

Don't Let the Numbers Get To You

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Social Capital, Digital Economy, User Generated Content

Tiziana Terranova on free labour, social capital in social media and research, as well as her upcoming book "Hypersocial" on application programming interface.

Her widely received essay ["Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy"](#) at the turn of the millenium made Tiziana Terranova one of the most influential voices on the digital economy . In the age of platform economy her [deliberations on free labour](#) remain ever so relevant. In this Interview with Vivien Hard and Christopher Olk she talks about her theory as a starting point in internet research, as well as her career, her upcoming book on application programming interface, the metrics of social capital in social media and the quantification of research.

*Ihr viel beachteter Aufsatz ["Free Labor: Die Produktion von Kultur für die digitale Wirtschaft"](#) machte Tiziana Terranova zur Jahrtausendwende zu einer der einflussreichsten Stimmen der digitalen Wirtschaft. Im Zeitalter der Plattform Wirtschaft bleiben ihre [Überlegung zu "free labour"](#) noch immer relevant. In diesem Interview mit **Vivien Hard und Christopher Olk** spricht sie über ihre Theorie als Ausgangspunkt für die Internetforschung, ebenso wie für ihre Karriere, ihr kommendes Buch über Application Programming Interface, die Metriken des Sozialkapitals und die Quantifizierung der Forschung.*

You first published your theory of free labour in 2000, so it is 19 years old at this point. In hindsight what would you like to update today?

I think that the notion of free labor was very much a part of its time – it read the whole business hype about 'user generated content through an 'eccentric' Marxist perspective, such as that elaborated by the French-Italian (post)workerist school. It allowed me, and the people who have drawn on it, to think about what was happening on the Internet in the light of a long history of transformation of the capitalist economy, trying to make sense of it in a different way than, let's say, mainstream economics which reduces it to a a-historical transaction between service providers and users. I do not think that it can really be updated, but maybe it can be used as a starting point to look at what happened after those early attempts of the Internet industry to leverage itself on users' participation. In my forthcoming book, *Hypersocial* (Minnesota Press), I look at the introduction of the application programming interface as a crucial movement. I think that the whole question of 'data as the new oil does not only correctly register the economic importance of data, but also indicates a kind of transformation of users' participation (their free labor) into something that is inert until the moment where data science and capital make it valuable. This does not mean that users' production of content does not have any value as such, but that by being spoken of as simply a means to generate data, there is a process of alienation that is harmful to the growth of social intelligence.

How do you feel about the term “user generated content”?

I feel it has become a very much run-of-the-mill term, ordinarily and widely used and kind of taken for granted. It was a big idea in the early 2000s, now it's just an established part of a common business model of the Internet. If I let myself listen to the sound of it, forgetting for a minute its history, I think what strikes me is its weird linguistic construction as the content appears as the subject that is generated by means of the 'user' – which of course is another commonplace term with an interesting history and connotations. I guess it makes me feel like I have been in this field for a long time!

What do you make of the phenomenon of paid social media influencers?

There is a whole software architecture and infrastructure constructed around metrics that measure 'social capital', such as centrality – and media interfaces that reward such metrics. The capacity to influence (action-at-a-distance) has been a crucial subject of

study for social psychology and social network analysis, that is two approaches that have been intensively drawn upon by the social media industry. It is perfectly understandable that some people, especially women apparently, are converting their hard-earned social capital into cash. I suspect that the overall trade balance of the time spent cultivating their social media status and the equivalent monetization might not work in most influencers' favor.

You demand that the financial value of the quantification of social interactions is reconnected to the social sphere of society. How can this be achieved?

I have no solution of course to such huge question, just an intuition that this is something that will become more and more important. I can point you of course to Nick Dyer-Witheford's excellent survey of 'Red Cybernetics' in Red Plenty, but also to William Davies' essays on the 'Chronic Social' and the ways in which social media seem to endow the social with the qualities of performativity and commensurability that neoliberal thinkers such as von Mises and Hayek thought were prerogatives of the market. I think that the question of how to reconnect money to social value will become more and more important for those who do not wish to rely on a return to national sovereignty and ethnocentric populism as a way out of the current economic crisis.

What do you think you will be researching on in 2030? What will be the title of your latest published paper then?

I have no idea, I would like to be surprised!

Do you experience a quantification and capitalisation of social interactions in your own field of work as a researcher? How so?

There are all kinds of tools of course to 'measure' your impact as a researcher in quantitative terms – as number of citations, likes, shares, viewings and downloads get computed to produce rankings. In my institutional life as a researcher in a public Southern Italian university, research funding is allocated on the basis of number of publications in A rated journals, but funding is so minimal that it is really a matter of

splitting peanuts. I do recognize however that I have capitalised on the number of citations of my scholarly work by enjoying the privilege of being often invited to speak to international conferences, festivals and other great events - including being interviewed by the HIIG of course! It also makes it quite easy for me to publish, which should not be taken for granted. I think that holding a permanent position in an Italian university, where these metrics are wielded in very idiosyncratic ways, has shielded me from the great anxiety that I am sure such quantification must produce especially for the younger generations – although exposed me to other ways in which power can and does operate in 'old-fashioned' academic institutions.

Regarding this: What is your advice to researchers today?

I am very wary of giving advice as the working conditions of today's researchers especially compared to when I started in the late 1990s have changed so much! Maybe the only thing that I feel like saying is to never lose the connection with that which motivates you most and not to let the numbers get to you too much. As Isabelle Stengers and Vinciane Despret put it in their book “Women Who Make a Muss”, one must continue thinking even more when one is forced into all kind of calculations with a view of securing a position in this unbearable competitive precarisation that plagues those who love doing research work these days.

TL;DR

Tiziana Terranova highlights the continued relevance of user generated data and content. As well as Social Media Software architectures and infrastructure as metrics of social capital.