

Tamara Shepherd, Concordia University
tamara.shepherd@gmail.com

Politics of Gender and Generation in the Labour of User-Generated Content (UGC)

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Abstract

As part of a larger project, this paper extends from a framing of UGC as a kind of labour, a special case of apprenticeship that takes place between the free labour of the commodity audience and the creative industries work of new cultural intermediaries. This in-between stage of apprenticeship is contingent on the position of younger UGC creators within a relatively privileged group of internet users, at a particular age and life stage. In their early 20s, the participants in the project are preoccupied with the development of professional identities, just as they are still within the throes of identity formation more generally. As this identity work takes place through both offline and online social spaces, it implicates processes of immaterial, especially emotional, labour in the management of a “branded self.” Age is obviously a key variable in this negotiation of identity within modes of immaterial labour, as indicated in terms such as “digital natives” and the “born digital” generation. Along with age, I include gender here as another central axis along which technologically mediated apprenticeship gets shaped by identity dimensions in popular understandings, policy discourse and participant interviews. The participants’ critical stances on UGC as somehow democratizing were accompanied by accounts of generational divides, gender politics and socioeconomic factors in the use of new media technologies. Such identity-based discourses are important to highlight not only because online cultural production involves a commercialization of younger users’ labour of identity formation, but also because policymakers working in the public interest have a responsibility to protect users’ rights on commercial Web platforms.

Keywords

youth, gender, user-generated content, Web 2.0, labour, identity

Introduction

User-generated content (UGC) has functioned as a corporate buzzword as part of promoting commercial Web 2.0 platforms in terms of their affordances for user agency. As a marketing term, UGC thus seeks to elide any discussion of the structural inequalities that subtend commercial Web platforms – particularly those that implicate the rights of people contributing their content and personal information. These contributions have been framed as a kind of free labour, most famously by Tiziana Terranova (2000; 2004), who follows an Autonomist Marxist conception of immaterial labour as the unpaid surplus labour emanating from expressions of the general intellect

(Virno 2004). Yet while it is unpaid and fundamentally exploitative as an immanent process of capitalism, free labour in UGC platforms also offers users benefits in the form of communication platforms that facilitate identity formation along with social, political and professional organization.

This paper reflects the outcome of two years of fieldwork conducted among a group of four Montréal 20-somethings – Shawn, Angelika, Laura and Marilis – who enact free labour on UGC platforms as part of an apprenticeship for culture industry careers. When UGC labour is framed as a kind of apprenticeship, it serves to highlight how assimilation into creative industry jobs requires the cultivation of a particular kind of creative identity – one that naturalizes the risk associated with precarious and low paying employment. What this kind of identity formation also accomplishes is the development of the self as a kind of brand or “commodity sign” (Hearn 2008, 201). This branded self is a necessary construct for negotiating the precarity of creative industry careers, which raises the question of the limits of a normative conception of autonomy in this context. David Hesmondhalgh (2010) notes that any designation of cultural work as autonomous or self-realizing might be critiqued from a broadly poststructuralist contention of the social construction of identity, and indeed from a Marxist perspective on how a sense of personal autonomy is the necessary condition of the worker’s own self-exploitation (233, 240, 242). Here identity can be seen as an expressly political construct in that, as Hesmondhalgh asserts, framing autonomy and self-realization as normative concepts happens within understandings of justice in cultural work – work performed by mostly white, middle class, educated people according to larger structures of privilege (246-247). Identity work in the context of both a future creative career and a present free immaterial labour investment thus intersects with political iterations of identity as it simultaneously raises the issues of justice and rights on UGC platforms.

In analyzing the participants’ interview responses and UGC practices, I have situated them within a corpus of internet policy discourses – recent documents that pertain to UGC from Canadian and UK federal regulators, and from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and the Pew Internet and American Life Project – in order to interrogate the rights that young people creating online content are afforded as free labourers. For an understanding of rights in UGC, the larger thesis project adapts legal scholar William McGeveran’s (2009) notion of “persona rights” as a co-articulation of privacy and intellectual property rights in terms of the promotional economies of online social networks. These persona rights are subject to a matrix of intersecting politics; for example, the class identity of free labourers has been posited as a potential departure point for envisioning organized resistance to capitalist exploitation of their intellectual property (Terranova 2004). But class is not the only salient identity-based politic here; multiple asymmetries of power are implicated in the negotiation of rights-based discourses. Here I focus on those having to do with gender and age, to add to the rich literature on class-based considerations of free immaterial labour online (e.g., van Dijck 2009; Camfield 2007; Coté & Pybus 2007). Power relationships in this case are contingent on the relatively privileged North American context in which my participants and myself are located.

In framing the work of creating UGC as a kind of labour, I have claimed that it represents a special case of apprenticeship that takes place between the free labour of a “commodity audience” and the creative industries work of “new cultural intermediaries” (Smythe 1981; Bourdieu 1984). This in-between stage of apprenticeship is contingent on the position of this study’s participants in terms of their location within a relatively privileged group of internet users, and in particular, on their age and life stage. In their early 20s, these participants are preoccupied with the development of professional identities, just as they are still within the throes of identity formation more generally (Maguire, Ball & Macrae 2001). Since this identity work takes place through both offline and online social milieus, it implicates processes of immaterial, especially emotional, labour in the management of a socially constructed “branded self” (Hearn 2008). Age is obviously a key variable in this negotiation of identity within technologized modes of immaterial labour, as indicated in the literature on “digital natives” and the “born digital” generation (Prensky 2001; 2004; Palfry & Gasser 2008). Along with age, I include gender here as another central axis to add to class as a framework for understanding how technologically mediated apprenticeship gets shaped by identity dimensions in popular understandings, policy discourse and participant interviews.

This paper focuses on age and gender in the context of young people’s online cultural production. I frame the labour of UGC as an economic construct that often conflicts with identity-based politics, where contentious popular stereotypes around gender and age tend to shape new media policy discourse, as well as the ways participants see their own online activities. Yet there are also apparent tensions between policy discourses and participant interviews that arise in participants’ tendencies to be critical of popular and regulatory proclamations around the social benefits of UGC. Celebratory notions of UGC as “democratizing” come up time and again in policy documents, typically as a means of legitimating underlying economic motivations for their regulatory approach to Web 2.0 platforms. The superficiality of such proclamations for UGC also become clearer when examining how users get characterized in policy documents according to reified notions of age, gender and class. The participants’ critical stances on UGC as somehow democratizing were in fact matched by more variable senses of these generational divides, gender politics and socioeconomic factors in the use of new media technologies. Such identity-based discourses are important to highlight not only because online cultural production involves a commercialization of the labour of identity formation, but also because policymakers have a responsibility to protect users’ rights, as implicated in the negotiation of identity on commercial Web 2.0 platforms.

Identity-based politics and representation

The participants’ discussions of their UGC labour highlight how the identities of young content producers get negotiated within the inescapably commercial context of Web 2.0. This context not only troubles claims for civic participation and social collaboration made in digital literacy policies, but also impinges on broader struggles around identity-related politics. Young people’s use of new media for cultural production,

communication and identity formation involves attempts to “work out identity and status, make sense of cultural cues, and negotiate public life” (boyd 2007, 120). This struggle takes place in the context of popular and regulatory discourses that offer only a narrow range of possible subject positions to young content creators (Facer et al. 2001). These positions tend to fall along essentialized lines of age, gender and class in the policy documents and interviews, although race, ethnicity and ability are also mentioned occasionally as relevant axes of identity here. While identity struggles take shape around these axes in both the documents and interviews, policy discourse tends to either reify certain stereotypical representations of users or emphasize demographic divides. By contrast, the participants offered much less formulated reflections on the question of personal politics in UGC. I interpret the participants’ attempts to articulate the meaning of political identities to their creative process as part of the broader work of identity formation typical of young people in general – something that the policy documents seem to either devalue or caricature according to superficial stereotypes based on age and gender.

Throughout the process of researching for the project, it has become apparent that age figures as the most salient identity position in the discourses of policy documents and of the participants. As Mimi Ito et al. (2008) have described, based on their large-scale survey of youth online conducted for the MacArthur Foundation, the various degrees of engagement implied by “hanging out, messing around and geeking out” tend to be situated mainly within practices of Western popular culture fandom. As such, I invoke Susan J. Douglas’s (2006) “turn within” in commercial U.S. media culture marked by ethnocentrism and narcissism as the primary context for young people’s UGC activities. The turn within concept, as Douglas articulates it, is clearly related to age and generational divides, in addition to American cultural and economic imperialism. As she asserts, “the consequences of the turn within are especially serious for young people” who have become narcissistic to the point of being “geographic illiterates” (2006, 622). In the policy documents, portrayals of younger users who are not part of the overly celebrated vanguard of civic participation online are seen in this way, as politically disengaged, spending their time playing games or chatting with friends. When used as a frame through which to view policy documents like UK super-regulator Ofcom’s *Social Networking* (2008), the turn within idea also has to do with other demographic qualities, including gender, class, race and ability. But the way that these reports posit such dimensions as mere demographics serves to obscure how these categories function as performative identity constructs, especially in the context of newer online modes of communication and cultural production.

To isolate gendered identities, for example, Ofcom’s essentialization of young women as “Attention Seekers” points to specific mechanisms for actively constructing identity online:

This group comprised social networking site users who craved interaction with others, often from the Alpha Socialisers. Most of these users had posted photos of themselves and friends in provocative poses, partying, drinking and portraying glamorous lifestyles. This type of user was keen to customise their profile. They regularly updated their ‘skins’ (the style, colours, and design of their site home

pages) to reflect an aspirational image, e.g. glitter and sparkle and images of ‘hunky’ men. Attention Seekers were willing to collect friends from all over the world, but tended to have actual online interaction with only a few people. Attention Seekers’ profiles had a big effect on their social identity. They were typically quite insecure, and for them social networking sites were all about entertainment and ego. It was important to them that others commented on the photos they posted. This gave them a sense of acceptance and increased their self-esteem.

Users from other groups could be quite dismissive of Attention Seekers, as these quotes show:

She seems really vain; 20 pictures of herself but no pictures of her friends – Boy 16, rural/semi-rural

I think some [girls] feel self-conscious...so they’ll put explicit pictures on and hope people will say they look good, and then they’ll feel better about themselves – Girl 15, urban/suburban (Ofcom 2008, 29)

This essentialized view of young women on SNSs manifests a version of the popular moral panic around girls’ sexualization in online social environments (Shade 2007; Marwick 2008; Cassell & Cramer 2008). These kinds of portrayals are particularly troubling in terms of their influence on adults’ perceptions, and more crucially self-perceptions, of girls online. As participant Angelika described, early exposure to a *20/20* program dedicated to this moral panic around girls’ provocative photos on MySpace created what she calls a “paranoia”:

[...] with MySpace I just never, cause a lot of MySpace’s I remember were a lot of girls in high school who were kinda out there, and they would have really photos on their, and I was always paranoid about that, like the whole internet in the *20/20* thing. Like I myself was like, “that’s weird!” And my parents never said anything to me about it, it’s like I think, what I saw on TV, and like these girls would have all these provocative photos and whatever, and I was like, “yeah, I’m not doing that”. So, I never, I never did MySpace because when I did see it and it was that I was like, “that’s weird.”

In Angelika’s case, it was popular moral panic discourse on *20/20*, rather than her own parents’ concern, that instilled a wariness of MySpace. A similar moral panic figures in Ofcom’s view of young women on SNSs as “Attention Seekers.” Ultimately, the report’s attempt to describe the practices of young women here is undermined by its egregious reification of this moral panic around a particularly gendered stereotype, which is speciously supported by quotations from users from other groups and not from “Attention Seekers” themselves.

Ofcom’s negative portrayal of young women on SNS reinforces the way they are sexualized in commercial media culture, resonating with Douglas’s characterization of the turn within as expressing narcissism and ethnocentrism. Moreover, depictions of young people as narcissistic tap into a storied cultural mythology that springs up in social studies books such as Christopher Lasch’s 1979 bestseller *The Culture of Narcissism: American Youth in an Age of Declining Expectations* and Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell’s more recent situating of that youthful narcissism online in *The*

Narcissism Epidemic (2009), cultural franchises like *The Twilight Saga*, and the theories of prominent developmental psychologist Erik Erikson. Yet on the flip side of the attention seeker as an emblematic figure of the turn within, a body of cultural studies scholarship on youth and subcultures has sought to validate young people’s media-based consumption practices by framing them as forms of (gendered) cultural and subcultural production (e.g. Hebdige 1979; McRobbie & Garber 1975); for young girls in particular, this approach has been invoked as part of a project to recuperate their cultural agency online (Mazzarella 2010; Kearney 2006; Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz 2006). For example, the Pew report *Teens and Social Networking* (Lenhart et al. 2007) takes pains to underscore all those activities in which girls are more active and indeed more “empowered” than boys in online activities. Girls are said to comprise the larger group of teen content creators, they “have fueled the growth of the teen blogosphere,” they “eclipse boys in photo posting,” they are “more frequent communicators” and more likely to be “multi-channel teens” (Lenhart et al. 2007, 4, 9, 13, 20, 19). While the Pew study may seem more progressive than Ofcom in its claims for girls’ empowerment, neither of these portrayals captures the nuances or fluidity of gendered identity construction online.

In fact, Pew and Ofcom offer up the two most emblematic pictures of young women’s activities online as either self-actualizing or self-absorbed, but in both cases, discourses around risk and harm tend to overlay any discussion of girls on the internet.¹ As a supposedly vulnerable population, young women function in these reports as the recipients of paternalistic regulatory protection. For example, Ofcom claims that Attention Seekers’ “need for interaction and attention outweighed the need to be safety conscious. This was particularly the case for younger female users who in some cases appeared to have low self-esteem and craved attention” (Ofcom 2008, 56). But beyond this specific group, all young women online appear to be in need of security measures: “Parents were anxious about safety risks online relating to their children and particularly the perceived dangers that teenage girls might be stalked, either online or offline” (Ofcom 2008, 32). The perception of girls as particularly vulnerable has even broader ramifications than the prevailing ideas around risk and harm from strangers – girls are often subject to moral panics about the harm they might pose to themselves, as in the case of pro-anorexia web communities (e.g., Shade 2003). The Pew study reports that “Over one-third (34%) of online teen girls report looking up information about health, dieting, or physical fitness, compared with only 22% of boys” (Lenhart et al. 2007, 27). This statistic not only recalls the public outcry over the promotion of eating disorders online through teen girls’ communities, forums and blogs, but it also serves to normalize the gender differences in teens’ relationship to body image. Young women are thus positioned by these reports as both insecure and vulnerable, in a way that supports Douglas’s turn within thesis, and also reiterates the protectionist discourse

¹ As Sonia Livingstone points out, “risk” serves as the dominant framework for new media policy about children and youth in general, seeking to “protect youth from the online risks associated with transgressive representations of the self and abusive contact with others” (2008, 395).

around girls that legitimates the role for parental and state regulation of their activities online.

Yet in all the interviews except for Angelika’s, the participants never mentioned the safety risks that seem to pervade regulatory discourses. While the participants may represent a special group of users engaged in content creation, their reflections point to the more nuanced ways that young people negotiate their identities online. Even in Angelika’s case, an ongoing concern about girls’ provocative photos on MySpace was posited alongside her self-identification as a feminist, where she uses her blog to explore popular misogynistic representations of women by posting images such as advertisements from vintage issues of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. She finds these ads both “funny” and “offensive,” and posting them offers her an opportunity to reflect on visual culture while it “makes me feel like I’m doing something creative.” The self-expressive function of UGC, as closely tied to explorations of identity politics, came up also in Laura’s description of writing for her Metro News celebrity gossip blog. While this blog was mainly seen by her as place for humourous speculation on lighter celebrity news items, such as Dustin Hoffman “stealing a bathmat from a hotel,” the blog’s lighthearted tone became more serious around the incident of singer Chris Brown’s 2009 assault on girlfriend Rihanna:

[...] sometimes I’ve written some, like, semi-serious things. There was one, after the Rihanna and Chris Brown thing, where I wrote like a fairly thoughtful, serious thing. And it was like “why do I feel so close to this person?” It was like, ok, I’m not going to question it too much right now, I’m going to just go with it and just be like, I do feel close to this person in this moment. I do feel that these boundaries are pretty fluid, considering the way things have been set up for us. The topic of domestic violence held personal resonance for Laura, who saw it as a chance for her to write passionately about an important feminist issue while not necessarily compromising the identity of her blog. She saw blogging, even in the relatively structured context of a celebrity gossip blog hosted by Metro News, as an activity where boundaries around the negotiations of identity are experienced as fluid. Both Laura and Angelika expressed feeling free to explore the contradictions of their identity politics through UGC, challenging the shallow policy conceptions of young women and girls as at turns “vulnerable” and “empowered,” where notions of “risk” dominate the discourse.

Contrasting the way that policy reports frame gender in terms of personal risk and harm, discussions of class in these documents tends to function in relation to infrastructural paradigms, such as the so-called “digital divide.” The main regulatory body, the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), posits the digital divide in Canada as one between socioeconomic and geographic groups:

A digital divide exists in Canada between urban and rural areas with respect to the availability of broadband Internet service. The network investments needed to provide next generation access will likely exacerbate this division because money will most logically be spent in areas with high population density which provide the greatest return on investment for sunk costs. [...] There is a significant difference in Internet use between the highest income households

and lowest income households. Statistics Canada found that a digital divide by income continues to exist. [...] While this report does not indicate where they use the Internet, it is not unreasonable to assume that significantly more upper income Canadians subscribe to Internet services than lower income Canadians. (CRTC 2010, 76)

While the CRTC report misleadingly conflates urban areas with higher incomes and rural with lower incomes, it also underscores the technical rather than social aspects of a digital divide. Users’ class status is presented here as external to the infrastructural and economic logics behind such a divide, rather than endemic to it.

Similar circumventions of class as a social issue in favour of more technical explanations for digital divides can be found in the other documents, which often discuss this issue in relation to broadband policy. For instance, the OECD *Participative Web* (2007) report asserts that “universal, affordable access for broadband technology” is a necessary precondition for UGC, in achieving the policy goals of “ensuring effective competition and continued liberalisation in infrastructure, network services and applications in the face of convergence across different technological platforms that supply broadband services” (OECD 2007, 42). The Ofcom report seems to confirm this contention, in stating that teenagers from lower socioeconomic groups often face barriers to accessing SNSs “predominantly due to lack of internet access” (Ofcom 2008, 19). The digital divide and issues around access get naturalized as infrastructural matters in these reports, which tend to avoid more nuanced analyses of the way class functions as a variable of social identity in young people’s content creation online.

The one exception to the lack of a more social understanding of class comes from the Pew study, which presents multiple findings on socioeconomic factors in teens’ UGC. In addition to the typical claims around broadband (i.e., “wealthier people are more likely to have broadband connections that enable access to a richer array of online activities and content”), the report includes more surprising findings, such as the high proportion of teens from lower income families who blog:

Teens living in households earning less than \$50,000 per year are considerably more likely to blog than those living in higher-income households; fully 35% of online teens whose parents fall in the lower income brackets have created an online journal or blog, while just 24% of those in the higher income brackets have done so. (Lenhart et al. 2007, 9)

These statistics are not framed in terms of infrastructural variables, such as broadband access; rather, they are contextualized within the more social dynamic of family structure: “Online teens living in single-parent homes are far more likely to have shared their writing through a blog; 42% of these teens keep a blog compared with 25% of teens living with married parents” (9). Contrasting the typically economic and technical explanations for class-based differences, the Pew report attempts to provide a social context to explain their findings here. While this move is not without problems, especially in that a social explanation is used here in a sense as a last resort to account for a finding that seems inconsistent with the digital divide paradigm, it nonetheless represents an important discursive association of socioeconomic status with online activities in ways that go beyond technical infrastructure.

The relevance of the Pew study’s attempt to characterize class variables as more deeply social bears out in the interviews with participants. When we talked about their teenage years and their first encounters with internet technology, the participants often brought up the socioeconomic situation of their families in relation to their early uses of networked technologies. For example, Marilis’s early blogging activities stemmed from the fact that she had internet at home for as long as she could remember, at least since elementary school, because her father was an astronomer who “always had like really technical stuff, like he was technologically inclined. And um, so we always had it.” Add to this early access the fact that she moved away to Thailand for two years at age 13, which prompted her to start a blog in order to keep in touch with her friends back in Canada. Angelika also reported using social platforms like the Polish version of Facebook to keep in touch with family back in Poland, but her home internet access was acquired later than Marilis’s. In fact, she remembers conflicts with her parents over allocating the dial-up connection: “I would get in trouble for like blocking the lines and stuff, so like, and my dad would always be like, ‘oh, you can’t stay on it for too long, because people are trying to call!’ And if they like left to go somewhere, I would be on it and I’d have to like hurry to get off of it and pretend like I wasn’t on it.” A similar situation was also reported by Shawn, who grew up in a rural town of around 500 inhabitants, where dial-up internet was the only option for households until very recently. Shawn’s family got internet access much later than his school, and even then, he and his mother and brother shared one computer – on which the brothers were allowed only one hour of internet time per day. As Shawn describes, this limitation made him have to “plan my hour,” where internet time was much more precious to him than to his friends who had their own computers with internet access in their bedrooms.

But while Shawn lagged behind his less rural peers in internet access, he was the first in his school to have a mobile phone precisely because of his rural upbringing: I was like, ‘mom, I live so far away, and if anything happens...’; I played the emergency card thing.” Shawn cited this early adoption of mobile technology as an influence on his current reliance on his iPhone for UGC activities like posting to Facebook and updating his blog. In another similar instance where socioeconomically determined early experiences with internet technology impacted later patterns of use, Laura described learning how to communicate over the intranet of her elite academic high school associated with the large city university. The high school’s intranet was hosted by the university system, where students could communicate at school and from home on message boards and chat rooms. Laura cited a traumatic chat experience with an older boy at school who she was dating as the root of her aversion to internet chat to this day. While her story was told with a humourous overtone, Laura’s early internet uses – like those of the other participants – seemed crucial for shaping current online activities, including content creation. These lingering effects of early mediated communication, as products of particular socioeconomic situations and social locations, are an important consideration in analyzing the intersecting dimensions of age, gender and class in UGC, which is implicated so intimately with identity formation.

In future qualitative policy reports, portrayals of age, gender and class would thus benefit from intersectional analyses that approach these identity dimensions as

simultaneously personal, social and infrastructural. Even more crucially, they might consider the impact of other identity constructs such as race, ethnicity, sexuality and ability. These concepts practically never appear in the sample of policy documents analyzed here, barring three discrete instances: Ofcom claims that respondents from ethnic minority groups in the UK are more likely to have set up a social networking profile compared to the total population, adding vaguely that “one of the reasons for this is likely to be the generally younger profile of ethnic minority groups – although this is not the only explanation” (Ofcom 2008, 18); the Pew study only mentions racial difference in the very particular context of looking for US college information online, where “African American teens who use the internet are significantly more likely to go online to look for information about colleges and universities they are thinking about attending than white teens” (Lenhart et al. 2007, 26); finally, in relation to ability, the CRTC’s Navigating Convergence report states that “it is important to ensure that Canadians with disabilities continue to have access to services,” particularly emergency services (CRTC 2010, 44, sec. 204). These three cursory mentions are all that comes up around race, ethnicity, sexuality or ability across all five policy documents analyzed for the project, which might be indicative of a distinctly Western ideal of multiculturalism that is often reticent to single out certain minority groups over others.

The legacy of Canadian, U.S. and UK policy discourse around identity issues other than age and gender might offer some clues to the basis of such omissions. In Canada, stipulations about “rural and remote” populations tend to refer mainly to First Nations people without explicitly mentioning ethnicity. For example, Industry Canada’s 2002 implementation of the Broadband for Rural and Northern Development Pilot Program sought to bring high-speed connectivity “specifically [to] First Nations, rural, remote and Northern communities” (CRTC 2010, 82). As such, the terms rural and remote work in the policy documents as euphemisms for First Nations groups, who get framed in the narrow neoliberal terms of the digital divide, as cited above: “A digital divide exists in Canada between urban and rural areas [...] Users in remote areas arguably stand to benefit the most from technologies with the potential to bridge great distances” (CRTC 2010, 76). Similarly, in the U.S. and UK, digital divide policies have also been the primary sites for any hint of discussing ethnicity in relation to internet technology. The series of National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) surveys conducted in the U.S. since 1995, which are often identified as the origin of the digital divide concept, tie the lack of internet access to socioeconomic status, gender, race, age and place of residence in superficial ways that ignore *how* people use the technology (Robinson, DiMaggio & Hargittai 2003, 17). In its 2008 *Media Literacy Audit* of ethnic minority groups, Ofcom in fact addresses the ways that different groups use the technologies, and yet still reiterates a similar version of the digital divide as a demographic category among UK residents by leading the report with a focus on access (Ofcom 2008a). One of the main problems with this discursive repetition of ethnicity in terms of digital divide rhetoric, as Virginia Eubanks (2011) has argued, is that it focuses new media policy on the distribution of access to technology: “Seeing high-tech equity only as broadly shared access to existing technological products ignores other social values, neglects decision-making processes, sees citizens only as consumers, and ignores

the operation of institutions and social structure” (26). Thus, rather than reifying access and divides as the key issues for ethnic minority groups, policy documents should address the intersectional implications of ethnicity as a variable that interacts with other axes of identity in a matrix of deep-seated structural inequalities.

Clearly, these intersections need further research and analysis, both from the policy perspective and from more extensive ethnographic approaches, although it is likely that economic drivers – such as specialized niche markets for content – will pave the way in terms of linking the cultural aspects of racial/ethnic, sexual and ability-based identities to UGC. For example, the way that marketers have collected and used personal information disclosed through social network sites works to compile aggregate user profiles and statistics according to various identity constructs, all on a much larger scale than policy research can typically afford to undertake. This kind of market-based consideration of multiple identities may become increasingly relevant to new media regulators as the state becomes more deeply invested in transnational economies of internet-based development, such as global e-commerce and international networks of security-surveillance (Diebert & Rohozinski 2010). While such economic imperatives tend to propel regulatory action, it is important to consider the personal and social impacts of identity politics online, beyond thinking of axes such as age, gender and class as mere demographics. Identity formation, as part of the labour of young people’s UGC production on the path toward creative industry careers, must also be considered in terms of how young people’s content creating activities are valued or devalued by regulators.

Conclusion: identity work, appropriation and protection

In terms of new media policy, identity work forms both a case for representing user activities in the policy documents, as well as a performative node for the enactment of certain discursive tropes. As an appeal to popular ideas of “networked publics” (boyd 2010), the involvement of young people, women and ethnic minority groups in online content creation is often celebrated. Yet as the participants expressed, these celebratory sentiments exist in tension with actual practices; moreover, marginalized groups often get framed in terms of access and the digital divide, rather than in terms of broader structural oppression. As Eubanks notes, the labour of participation that contributes to the success of Web 2.0 platforms often unequally benefits already privileged groups by “enroll[ing] oppressed people into the process of their own domination, burdening them with extra responsibilities while failing to shift power relations or patterns of material inequity” (2011, 148). As such, intersections of domination need to be further interrogated in policy work as part of addressing inequalities in technology use and development under systems of neoliberal control.

The policy documents indeed take on the neoliberal imperative to emphasize economic impacts of UGC, even when discussing its public functions in terms of digital literacy. While literacy initiatives are superficially lauded for their contributions to a more engaged and informed future citizenry, they often stress the importance of learning online production skills by future workers. As Keri Facer et al. (2001)

summarize, “In educational policy statements, young people’s engagement with ICT is located firmly within a skills agenda in which the child computer user is constructed primarily as a ‘novice learner’ and ‘future worker’ in the ‘Information Society’” (97; see also Facer & Furlong 2010). When looking at how these future workers are afforded public, identity-based subject positions, it becomes clear that certain narrow conceptions based on age, gender and class predominate in policy discourse. Linking the aged, gendered and classed labour of UGC to race, ethnicity, sexuality and ability would implicate broader and more nuanced iterations of socioeconomic constraints on early technological experiences, and start to address how these spread out into young people’s technologically-mediated processes of identity play online. Identity formation as both labour and play is always political, wrapped up in popular ideas around youth as citizens, consumers and producers. Yet the availability of these roles falls along gendered and generational lines, skewed toward orienting young people toward seeing their everyday media production as consumption while their labour benefits entrenched structures of capital.

It is clear that the policy documents examined here tend to privilege the commercial possibilities for UGC, and thus represent users as consumers where their labour of cultural production gets devalued, despite its contribution to capital. One troubling aspect of this thrust in the policy documents relates to federal legislation’s apparent responsibility to protect people’s rights as citizens, rather than to ensure their free market choice as consumers (Livingstone & Lunt 2007; Livingstone, Lunt & Miller 2007). Concerns around rights have figured in broader public debates around online privacy and UGC as intellectual property; issues which together might be termed “persona rights” (McGeeveran 2009). The persona rights paradigm articulates rights of privacy alongside those of intellectual property, and thus usefully highlights how young people’s negotiated autonomy in UGC as identity-based labour implicates legislated regulation of their persona rights. This policy imperative is particularly crucial in the commercial context of UGC creation that leverages structural inequalities as part of appropriating users’ personal information and intellectual property, along with their labour of cultural production.

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Bio

Tamara Shepherd is a PhD candidate in the Joint Doctorate in Communication at Concordia University in Montréal, Canada. She has published and presented papers on aspects of labour in user-generated content and social media, from a feminist political economy perspective. Her dissertation research looks at the implications of young people’s cultural production on the Web for the development of new media policy.