

Special issue of Media-N: Art & Labor in the Amazon Economy

Deadline: May 1, 2019

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Media-N: Journal of the New Media Caucus

Special Thematic Issue: "Humans Are Underrated: Art & Labor in the Amazon Economy"

Media-N, Journal of the New Media Caucus, invites submissions for a special themed issue on the changing status of art and labor in the digital age. The issue borrows its title from a best-selling managerial tract, *Humans are Underrated: What High Achievers Know That Brilliant Machines Never Will*, which instructs companies on how to prioritize and reward undervalued forms of human labor as an effective business strategy in an age of increasing automation. Such "underrated" labor forms include storytelling, improvisation, spontaneity, critical and aesthetic judgment, creativity, empathy, authenticity, sincerity, attention, intimacy, care, cheer, and humor. Often referred to as "soft skills," these "human" capacities are also (and not coincidentally) typically associated with artistic production. By engaging in these activities and behaviors, human workers generate forms of surplus value more effectively and convincingly than their machine counterparts—at least, for the time being. But inasmuch as the notion that "humans are underrated" responds to the substitution of human workers by computerized systems, the underlying question of what will constitute exclusively "human" labor in an increasingly automated future remains in flux.

Spearheading this transformation in the meaning and value of work are major tech corporations like Amazon, which currently ranks second to Walmart as the largest U.S.-based corporate employer in the world. Amazon's worker base extends beyond its warehouses and corporate offices, and includes employees of subsidiary companies like Whole Foods, the thousands recruited to run its new HQ2 (locations now TBD), and legions more part-time workers who perform deliveries for services like Prime Now. Even more dispersed, and much less visible, are those employed via Amazon's global microlabor platform Mechanical Turk, described as "an on-demand, scalable, human workforce to complete jobs that humans can do better than computers." Essentially, mTurk is a marketplace that enables anyone to become a "requester" in order to advertise "Human Intelligence Tasks" (HITs), typically simple assignments like filling out surveys, analyzing receipts, performing online research, transcribing audio or writing captions. The vast majority of these micro-tasks take less than a minute to complete and pay around five to ten cents. While most HITs are used for the purposes of marketing and industry research, in the aggregate, these tasks contribute to the longer-term goal of improving algorithms so that computers can be "trained" to behave more like human beings.

Much criticism has been leveled against Amazon's workplace culture, from the unsafe conditions, long shifts, and low wages at its warehouses, to the notoriously cutthroat culture of its corporate offices. However, the labor performed by its global workforce of mTurkers remains largely invisible and behind-the-scenes. As a result, the impact of companies like Amazon on the future of human labor, not just in the U.S. but world-wide, has yet to be fully grasped.

This special issue of Media-N seeks submissions that examine the role of art, and specifically new media art, in addressing the ongoing transformation of human labor in an economy dominated by corporate tech behemoths like Amazon, and by extension, how this transformation impacts the meaning and significance of artistic labor. We seek contributions from scholars, critics, artists, designers, scientists, media-makers, and interdisciplinary researchers from across the humanities and sciences who are interested in the relation between digital media and human labor. Individual and collaborative submissions are welcome.

Media-N, Journal of the New Media Caucus (ISSN: 1942-017X) is a scholarly, invitational, and double blind peer-reviewed journal. The journal provides a forum for scholarly research, artworks and projects, and is open to submissions in the form of papers, reports, and reviews of exhibitions and books on new media art. Media-N is an English language journal, and all submissions must be received in English adhering to the standards set by the 16th edition of the Chicago Manual of Style.

TIMELINE:

May 1, 2019: Deadline for submission of abstracts.

May 15, 2019: Notification of accepted proposals and invitation to submit paper.

July 30, 2019: Projected deadline for submission of final papers.

ABSTRACT GUIDELINES:

Please send your proposal by email with the following information combined into a single document:

- Proposal Title, and a 300-500 word abstract, plus 1-2 images if desired.

- Please include your name, email, and title/affiliation on abstract.

- A condensed CV (no longer than 3 pages).

NOTE: Materials should be submitted in English, as a Word document or PDF.

File should not exceed 5MB.

SEND SUBMISSIONS TO:

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Reference:

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