

# Letter to a Digital Worker

McKenzie Wark

Dear fellow digital worker,

I hope this message finds you swell. Oh, fuck that. Let me start over. Greetings! We don't know each other, but it seems like we do the same job. Do you find yourself staring into a screen and clicking around a lot? Me too! Sometimes I talk to other people who also look at screens and click around.

The apps and programs we stare at are probably very different and I likely have no clue as to what expertise you bring to your clickery. And yet it is also likely that we have similar computers, connected to the same digital infrastructure if you trace it all down far enough. Who knows? Maybe our 'work product' is sitting next to each other on the same servers, nanometres apart, somewhere in the world, even as we speak.

If we met at a party, maybe we would not get along. Maybe we have different styles of presenting ourselves, different tastes, different interests. Maybe you think the digital work I do is useless. Maybe I think the kind you do is evil. Or vice-versa. We may be quite different sorts of people culturally or politically or in terms of educational background. That makes it hard to get at our common experiences.

Like me, you probably have to interact with other people who are digital workers, who do things that neither of us really understand. If you go to the doctor, they will probably look at a screen more than at you. Same with your accountant and many other professionals you might see. Order a drink in a bar and your server will enter it on a touch screen. About all that really changes across these jobs is how rare the skills are to do the clicking and hence how replaceable you are.

I'd also venture that you worry about the same things I do. About whether you'll ever get a secure job, or if you have one, how long you'll keep it. About becoming obsolete and replaced by someone more up to date. About whether you fit into the social dynamic with your co-workers and how much effort that takes. About whether your boss may or may not be an idiot and that you'll go down when they do. About whether any particular thing you do, or even your whole line of work, really has any meaning or value in the grand scheme of things. About all the other far more interesting things you could do with your time if there weren't bills to pay.

Much of your leisure time, like mine, is probably also mediated by screens, whether it's a streaming service, social media or a game. Digital labour has, as its double, digital leisure. You might even be doing your digital labour and digital leisure on the same computer, through the same screen, maybe even in the same room. Games sometimes feel much the same as my job, except that in games, when I fuck it up, I get do-overs.

What do you do to get away from the screen? It's good to get away from it. There's a whole raft of services that offer a compensatory feeling of being in touch with the world. I like to go to the gym and push hunks of metal up and down. Feels good to use the muscles of my body. Although, to be honest, this is also digital leisure in that I'll have my headphones on, listening to podcasts or techno mixes.

Over the last few years, before Covid, I went back to rave culture, which at first seemed ridiculous at my age, but on the dance floor nobody cares and after a few hours of pounding beats into my body I can feel like it's really there again. But then if I look over at the DJ what I see is no longer turntables, but digital input and mixing devices. My leisure turns out still to be digital—and to be someone else's digital labour.

Sometimes I really want to get away from it all, so my partner and I will pack up the car and go to the countryside—'upstate' as New Yorkers call it. There we can really get away from both digital labour and leisure. Or so we imagine, but then we end up putting bucolic pictures on Instagram. In any case, to pick the day to go we need the weather app, and to find the route we need the map app. The digital seems to insinuate itself into our desires for its opposite.

Then there's what I'd call digital non-work. It isn't work in that I don't get paid for it. It isn't exactly leisure in that it is not in itself an activity I choose to enjoy. For instance, just walking around, with my cell phone in my handbag, I'm generating data for various companies about my movements. It's being fed into various algorithms; in the short run, to figure out how to sell me stuff; in the long run, to model all that humans do—so that machines can do some of it instead.

We live in a world that seems to bifurcate sharply between work that is digital and work that is, for want of a better word, analogue. I see an extreme version of this among those of my friends who happen to be people like me: trans women. There's been an acceleration in the number of trans women who have been able to carve out successful careers in information science and related fields. They are conspicuous in the trans community as having money and security of an order that most trans women can't even dream.

On the other hand, I know a lot of trans women who do sex work. It is often the only work sisters can get. You could see it as the opposite path: making a living by emphasising the analogue pleasures of touch, or even really of just good company, emotional release and the entertaining of a client's fantasies. A lot of their clients, my sex worker friends tell me, stare at screens and yammer at phones all day.

There's a psychic and somatic cost to digital labour. It makes our bodies feel like sacks of shit. It makes our heads swim and throb. It makes us emotional trash fires. That in turn generates whole industries which at least pretend to make us feel better. Go to the spa and have a massage. Go to the climbing wall and conquer a simulated mountain. Go unload on your psychotherapist. Or, hire a sex worker. The efficiencies extracted from digital labour seem to require ever more elaborate compensations to restore the analogue world of sense and touch.

And yet here again the digital insinuates itself into the analogue. Trans women who are escorts need a digital presence to find clients. Those who don't physically meet their clients need not only a platform to advertise and to perform but also a way to do financial transactions. Since their labour is in many places not legal, their livelihood is at the whims of service providers. They experience in an acute form what many of us do: that underneath digital labour and leisure, and also under analogue pursuits that depend on some level of digital mediation—are the big platforms that host and track all these activities—and collect the rent.

It's not just that your digital labour, or mine, ends up being monetised by giant companies that happen to own the interfaces and servers and connecting vectors of the information economy. Some of those same companies seem even more interested in owning our information. They own not just the data produced by our labour, non-labour and leisure, but data extracted and extruded out of everything around us, living and non-living.

Control of the world through the control of data seems to be the way that power works these days. Both governments and corporations are moving in that direction. The actual making of a product or the delivery of a service seems to be a low value activity compared to controlling the information about activities, both actual and potential. The contemporary form of governance is to own as few actual things as necessary, but to extract a maximum amount of data out of every activity within sight, so they can predict all possible futures—and own them.

It wouldn't be the first time that a ruling class emerged out of grabbing hold of something that was not theirs and making it their property. That's the history of colonialism and capitalism. Grab the land, grab the resources. Grab the labour and force work out of it without giving enough in return to sustain that labour. Then go turn some other people into workers by taking their land out from under them. The new wrinkle is that this process now includes grabbing information from all of us and making that their property as well.

The theft of information leads to the wielding of its ownership over and against us. That's bad for all kinds of workers, including digital workers. Our autonomy over our work is being confined by its reduction to observable and measurable actions. You could call this proletarianisation. What industrial organisation did to craft workers, informational organisation is doing to us. The skills we have are stripped down to their component gestures. Those that can be quantified are assigned to machines.

If it's bad for us, it's even worse for a lot of analogue workers. Here I'm thinking not so much of my sex worker friends as of workers who are driving trucks and cars, filling orders in warehouses, assembling products on assembly lines, or serving people in shops. It can all be monitored and measured ever more closely. A pause of a few seconds in the life of a warehouse worker can generate an 'inactivity report.'

It's entirely possible that it's your job as a digital worker to make the work of analogue workers even worse. Or it might be your job to make people feel that making things worse for analogue workers is 'innovation' or something. Or maybe your work is to offer solace or compensation for all that we have lost. I sometimes think that's all that the books I write achieve. There's digital work that does the thing, and then there's digital work that explains and justifies or even critiques the doing of the thing. Regardless: we don't always have much choice about the work we do. Like analogue workers, we're at work because we don't own the means of production.

But unlike analogue workers, our work can be less about performing an action over and over within a defined labour process. Sometimes our job is to design that labour process itself. Or design it out of existence. Or make it sound and feel like a good thing that it went away. The problem being of course that our own jobs can also be designed out of existence or made routine. So we're caught up as both subject and object of the process of proletarianisation.

The decision we have to make, as digital workers, is where our interests lie. It's the mission of governments and corporations to make us as inessential and replaceable as analogue workers are. Our bargaining power is only as good as the uniqueness of our talents. The transformation of labour processes into modular, repeatable, measurable tasks is eating away at our workplaces, not to mention our souls. It's time to get organised.

There's a couple of steps to this. The first is recognising that we have common interests. Digital labour is often presented as a matter of an individual career. We're trained to think of ourselves as on some unique path. We view our immediate peers as rivals. In some ways we have to. We are pitted against each other—and in ways that are increasingly subject to 'metrics' of one sort or another. The first step is to try to find common interest with those who are closest to us in the kind of work we do.

The second step is to think of this commonality more broadly, as extending to all digital workers. Here we might be less instinctively inclined to think of others as rivals. The problem is more to stop thinking of others as doing something less important, or incomprehensible, or just not anything like what we do. And yet: don't you and I both stare at screens? Use our training and experience to click around? Don't we both worry about the same sorts of things?

Could we even think about a shared class interest among digital workers? Twenty years ago, I proposed thinking of us as a 'hacker class.' It isn't the best term. People tended to think I just meant computer people. Nowadays the media have reduced the word hacker to criminality. So that word won't do. Let's just call ourselves digital workers. We do very different things, and don't share a common culture. But all of our work is becoming quantifiable and interchangeable within a political economy that runs as much on digital labour power as it does on analogue labour power.

The next level of solidarity is to think of ourselves simply as workers. It's a useful exercise to look critically at what one is obliged to do as labour, no matter what it is. In the seventies, Italian feminists proposed 'wages for housework,' as a slogan that drew attention to the unpaid labour of women. Work that didn't make the commodity in the factory, but which made the worker who would.

The artist Laurel Ptak took the 'wages for housework' literature and turned it into an art project that accidentally became a social movement: 'wages for Facebook.' It's a critique of what I'm calling here digital non-labour. All that stuff we do for free for the giant companies that ingest all the information we give them and turn it into business strategies against us.

So maybe labour is a much broader category these days. The image of the worker from labour movement kitsch—picture a big-chinned Man with Hammer—just won't do anymore. Particularly as it tends to lock us into a dated image of the real worker as a white man whose work is factory work.

There might still be subtle differences between what I'm calling digital workers—us—and what I'm calling analogue workers. It's a crude distinction, and no work is ever just one thing or the other. The difference though is between those things that involve the clicking and those that don't. The work of selection on a screen, as different to work that involves pushing one's body through a series of variable movements to change an object's position, directly in the world.

This sounds a bit like the older terms manual and intellectual labour, or even skilled and unskilled labour. But I think there might be different possibilities to thinking about digital and analogue labour. It isn't always the case that digital labour is a better thing to be doing. I know some very successful sex workers, including some who prefer that work to more controlled and constrained digital labour. It also seems somewhat judgmental to call someone else's work manual or unskilled.

So let's think then about digital and analogue labour, as all being labour but a bit different in the work done is subsumed into commodity production. One difference is that with most analogue jobs, the labour ends when the working day ends. With a lot of digital labour, it's not so clear when it ends. Ever quit work, with some long list of tasks undone, and have them all stewing away in your brain, the whole rest of the evening?

On the other hand, we'd all have to admit that not all our time on the job is 'productive.' Sometimes I just sit at my desk and fool about with my Twitter friends. It's hard to get good quality work out of us all the time. It's even harder the more our jobs are qualitative to begin with. Commodity economies are just not very good at things that can't really be directly measured. Which is why today's ruling class has a mania for measurements, no matter how arbitrary.

When we do come up with something of quality, some configuring of the information on our screens, it is easily copied. It's very, very cheap to copy the output of digital labour. It's basically the cheapest way ever invented to make something once and copy it indefinitely. To do digital labour is to be caught in this bind. On the one hand, it is necessary to commodity production as that which makes new things. Nothing is easier to move around and permutate than information. On the other hand, it's necessary to commodity production because it's so easy to copy. One instance can be replicated over and over, by machines, eliminating the need for a good many workers, digital or analogue.

The plain truth is that digital workers are often working on making life harder for analogue workers. Our interests don't always align. Digital workers are also making life hard for each other. And so: either we keep making things harder and harder for others, and each other, or we think in terms of our solidarity with all workers. That's the choice, really.

Solidarity is hard. It means both attending to, and setting aside, our differences, all at once. Attending to them because there are a lot of ways all the other cleavages in the social world pass through labour and can't be ignored. The working life of women, of people of colour, of queer and trans people, of disabled people, all have specific kinds of tensions added to them. It's not helpful to just pretend that can all be swept under the rug.

On the other hand, solidarity does mean that there's a point where our differences matter less than the fact that we all have to sell our labour time to get paid to pay the rent and buy food and so on. The thing we have in common is not as concrete and immediate as our differences, but it is very real. It takes a bit of a leap to see how we're all in the same boat.

It's best to imagine the prospect of solidarity from the point of view of the most marginal workers, even if that is not you, or me. The points of view of the workers who have to deal not only with the exploitation of their labour, but also with oppression and discrimination because they are not white, not men, not cis, are not more particular, they are more universal.

The pandemic has magnified a lot of the problems we experience as digital workers, and shown how dependent the digital labour that goes on in our cities is dependent on analogue labour. The lockdown compounded the problem of the fuzzy border between labour and leisure time, of the lack of separation between home and workplace. Not to mention the problem of which of us have also to do the care work for children or the elderly, or the housework.

It exposed in graphic terms how dependent we all are on essential workers we rarely think about, who often do the most analogue labour, such as farm workers, food process workers, delivery people and so on. Many of whom are people of colour, and who in many cases have died of Coronavirus at higher rates.

We all want a vaccine. Its success depends on both digital and analogue workers. It is digital workers in medical research who will make it. It is analogue workers in the pharmaceutical factories and supply chains who will manufacture it. But we know that those who make it will not own it. The information about it will be some company's property. And we all know that if it works, its distribution will be skewed toward those with the power to jump the queue, not to essential workers most in need.

I'm hoping, though, that I'm not alone with some of these thought and feelings, dear fellow digital worker. I'm hoping you share some of this too. It doesn't matter whether we agree on everything. It's more interesting when we don't, isn't it? What are we to do then? Wish I knew. Politics and policy are not my thing. Maybe they are yours, though. Or maybe you know people who have the gift for sizing up a situation and picking an effective course of action. Let's talk to them. Or find those capacities in ourselves. We have a world to win.

Yours sincerely—no, that won't do.

Yours in solidarity,

McKenzie Wark