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Thanks for the Ad(d): Neoliberalism's compulsory friendship

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The context for this paper is a three year fellowship looking at new media technologies' impact on work and home life. The main component of that project is interviewing workers employed in information jobs over a three year period, to track their use of technology in both locations over time. I'm interested in the extent to which, as work becomes more mobile, its temporalities and discourses get taken up in non-work contexts (whether this is personal, family or social situations). It seems to me important to recognize how technology, software and communication devices are embedded within and reflective of the rhythms and priorities of workplace culture, and that this is likely to have particular effects. So, while the flexibility and convenience of mobile technologies is regularly trumpeted as positive and liberating within both marketing rhetoric and academic studies, I want to understand what it means that people are leading lives that are always in a sense "online" and immanently tied to network structures and logics. As Kathi Weeks has wondered in a recent issue of *ephemera* on immaterial labour, I want to offer a new perspective on the somewhat limited debates about work-life balance, to ask how life can be understood as 'at once fully implicated in, but nonetheless potentially set against the spaces, relation, and temporalities now dominated by work.' (247)

The book project I am present from today has the working title 'Broadcast Yourself: Presence, Intimacy and Community Online' and is written in collaboration with Catherine Driscoll at the University of Sydney. It offers new theoretical tools to elaborate a number of case studies or instances of online intimacy to contextualise privacy panics over new media and provide a counterpoint to the fetishisation of youth in current internet studies. Against popular representations of online culture that see it as evidence of dysfunction—of an inability to communicate "offline" in "the real world"—we argue that online friendships and communities may act as a recompense for the intrusion of public-sphere demands on traditional leisure time, the widespread expectation of computer literacy among young people (Nunes 2006) and the long hours culture of middle-class professionals engaged in computer-mediated information jobs (Liu 2004). We think that the extent to which people *choose* to conduct significant parts of their personal lives online—from finding the next book they should read to finding a life partner—says something about the opportunities available for previous forms of leisured activity and perhaps their reliability in providing satisfying relationships.

My aim in this short paper is to provide one example of this approach. In what follows I discuss the proliferation of social networking sites in the last few years and their popularity amongst a particular user-demographic, but in doing so, I want to offer a different emphasis than currently available approaches. So far internet scholars (encouraged by a soundbite hungry media cycle on the look-out for the latest trends) have tended to explain these sites as the domain of young people, and leaving aside the wider issue of the interests served by generational rhetoric in business and mainstream media, we think this is a result of problematic pressures of other kinds – for instance institutional constraints that lead academics to opportunistically consider their students as representative users, or cultural factors, such as the moral panic characterizing parents' fears about teen behaviour online. While Dana Boyd's work has revealed how this plays out acutely in the United States, in Australia the Federal government's current campaigns to promote its Internet filtering package and 'protect families online' shows how the

discursive construction created by established interest groups in one context can be successfully exported elsewhere around the globe for similarly conservative and moralising objectives.

The relationship these websites have with work, labour and class goes unrecognized in these representations, despite the fact that they have tended to emerge from and are largely accessed within work or vocationally oriented locations. So, aspiring musicians were the driving force behind the popularity of MySpace (the site's key feature was to allow the free distribution of band demos) while in Facebook, college and post-tertiary job locations have been crucial to initial membership and subsequent exercises in crafting identity. That this context has been downplayed or considered incidental so far may have something to do with the fact that the academics producing the studies presently available also inhabit these same venues, and often resemble the normative or typical user of these sites.

Yet even if it were the case that only young people used these sites, I want to suggest that participation in these online communities is both sensible and valuable preparation for the labour conditions currently flourishing in the network society – and thus the kind of economy to which educated, tech savvy, English-speaking college kids will contribute. Those of you who have read Ros Gill (2006) and Angela McRobbie's (2002) research on the precarious labour conditions of the creative industries will know that these jobs are highly competitive, very much premised on who you know as much as what you know, and that in spite of their glamorous image they demand long hours and a high degree of sacrificial labour. Social networking sites have grown in tandem with these conditions: are symptomatic of them as much as they perpetuate them. But, as I want to conclude by saying, the very strengths and advantages they offer their users—who can develop and extend friendships in response to already existing networks, or as a result of shared interests and attraction—ultimately renders them quite vulnerable to shifts in labour and work practices taking place on a global level. It is these shifts that an ongoing Anglocentric focus of new media scholarship will be poorly placed to explain, let alone help to prevent.

Compulsory Friendship

In my first paper looking at compulsory friendship I talked about office politics.¹ I used the example of Friday night drinks to discuss the way that networking, friendship and work obligations become complicated and usually overlap in middle-class jobs. In generic office culture, Friday night drinks are the tension release from the stress of a week of mental labour. Being part of the team means working and playing together. As Alan Liu argues in his book *Laws of Cool*, the purpose of the team is to simulate away difference in identity, and the rituals of office culture—signing colleagues' birthday cards, or in my case, bringing your own birthday cake—are the hallmarks of the “eternal, inescapable friendship” specific to knowledge work, right down to the smiling paper clip in word processing software.

Social networking sites take this form of friendship to a new level. In a far more explicit way, the friending practices they encourage resemble the same subjectivities destined to succeed in the workplaces of the information economy. This is a dimension that existing literature has yet to adequately acknowledge. Teen-oriented research has tended to draw out the way that friending practices exacerbate the worst of high school behaviour, likening social networking sites to a popularity contest, or showing how they can be used for bullying and other more subtle ways of including and excluding others. As more and more sites have developed however, and users are shifting, leaving or modifying their networks of friendship in response, scholars are noting that friending practices differ on different platforms. For example, the expression I used to title this talk—“Thanks for the add”—comes from the ritual acknowledgement shared amongst MySpace users when someone “adds” you to their list of friends. It’s part of the site’s appeal that even though users are often friends with their online friends beforehand, on MySpace people that aren’t known personally in so-called real life can be accepted as a friend, whether in recognition of a good profile page, a shared interest, or simply in response to a “friend request”. In this sense, the site pivots on the invitation to display and market a coherent self that can be assessed and consumed by others. This is the double meaning in my bracketed title: it is both an addition and an endorsement to be allowed to join someone’s group. Due to the taste logic of these sites, the benefit that is recognized here is that friendship allows your own profile to be circulated for free to a wider market of potential friends.

Writing “Thanks for the add” on the publicly visible comments section of a homepage is just one way that friendship is vigorously affirmed on social networking sites. Comment sections, wall space, status updates, inboxes and instant messaging are just some of the ways they incite discourse, meanwhile add-on applications allow gestures and mementos to accrue over time, acting as tangible evidence of friends’ ongoing presence, and providing the potential for further “hook-ups” in future. It is this potential, and the constant and reassuring promise of presence, that is MySpace’s permanent consolation. Social networking sites offer on one convenient page the life narrative as archive; the ‘full time intimate community’ as security blanket.

While its users vary greatly in their level of seriousness and resolve, sites like MySpace foster a new form of literacy amongst users – what I call a broadcast impulse – which encourages them to articulate and communicate a particular “type”. This is also how online cultures can cross the specificity of regional location: shared reference points can garner recognition within a familiar set of expectations, activities and aspirations. Here it is not incidental to remember that MySpace emerged as a publicity website for aspiring musicians: this entrepreneurial impetus remains in the mainstream uptake of the same technology. The broadcast capacity means young people can ensure the image they project is a favourable one, while also allowing them to become skilled in networking to create an archive of “contacts” for the future. In this sense, it is important to track the popularity of these sites in tandem with the growth of more work-specific, professional sites such as LinkedIn, and an emerging genre of sites (Doostang, Zubka) that combine the two functions of friendship and job opportunity. Not only do you invite friends to join these sites, they have the capacity to mine the address books in email programs on your

computer or server so that *any* contact made over time can be notified of your profile. Here the cloudy distinction between contact and friend perpetuated by office software packages can be seen to play out in an unfolding set of encounters.

At the heart of these networking websites is the mutually affirming, reciprocal “link”: friends are listed in blogrolls, “pinged” in “trackbacks” or displayed in aggregated galleries to add value, demonstrate popularity and affirm credibility. Gestures of presence and connection are the material reflections of a worthy online self, and the confidence that one’s self *is* worthy of broadcast ties to broader trends in neoliberalism that celebrate the positive virtues of entrepreneurialism and self-assurance. In online communities, relationships become part of the CV for which you are judged, and the testimonials of “contacts” are central to maintaining status.

In this way, what is most notable is the extent to which these sites *reproduce* offline culture rather than threaten or oppose it. Social networking technologies reflect the truism that it’s not what you know, but who. Yet the precociousness they encourage from users – the self-reflexivity required to broadcast oneself and the literacy of being able to distinguish “friends” who share similar characteristics – chastens web enthusiasts’ claims that “anyone can publish/edit/broadcast” online. So far, “broadcasting yourself” on social networking sites has generally meant speaking to a community that is already in existence, either geographically near to the user or already sharing his or her past or present interests. The forms of community created in these acts seem destined to perpetuate, if they do not outwardly celebrate, homogeneous networks of similar social backgrounds. Or at least, this is where they are heading: not only are there debates over the “white flight” from MySpace to Facebook taking place at the minute (Wilson 2007; Boyd 2007), but sites catering to distinct class, ethnic and religious backgrounds (such as ‘MuslimSpace’) are also being developed. This raises an obvious portent that even if the “digital divide” in Internet access is reducing across demographics, the real issue in the near future will be ongoing divisions in *use* (Gregg 2007; Gregg 2008 forthcoming).

Implications: Friendship as labour

While affective labour is increasingly recognised to be at the heart of the digital economy—with love of one’s work intrinsic to the heady days of the dotcom bubble (Ross 2003), and love of the object key to ongoing software development and the burgeoning games industry (Terranova 2000)—social networking sites take notions of affective labour to a further level. In a quite explicit way, they reveal that in neoliberal societies “friendship” *is* labour in the sense that it involves constant attention and cultivation, the rewards of which include improved standing and greater opportunity. The amount of effort and time required to perform and display oneself, the various genres of managing presence, from Facebook’s status updates, to Twitter’s what are you doing? seals the mutually constitutive bond of friendship, connectedness and desirability. The consequences of this seem to me several.

First, for knowledge workers in information jobs in the West, social networking sites offer positive short term benefits: the skills learned in such interactions position them

well for securing the kinds of work they are likely to be qualified for, just as the sites may act as a form of workplace solidarity amongst workers in geographically disparate cubicles when they are on the job. But these same technologies are also poised to render a middle class worker vulnerable in new ways: the potential for all interactions taking place to be monitored by friends and colleagues is not unlike one's social life being a constantly available CV. Further, as others have argued, participating in online interest sites can be described as a new form of surplus labour value in a traditional Marxist sense, because in providing details of their tastes and preferences for others to see, such information can be used by companies to develop and sell products back to the user.² The "work of being watched", as Mark Andrejevic puts it, is the typical explanation business pundits provide for why Rupert Murdoch bought MySpace.

At the moment though, I cannot help but wonder whether the amount of time spent chatting and reciprocating presence online might be better spent reflecting on the shared fate of knowledge work, which is increasingly defined by the hollowing out of hierarchies in white collar jobs, and hence the end of the kind of occupational security that middle-class college graduates might once have been training for. On a local level, I call this the growing phenomenon of 'management empathy': where everyone at every level of the workplace now experiences the same pressure from faceless suits. On a global level, the hollowing out of hierarchy comes in the growing practice of skills and knowledge transfer across countries according to the needs of global business. As Andrew Ross (2006) has shown, this is when those with jobs in the West end up training others who will be hired by the same firm at a cheaper rate to replace them. In this sense, making friends, like with like, in cultural and regional vacuums seems the worst kind of preparation for building the alliances that will change this wider structural trend in which capitalism has managed to produce an atomised workforce that has no aspirations for living wage claims because overwork has been normalized and an all-seeing screen binds public and private personae. So, in the context of this seminar today, my sense is that the future for scholarship in gender and culture must involve comparative and cross-cultural studies of the use of new media in workplace settings. Because while the friendships apparently so highly valued there may be premised on a form of loyalty, the workings of capital and labour hire under neoliberalism most definitely are not.

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¹ 'On Friday Night Drinks' delivered at the Cultural Studies Association of Australia Annual Conference, 'UnAustralia', University of Canberra, December 2006.

² "The 'work' of MySpace, as a corporate entity, is to 'monetize' these practices in a manner which does not compromise the good will of users." Mark Coté and Jennifer Pybus (2007) 'Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0', *ephemera: theory and politics in organization*, 7(1): 96.