The Routledge Companion to Labor and Media

The narrative on new technologies is permeated with language that describes them as ethereal. In effect, a universe of material and concrete artifacts, and real life human beings are blurred and consumed by a symbolic universe of "clouds", "connections" and "*data centers*". However, this universe is only immaterial from a techno-optimist approach, or a product of naive imaginations of what new technologies actually are. The truth is that these clouds, connections or *data centers* are concrete, physical manifestations, they occupy geographical space, require millions of kilometers of cabling, circuits and the infrastructure needed to support terabytes of data, 4G networks and high speed internet; they consume energy and have an impact on the environment (Cook, 2012). This new technology produces artifacts that, for however much we may have naturalized their use in daily life, leave a trail, product of their global scale production. The trail includes manual labor used in every stage of production, from the extraction of natural resources, to the handling (if there is any) of techno-junk left-over at the end of their life-cycle (Vitola, 2011).

Look at the rechargeable batteries used in our cell phones, tablets and portable computers, look at their life-cycle: the vast majority contain cobalt, and about 60 percent of the mineral is extracted manually from Congolese mines, even to the extent of using child labor (Frankel, 2016). The better part of the companies that exploit and commercialize cobalt are Chinese, and China also represents half of the world's production of batteries (Patterson & Gold, 2018). In China you find for example, Foxconn, the main supplier for all the tech giants, and whose factories employ thousands upon thousands of workers in precarious working conditions (Hern, 2017; Merchant, 2017). This means that, an electronic device designed in Silicon Valley is produced in China, with mineral extracted from central Africa, and commercialized all over the world.

In the words of Vincent Mosco (2011), on occasion, the nature of the work involved in the oft called contemporary creative industries differs little from the conditions the industrial worker of the XIX century and early XX was subject to in the midst of the industrial revolution. This is valid for those that mine for cobalt, on the factory line for electronic assembly of devices that sell for US$1,000, or those that built the *data center* for Google in Quilicura (Santiago, Chile), and extends to poly-functional and compromised journalists in communication media in Norway or Canada, *call center* operatives in Brazil, or the unpaid work of *online* audiences.

The collective works edited by Richard Maxwell, *The Routledge Companion to Labor and Media* documents this, discusses and theorizes this highly stratified global vision of work in the so called creative or info-communicational industries. The book is divided into four sections: the first is *The Changing Face of Media*

Labor: Networks, Clouds and Digitalized Work; the second is *Materials and Chemical Impact on Workers and Consumers*; the third is titled *Media labor around the World* and is the heart of the book. This third section discusses the type and nature of the work involved in the info-communicational industry all over the world, and speculates on global trends as well as local case studies. The last section of the book offers varying perspectives on activism, media organization and the strategies behind resistance to future conditions in the field of info-communicational labor under the title *Activism, Organization, Worker Resistance, and Media Labor's Future*; the section was inspired by the conviction that we must explore alternative paths and strategies for change (Artz, Macek, & Cloud, 2006).

Due to a lack of space I will focus on the first and third sections of the book. The first places the most emphasis on theoretical aspects stemming from interactions between capitalism, digital technology and labor. In this section the authors propose denaturalizing the supposed distinction between intellectual or creative work versus manual labor. What is preferable is re-conceptualizing labor within the framework of digital capitalism to better understand how it is organized (Schiller en chap. 1). In the same manner, the digital *clouds*, that are little more than large data centers belonging to corpora-

tions such as Amazon or Google, should be looked at from a perspective that includes "their potential benefit to the public as well as their risks", the latter such as the concentration of labor to few people, damage to the natural environment, growing surveillance and veneration of *big data analytics* and the diverse threats they pose to labor and workers (Mosco, 2011, p. 28).

In the same manner and in light of the business models employed at Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Weibo, Pinterest, instagram, Blogspot, VKontakte, LinkedIn, Tumblr and still others, Smyth's theoretical proposal to understanding the role of commodification of audiences is both clarifying and more current than ever (Fuchs in Chap. 4). Therefore, understanding and updating the concept of exploitation (Hesmondhalgh in Chap. 3) is key in a digital environment rife with 24/7 type jobs, *permatemps* (temporary workers that operate permanently) that constitute a precariat in lieu of a proletariat, and expands on previous jobs that imply self-exploitation and independent work (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Einstein, 2012; McChesney, 2015).

The third and longest section of the book is a treaty on global and local trends in the role of labor, and worker status in digital capitalism. It covers areas of work and specific industries such as the cell phone industry, communications consultants, art, communications media and journalism in local cases in India, China, Brazil, the United Kingdom and Spain for example. This is how this section offers empirical studies on diverse methodologies that provide detailed insight into the issues, industrial areas, skillsets or specific circumstances surrounding labor, but under the lens of global trends intersecting with capitalism, labor and new technologies.

Despite it having been published two years ago, this book of collective works is
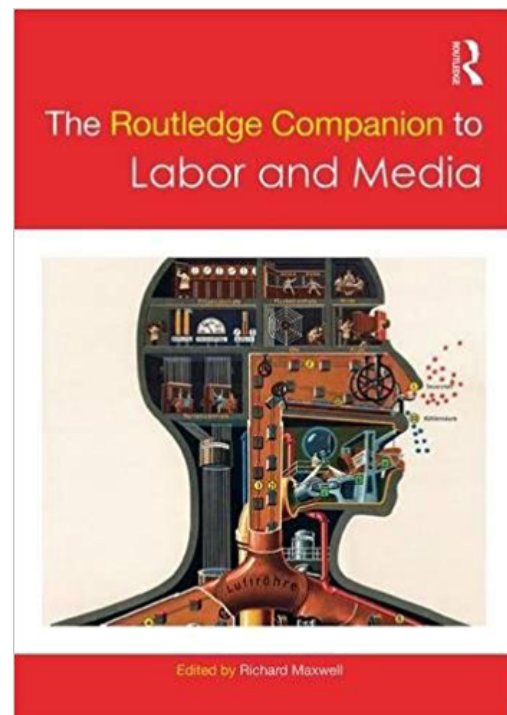
fundamental to studies on the political economics of communications, the history of technology, environmental studies, and the activism built on combinations of the aforementioned fields. As Maxwell himself indicates in his introduction: "this is a big book, but it's not a complete work. There is simply too much we still don't know regarding media labor within the far-flung reaches and hidden corners of the global commodity chain" (p. xx). What a good job or quality labor would consist of in the field of communications and technology is in dispute and by definition, as Maxwell indicates "something to fight for" (p. xx).

Bibliography

Artz, L., Macek, S., & Cloud, D. (Eds.). (2006). *Marxism and communication studies. The point is to change it.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, inc.

Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic TM: the politics and ambivalence in a brand culture.* New York: New York University Press.

Cook, G. (2012). *How clean is your cloud?* Amsterdam: Entidad editora.

Einstein, M. (2012). *Compassion, Inc. How corporate America blurs the line between what we buy, who we are, and those we help.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Frankel, T. (2016). The cobalt pipeline. Tracing the path from deadly hand-dug mines in Congo to consumers' phones and laptops. *The Washington Post.* Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/business/batteries/congo-cobalt-mining-for-lithium-ion-battery/?tid=ss_fb

Hern, A. (2017, November 21). Apple under fire over reports students worked illegal overtime to build iPhone X. *The Guardian.* Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/nov/21/apple-students-illegal-overtime-reports-iphone-x-foxconn-interns

McChesney, R. (2015). Preface. *In Rich media, poor democracy.* Forthcoming.

Merchant, B. (2017, June 18). Life and death in Apple's forbidden city. *The Guardian.* Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jun/18 foxconn-life-death-forbidden-city-longhua-suicide-apple-iphone-brian-merchant-one-device-extract

Mosco, V. (2011). The Political Economy of Labor. In J. Wasko, G. Murdoch, & H. Sousa (Eds.), *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications* (pp. 358–380). Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing.

Patterson, S., & Gold, R. (2018, February 11). There's a Global Race to Control Batteries—and China Is Winning. *The Wall Street Journal.* Retrieved from https://www.wsj.com/articles/theres-a-global-race-to-control-batteriesand-china-is-winning-1518374815

Vitola, G. (2011, September 25). E-Waste Hell. Australia: SBS Dateline. Retrieved from https://www.sbs.com.au/news/dateline/story/e-waste-hell

Claudia Lagos Lira
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, The United States of America
cllagos@uchile.cl

▾ ¿Como citar?