

Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary¹



Venture Labor, the News Crisis, and Journalism Education

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This essay applies Neff’s venture labor concept to crisis in journalistic production and attempts by journalism schools to reconcile their roles of training students for a professional workforce with the slow-motion disintegration of that workforce. Specifically, it looks at entrepreneurial journalism training programs in the United States and the complex ways these programs both reify and challenge notion of venture labor.

Keywords: journalism, education, professions

I want to apply ideas of venture labor as both a habitus and a large-scale macroeconomic structure (Neff, 2012) to the current crisis in American news production (Anderson, Bell, & Shirky 2012; Downie & Schudson 2009). Specifically, I want to ask: How has that crisis affected journalism education in the United States? In other words, I want to treat Neff’s book as an overarching conceptual text worthy of application to a variety of 21st-century work practices. I’ve found that journalism is such an idiosyncratic profession and set of digital work practices that using it as a lens through which to interrogate broader concepts is a useful exercise, insofar as it often draws out hidden theoretical lacunae. Specifically, I want to discuss the relationship between journalism education and journalistic practices—about how major changes in the production of news intersect with large-scale cultural shifts within journalism education, and how journalism education is currently dealing with the challenge of venture labor.

Two major trends are at work in journalism education. Both represent a response to the current so-called journalism crisis. The first trend is the notion of journalism school as a “teaching hospital,” in

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which deficits in community news production will be made up through the work of students and academic faculty (Newton, 2012; Ryfe & Messing 2013). The second is the idea of “entrepreneurial journalism education.” In this paper, I am going to focus simply on the second notion—that of education in entrepreneurial journalism—insofar as it dovetails most precisely with Neff’s work (though for a longer discussion of these themes, see Anderson 2014).

The specifics of the American journalism crisis are, by now, well known. Suffice it to say that I think that this crisis is composed of at least five mini-crises: a cultural crisis in the profession, an economic crisis in the news business, a political crisis, a crisis of organizational workflow, and a technological crisis. For an educational system whose primary function has been to pump graduates into stable and secure positions, these varied crises in news work have obviously caused a crisis in pedagogical rhetoric, and occasionally a crisis in the curricular practices of these schools themselves. For journalism educators, the usual historical uncertainty about the very nature of journalism school and the exact forms of expertise journalism educators are supposed to convey to their students (Anderson 2014) have been exacerbated by the brute facts that fewer journalists are employed now than at any time since the early 1970s and that “the total of 38,000 [editorial newspaper] jobs is down 33.2% from its 1989 peak of 56,900” (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2014).

One of the ways journalism schools and journalism programs have responded to these employment challenges has been to argue for the increasing importance of entrepreneurial journalism education, the very definition of which is contested—as we will see below. Recent scholarship by David Ryfe and Donica Messing (2013) documented that the number of entrepreneurial journalism programs has increased 10-fold across the United States in the past half decade, most prominent among them being programs at my own institution, the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, and the journalism program at City University London.

But what is entrepreneurial journalism? The most succinct self-definition comes from the CUNY journalism school website in describing its mission:

Our goal is to help create a sustainable future for quality journalism. We believe that future will be shaped by entrepreneurs who develop new business models and innovative projects – *either working on their own, with startups, or within traditional media companies.* (CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, 2014, para. 2, emphasis added)

However, it is obviously not quite that simple. Recent scholarship on the future of journalism education by Caitlin Petre and Max Besbris (2013) uncovered that entrepreneurial journalism educators actually mean three very different things when they talk at length about entrepreneurial journalism education. First, some entrepreneurial journalism advocates believe that journalism graduates must invent their own jobs, often by starting their own companies, since “traditional” media jobs are no longer available. Second, in some cases the meaning of *entrepreneurial* has to do not with starting one’s own business, but with promoting one’s own work, whether or not one is employed within a media organization. Entrepreneurialism in this second sense is similar to the oft-invoked dictum that a journalist today must make a concerted effort to “build her personal brand.” The third and final sense in which *entrepreneurial* is

used by journalism school professionals is more unclear, but we can generalize that it refers to a particular type of individual disposition: An entrepreneurial journalism student is a “student who is boundlessly energetic, game, and highly adaptable. It also means being willing and able to accept working conditions that are unstable, poorly paid, and without benefits” (Petre & Besbris, 2013, p. 33).

I’d argue that each of these conflicting definitions carries strong affinities with Neff’s (2012) definition of *venture labor* as “the explicit expression of entrepreneurial values by non-entrepreneurs When people think of their jobs as an investment or as having a future payoff other than regular wages, they embody venture labor” (p. 16).

So, what happens if we use a general notion of venture labor as an analytical lens through which the specifically *journalistic* crisis and its educational instantiation help us achieve? What can the general concept of venture labor tell us about journalism in particular, and about labor in our current age of uncertainty more generally? It tells us three things. First, viewing the crisis in journalism school through the lens of venture labor helps us see that entrepreneurialism serves as a specific response to a specific economic crisis. In the theoretical section of her book, Neff (2012) often frames her understanding of the relationship between venture labor and macroeconomic trends at the “1,000-foot” level. Looking at venture labor through journalism can help ground the theory in a more granular understanding of particular economic catastrophe—the catastrophe engulfing journalism. Second, analyzing the nexus between venture labor and entrepreneurial journalism education helps us understand the relationship between venture labor and professionalism. Compared with the disruption and openness presented by Silicon Valley, journalism practically looks like a medieval guild. The way journalists are educated, appreciated, and promoted throughout their careers is much more structured than in the technology industries. And so, by looking at venture labor through the lens of journalism, we can better understand how the general trends Neff analyzes play out within the context of a far more professionalized environment than the one studied in her book. In other words, we can ask which complex cultural apparatuses play a role in “pushing back” against the overarching tendencies produced by the entrepreneurial moment. Third, thinking about the relationship between journalism and venture labor forces us think harder about the critical and normative implications of Neff’s analytical toolkit. To just name one example, should we call venture labor “false consciousness,” in the venerable Marxist sense of the term? This is unclear in Neff’s work, but I actually think this has more to do with the fact that the entire concept of economically oriented action needs a radical rethinking, rather than with any flaw in her arguments.

We critically inclined scholars might chastise venture labor as a symptom of ideological delusion in most occupations and professional fields. However, in the case of journalism—a noble profession with a mission of enhancing democracy—we may feel the temptation to hold back our critique in the interest of keeping the field alive.

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