

Mission Impossible? A Review of Kylie Jarrett's Book *Digital Labor*

Peter Goodwin

CAMRI, University of Westminster, London, UK, P.Goodwin@westminster.ac.uk

Abstract: This article reviews Kylie Jarrett's new book *Digital Labor* (2022, Cambridge: Polity Press). Jarrett develops a precise definition of digital labour to meet the objection that the term has been over-extended. This article argues that, despite much thought-provoking analysis of the different categories included in her definition and imaginative attempts to link them, the book fails to establish that digital labour in an extended sense has any distinct meaning separate from more general developments in work in contemporary capitalism.

Keywords: digital labour, alienation, labour process, commodification, exploitation

Kylie Jarrett's new book *Digital Labor* is a thought-provoking introduction to its subject. But what exactly is that subject? Jarrett is all too aware of that question from her opening chapter to her conclusion.

One possible answer might simply be that it's obvious. After all, as Jarrett herself points out, the term "digital labour" is in common use. She reminds us that, according to Google's Ngram Viewer, since 2009 there has been an exponential rise in references to the term in the Google Books data set. Furthermore, as the impressive number of recent works cited in *Digital Labor* attest, this is now very much an established area of academic inquiry. "That you have picked up this book with the title *Digital Labor* speaks to a relatively wide recognition of the term and some conceptualization of the general field it describes", she wryly, but quite rightly, observes (Jarrett 2022, 4).

However, Jarrett is unhappy with this "obviousness" and in her first chapter explicitly seeks to define the term: "what on earth does 'digital labor' refer to?" (2022,6). In attempting to clarify that she begins with a number of exclusions. First, she rejects defining it as any occupation that uses digital tools – today it would be difficult to find any that don't. Second, she rejects defining it as any labour that occurs in the production chain of digital commodities. Third, she rejects defining it as work in any industry that has been (even profoundly) transformed by digital technologies – today they almost all have been. The final rejection is of "a particular set of occupational conditions" for, as she rightly observes, "there is still a remarkable diversity, within each single digital labor sector in terms of work activity, products and contractual relations that make this a challenge" (2022, 9).

All of these exclusions make complete logical sense, although it should be noted at this stage that the second – any labour involved in the production of digital commodities – removes one of the most powerful polemical aspects of a wide definition of digital labour. Gone from the term (but of course not from reality!) are the enslaved Congolese mineworkers with whom Christian Fuchs opened his book *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (Fuchs 2014) and the "iSlaves" in China making Apple phones at Foxconn, whose conditions are so powerfully described by Jack Linchuan Qiu (Qiu 2016).

In formulating her definition Jarrett is explicitly reacting to the warning given by Alessandro Gandini (2021), who argues that the term “digital labour” has evolved since the early 2000s from its, in his view, theoretically legitimate (if controversial) use critically analysing the political economy of the unpaid leisure-driven activities of social media users, to an umbrella term covering a far broader range of relationships between labour – including paid labour – and digital technology.

Heeding this warning Jarrett strives to be precise in her terminology – hence those very explicit exclusions. But whereas Gandini (2021) concludes that the term “digital labour” has become an “empty signifier”, Jarrett formulates her own definition, one that is more precise, she hopes, but still draws on “commonsense usage of the term”. Her definition, she says, won’t be the only way to define digital labour, and the boundaries it sets will be “relatively arbitrary and open to debate” (Jarrett 2022, 11), but nevertheless it provides the framework for the rest of the book.

So with all her qualifications, what is Jarrett’s “novel” (as the back blurb on the book, probably embarrassingly to her, proclaims) definition of digital labour? “Three broadly defined categories of workers” who work “within the digital media industry” (Jarrett 2022, 22). These three categories she terms:

1. User labour – the unpaid “work” on social media platforms for which the term “digital labour” was originally coined.
2. Platform-mediated workers – people employed (part-time or full-time) through intermediating platforms like Deliveroo, Amazon Mechanical Turk or Care.com. To these she adds “creative and technical workers in the social media economy such as influencers, cammers, beauty bloggers and live-streamers”.
3. The formal worker – “paid workers engaged more or less full-time, or on an ongoing basis within the digital media industries”. This includes at one end “those involved in sustained, elite, professional careers such as design, programming or marketing” and at the other “more marginal workers who are paid employees in less elite positions, such as content moderators, Amazon fulfillment center workers, data-center workers or game testers” (Jarrett 2022, 22-26).

And what is Jarrett’s definition of the “digital media industry” within which this “labour triptych” is to be found? The big platforms both in the West and in China – Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent (GAFAM/BAT) – and the smaller and often newer digital companies that have grown up alongside them (and in many cases been taken over by them). She sees these sorts of companies and digitalisation in general as being at the forefront of the transformation of capitalism since the beginning of the breakdown of Fordism in the 1960s (Jarrett 2022, 11-22).

Having established her definition, Jarrett proceeds to apply the critical frames of Marxism and feminism to “interpret the salient qualities of digital labor” in five subsequent chapters organised in categories drawn from Marxism. These five chapters form the bulk of the book: “how labor is *exploited* [chapter 2] for profit, how work *processes* [chapter 3] are organized to maximize the extraction of value, the *alienation* [chapter 4] that is caused by workers’ exploitation, and how subjectivity itself consequently becomes a *commodity* [chapter 5]”. Chapter 6 naturally completes this Marxist- and feminist-themed survey by examining digital workers’ struggles (Jarrett 2022, 29).

As we shall see, all these chapters make many thought-provoking points, but in doing so, they also, to my mind, demonstrate that even Jarrett’s carefully worked out definition of “digital labour” fails to meet the objections made by Gandini to the increasingly extensive use of the term. And this despite the fact that Jarrett not only

favourably references Gandini but also presents her answers to him with a succession of (generally very reasonable) qualifications.

Take chapter 2 on “Exploitation: Digital Deeds Done Dirt Cheap” as the first example (Jarrett 2022, 36-68). Understandably Jarrett wants to go beyond a succession of horror stories. So, having explained Marx’s notion of exploitation as the appropriation of surplus value, she goes through how this works in each of her categories of digital labour. On the way she also makes the point that these tend to involve three different types of contractual relationship between the digital labourer and their employer. First, there is traditional (particularly in the Marxist scheme of things) waged labour of both those she calls “elite” professionals “as well as lower-status formal workers”. The second form of contract is no contract – the “unpaid work associated with users which is typically undertaken during leisure time”. Jarrett immediately makes the qualification “while I argue this is exploited labor, this status is contentious because of its uncontracted and uncoerced nature”. Despite promises we get little amplification of any debate on this contentious subject in the rest of the book. Third there is “self-employment such as that associated with freelance creative workers, startup entrepreneurs, or platform workers” (Jarrett 2022, 37-38).

Having carefully and favourably summarised what she sees as the Marxist theory of exploitation, Jarrett makes the (what should be) obvious point that there is another more common concept of exploitation “regularly invoked normatively to describe the degree to which surplus value is extracted and/or the cruel, coercive, or cynical conditions through which this extraction occurs” (2022, 38). Having made that quite correct point, Jarrett then rather undermines her previous apparent rigour, by seeking to “combine these two perspectives” – shifting the central framework of digital media labour economics “to questions of income instability and the precarious labor position that creates” (Jarrett 2022, 39).

What light does she shed on “digital labour” by doing this?

Clearly the notion of “precarity” has been developed by its most prominent exponents, not as a feature specific to “digital labour”, but as a feature of at least some types of labour across the board in contemporary capitalism. Jarrett’s take on this is to state that “as the exemplary form of labor in the post Fordist economy, digital labor is fundamentally tied to the emergence of the precariat” or again “The connection between digital labor and precarity is profound” (2022, 40 and 41).

But the evidence Jarrett puts forward for these generalisations is patchy. Her first category of “digital labour” is the free labour it is claimed we all provide when we use advertiser- or data-funded social media. On that line of argument we are all members of the precariat.

More convincing as examples of “unpaid labour” are her references to the various payment rip-offs reported by Uber, Deliveroo and other platform workers and to the widespread use of internships or of the unpaid work carried out by creative media professionals in order to break into the industry. But, as she herself observes, internships are a “widespread corporate trend often supported directly by government policies on education and welfare”, or again “creative professionals have long worked without compensation with a view to establishing themselves within a field” (2022, 46 and 47). In other words, these extremely varied examples of unpaid labour within the paid sector are neither exclusive to “digital labour” nor in fact particularly new. And to that one might add that nor are they payment rip-offs. So far as precarity is concerned, Jarrett’s claim that digital labour is the exemplary form of labour in the post-Fordist economy is being made to do a lot of work.

The same problem arises when Jarrett turns to “formally paid” contexts. “Workers within digital industries are typically required to take on work outside their officially contracted hours”. She gives examples from games development and Facebook – what in the rest of the book she refers to as “elite” workers. “The uncompensated extension of the working day is also a particular feature of work for freelance, short-term contract, and platform workers” (2022, 48, 49). With “elite” workers in particular (she gives the example of games developers) extended unpaid overtime is seen as a sign of commitment. But this phenomenon is neither particularly new, nor is it confined to the digital industries. It has long been a feature of many traditional professions, of business management and of “elite” employees in finance. It may well be getting worse. But that again is not simply a feature of the digital media industries – one only has to think of a world very familiar to many *tripleC* readers: the world of higher education.

“These demands for unpaid work are particularly pernicious in creative platform work”, argues Jarrett, “where incomes are often dubious and unstable to begin with, particularly when they rely on advertising revenue” (2022, 51). Almost certainly true, but yet again, is this a feature specific to this section of “digital labour” or is it something true more widely of “creative” workers – jobbing (or more likely “resting”) actors and freelance journalists come to mind.

Running the full gamut of her definition of digital labour, Jarrett finally turns to “elite digital workers in full-time employment”. One might not think that income instability would be a concern to them, but in at least two ways, she argues it is. First, there is the practice of paying them wholly or partially in stock options where they effectively “bet their wages on the future success of the company”. Second, not all start-ups succeed, so even where the full-time employees are not being paid in shares they face redundancy if and when the start-up fails, as it so often does (2022, 57- 64).

But how widespread is the practice of stock options rather than wages in digital media start-ups? Or, perhaps more important, how deep does it go within each start-up? And how much does it extend to other “non-digital” start-ups? And how many start-ups fail outside the digital media sector (restaurants come to mind)? And where they fail, are there not redundancies? And don’t those redundancies include “elite” workers?

Jarrett pulls together her various accounts of exploitation (or precarity) among her different sorts of digital labour by concluding that “the digital media industries frame labor as *cheap*. By this term I don’t mean that it doesn’t cost a great deal [...] but that it is disposable and treated with contempt” (2002, 64-65). But isn’t that a general feature of capitalism from at least Marx’s day to today? With the stereotypical “Fordist” worker of the post-war Western world that may have been somewhat ameliorated but, if so, hasn’t it become more pronounced in the globalised neoliberal world of the past few decades? And hasn’t it become more pronounced in *all* sectors of the economy – not just the digital media industries?

I have examined *Digital Labor*’s chapter on exploitation in some detail because it has features that run throughout the book: lots of varied and well-chosen illustrations of Jarrett’s theme, a recognition of the very different work situations of the workers included in her definition of digital labour and a dogged persistence in trying to find linking features across that definition. In doing that she comes up with some intriguing approaches, for example, explicitly combining Marxist and popular concepts of exploitation, introducing precarity as a key element of this, and describing digital labour as “cheap”. Even when I don’t agree with these approaches, they are certainly thought-provoking. But for me the key problem is that she doesn’t establish any of them as

being particular to *digital* labour rather than labour in general in the third decade of the 21st century (or in many cases well before it).

The same could be said for the other thematic chapters of the book; on the labour process, on alienation, on commodification and on workers' struggle.

First, some of the thought-provoking approaches. The starting point for Jarrett's discussion of the labour process is Harry Braverman's Marxist classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Published in 1974 and with the significant subtitle "The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century", Braverman's book is very much a product of the end point of "Fordist" dominance. Writing mainly about manual work in factories, Braverman described how managers had actively sought to replace craft skills by standardised, repetitive and low-skilled work. However, for Jarrett, the same capitalist problem of desiring to control the labour process, is more difficult when it comes to digital workers "involved in information-intensive knowledge production". "This means that in digital labor the exploitation of workers requires very particular modes of management" (2022, 71). These include work allocation by algorithms, discipline by customer feedback and for the "elite" workers the "invisible management" of culture. "In digital media industries, hope is a management tool" (2022, 98).

The chapter on alienation starts with Jarrett's puzzlement with a Microsoft ad trumpeting the "excitement" of having more than five jobs in a lifetime.

"How, I wondered, has precarity, overwork and lifelong instability become an ideal? [...] But my instinctive critical response may be asking the wrong questions. Perhaps celebrating entrepreneurial precarious work contexts is not Kool-Aid at all. Certainly, many workers find opportunities and higher incomes in the gig economy than would be otherwise be available in their local contexts" (2022,101).

She contrasts this with the classic notion of alienation and concludes in answer to her initial puzzlement about "how people have come to embrace digital labor despite its precarity, the answer is simple: it is because it *is* desirable and pleasurable work that is socially validated and from which both psychic and monetary rewards can be derived" (2022,132).

Taking another Marxist concept, commodification, Jarrett argues that while still relevant, its foregrounding by Marx "was tied to his critique of a particular kind of exploitation associated with waged labor. In the digital economy, where self exploitation, self employment (both legitimate and bogus) and entrepreneurial industriousness abound, this model is not always fit for purpose" (2022,163). She prefers the term "assetization" in which digital workers utilise (but do not completely commodify) their personal assets (whether sex workers' bodies or Uber drivers' cars). "In eschewing the logic of the commodity – the dead object handed about in market places – in favor of the dynamic ongoing processes of assetization, a renewed vigor is potentially brought to the struggle for better work" (2022, 165). And Jarrett begins her chapter on digital workers' struggles by challenging the common assumption that "the competitive, individualized and distributed nature of the digital workforce is [...] too averse or difficult to marshal into collective action" (2022, 167) and then proceeds to give a range of examples of such struggles, some involving established unions, some not, using a range of bases for collective action, from physical meeting places to online discussion forums.

There is much productive provocation of thought in these and many of Jarrett's more detailed approaches to her subject. This is reinforced by a continuing dialogue

between Marxist and feminist approaches, which runs through them all and in an extensive and well-chosen set of examples to illustrate each of her themes. These include not only many academic studies, but also examples drawn directly from press or industry sources. Two of these are particularly striking (and useful): the words from the Microsoft advertisement with which she begins her chapter on Alienation (subtitled “The Romance of Entrepreneurialism”) and a news report on Bella Thorne’s launch of an Only Fans page, which frames Jarrett’s chapter on Commodification (subtitled “Affective Attachment and Inalienable Assets”). And each chapter manages to pursue its theme(s) through the full range of activities that she identified in her definition of “digital labour”.

So how does Jarrett’s definition of “digital labour” stand up? How well does it meet the Gandini critique outlined earlier, which prompted the precision we have described?

In my view it does not.

All of Jarrett’s thematic chapters present the same problems that I have suggested in my treatment of her chapter on exploitation. Despite her careful differentiation between different types of “digital labour”, almost all the cases she advances can be found almost exactly in other cases of contemporary work outside the digital media sector. Hope may well be a management tool among the “elite” employees of the digital media industries, but so it is among most “professional” employees and “creatives”. Discipline by customer feedback may well be an important feature of the work of Uber drivers, but so it is increasingly among hospitality workers and academics. Even the algorithms and apps, apparently so characteristic of “platform” work have now been adopted by “traditional” employers in the same sectors. So, in London at least, the same sort of app that disciplines Uber drivers, now powers the largest “traditional” minicab firm. Similarly, “desirable and pleasurable work” from which both “psychic and monetary benefits” can be obtained exists way beyond the digital media sector – with exactly the same sorts of limits that it has there.

The cases can also be found historically way before the advent of “digital” work. All sorts of work from bus conductor to coalminer to bank clerk have been seen in their particular context as providing “psychic and monetary benefits” as against the concrete alternatives available to the people who undertook them.

Some of these features identified by Jarrett as characteristic of “digital labour” may of course be more common today than they were 50 years ago at the high point of Fordism (or welfare capitalism). But that change (if it exists) extends far more widely than digital work.

Finally, Jarrett’s dogged rigour in treating each of her types and subtypes of digital labour on its own merits for each of her themes, leaves one asking whether each of these subtypes of digital workers has more in common with subtypes of the workforce outside the digital media sector. Perhaps Amazon fulfilment centre workers have more in common with Walmart warehouse workers than they do with Jarrett’s “elite” developers in Silicon Valley. And those “elite” developers perhaps have more in common with other professionals, both contemporary and historical, than they do with their fellow (but non-elite) formal workers for digital media companies.

One way round this objection is that digital labour is the “exemplary” labour of contemporary capitalism. We have already noted Jarrett making this claim. And in her first chapter “Defining Digital Labor” she stresses the importance of the big platform companies in contemporary capitalism.

“Alongside the expected list of international banks in May 2021 the GAFAM/BAT group of companies featured highly on the Forbes Global 2000

list of the world's largest publicly listed companies. Apple was sixth, Google/Alphabet thirteenth, Microsoft fifteenth, Alibaba twenty-third, Tencent Holdings was twenty-ninth, and Facebook was at thirty-three" (Jarrett 2022, 21).

So, no denying it, the platform giants are not only new and well-known, but in the first rank by size (market capitalisation?) of publicly listed companies. But who were numbers one to five or six to twelve? And what about listing by number of employees? Beyond this list elsewhere in the book there is a frustrating lack of quantitative evidence to back up any claim to the "exemplary" nature of the digital media industries in contemporary capitalism, or indeed of the relative sizes of the different types and subtypes of digital labour she identifies.

In many parts of the book Jarrett makes (often fleeting, but generally perfectly correct) qualifications to her overall argument, drawing attention to the similarities of a particular point she is making on labour in the digital media industries to labour in other industries whether contemporary or historical. And in her conclusion, she confesses that when she began writing the book she was not sure what she would find that connected "these disparate forms of work and use to typify the nature of digital labor". But as work progressed:

"an important – and unexpected – theme did emerge that connected Google programmers with *zhubos*, Deliveroo riders, and tweeters. This was the structural similarities or tendencies toward the kinds of work historically associated with the margins of the economy. Although differently articulated in each sector, this association with the fringes emerged as a persistent framework, for understanding the socioeconomic and cultural underpinnings of labor in the digital media industries, as well as linking them to wider global and economic trends" (2022, 201-202).

Summed up like this, the same problems remain. "Elite" Google programmers having similarities with work "traditionally regarded as marginal", for example? And among the many contemporary forms of work which have characteristics traditionally regarded as marginal how many exist outside the digital media industries? For example, the move from coal-mining to call-centre, may have produced aspects of work "traditionally regarded as marginal" but this has happened outside the world of the digital media industries.

One final point. In exploring her three-fold definition of digital labour, Jarrett inadvertently exposes some of the problems with her first category, user labour, the unpaid, uncontracted "work" on social media platforms – which according to Gandini was the original sense of "digital labour". For, in each chapter, once comparisons are made between "user labour" and the more conventional use of the term labour involved in her other two categories, then "user labour" either fades into insignificance or seems quite artificially linked in. For example, writing of the terms and conditions required to use a social media platform as a form of management of the labour process (Jarrett 2022, 86-87) seems particularly strange.

To sum up, my major criticism of *Digital Labor* is that in trying to make the term more than the "empty signifier" that Gandini describes, Jarrett has attempted mission impossible. On the way she has produced a theoretically provocative and well-informed introduction to a number of features of labour in contemporary capitalism. To write a comprehensive study of labour in contemporary capitalism would require

superhuman multidisciplinary knowledge. It would also lead to a book at least five times the length of this one.

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About the Author

Peter Goodwin

Peter Goodwin is a Principal Research Fellow in CAMRI, the Communication and Media Research Institute, at the University of Westminster, UK. He has published on media policy, public service media and the political economy of communication.