.1.1). While it is unlikely that this law will truly, meaningfully free us "from the performance of work," the so-called "right to disconnect" law speaks to longstanding debates over the technology-enabled intrusion of work into all aspects of our lives, which have intensified during the pandemic.

Ladner's *CJC* article examines early adopters of "laptops in the living room," and the implications for the distribution of household labour when technologies usher office work into people's homes. She follows interactive ad agency workers who took company-issued laptops and mobile devices home only to face the expectation of "hyper-responsivity to work" (p. 484). Ladner tracks what was then becoming a "new norm" (p. 467): workers took technology home to get more work done, but found new challenges arose when they were continuously connected. As people's working hours expanded, Ladner emphasized that companies did not have policies to recognize salaried employee's excessive work time.

Mobile technologies came with the expectation of an immediate response, putting a "burden of availability" (p. 480) on workers, including shouldering the expense of long-distance calls while on vacation. Laptops in the living room also generated conflict at home: families were angry at people for bringing work home, tensions around gendered divisions of labour deepened, and yet some felt working at home was a way to reconcile work pressures with pressures to spend time with family.

Vitally—and worth remembering in current debates about work, tech, and the pandemic—Ladner argues that it is not technology alone that blurs the line between home and work life but social relations of the workplace: hierarchies, labour dynamics, and power. She links the use of mobile technologies for work to the wider political economy of the workplace, where autonomy is unevenly distributed and long hours are expected, even if the geography of work changes. She concludes that workers will need to engage in collective action to address the

work/life blur, and that any new laws "must take into account that 'work' is completed in shorter periods, often in conjunction with other activities, and from multiple locations" (p. 486).

Article 4

Shepherd, Tamara. (2013). Young Canadians' Apprenticeship Labour in User-Generated Content. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *38*(1), 35–55. doi:10.22230/cjc.2013v38n1a2598

Labour politics are erupting on social media platforms. In spring 2021, influencers and content creators signed an "influencer agreement" with the performers' union SAG-AFTRA, enabling influencers to access health benefits, a pension, and image rights, which young people sign away in sponsorship agreements without much consideration (Germain, 2021). Later that summer, Black TikTok creators went on strike, refusing to choreograph dances for the platform to protest the way non-Black influencers co-opt Black creators' dances, gaining views and income from viral videos without crediting Black creators (McClay, 2021). What was barely a job a decade ago is now a viable way for some to make a living but also a contested field, where race, gender, and labour politics intersect and where billions of dollars are at stake.

Shepherd's *CJC* article examines proto-influencers, those creating online content for Web 2.0 in the earlier 2000s. She follows four Montréalers in their twenties, aspiring media and cultural workers entering the labour market at the height of "creative class" discourse, which promised young people fun, fulfilling, autonomous careers doing what they love. To navigate job insecurity and precarity in creative industries, they worked for free blogging and creating content in the hopes of securing paid work via building portfolios, reputations, and connections.

Shepherd positions this activity as apprenticeship labour, where aspiring workers seek out "masters" in their fields—successful bloggers with big followings who translated unpaid work into careers—to model their unpaid work after. Apprenticeships, similar to their historical antecedents in the trades and skilled labour, are aimed at occupational socialization. For Shepherd, however, in the case of online apprenticeships, this entails honing subjective dispositions toward flexibility, risk, and precarious labour. Shepherd's argument remains vital today: young people's self-directed, self-driven unpaid work creating content trains them to enter unstable, tech-driven job markets yet also intersects with social media business models, which continue to channel creative and social activity toward commodification and profit, the foundation on which today's influencer labour is built.

Nicole Cohen is Associate Professor at the Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology and the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. Email: nicole.cohen@ utoronto.ca.

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