In the upsurge of interest in media and cultural labor since the turn of the century, the concept of exploitation has been neglected. Take two books that are rightly among the most widely cited and used sources in the recent “turn to labor” in media and cultural studies: Mark Banks’s *The Politics of Cultural Work* and Andrew Ross’s *Nice Work If You Can Get It*. They hardly mention exploitation at all. Given that both books are extremely accomplished and insightful, this might be taken as evidence that the concept of exploitation is not needed for a critical understanding of media labor. But exploitation is a concept that will not go away in considering the politics and ethics of work. Significant attention has been paid to it in recent debates on digital work, partly because of interest in the concept of “free labor” introduced in a seminal and brilliant article by Tiziana Terranova. Another has been the important but problematic notion of “self-exploitation.” Yet, even in this recent wave of digital labor studies, there have been no sustained efforts to theorize exploitation or to address systematically problems of definition and conceptualization that inevitably haunt a term with such a long and complex history in critical thought. This short chapter offers the beginnings of such an effort. It does so in the hope of offering “common ground” to advance debates about exploitation in media work, including the topical issue of whether changing forms of information production and circulation provide new spaces of positive potential or “new forms of labour exploitation.”

The definitional and conceptual problems surrounding the word “exploitation” should not be underestimated. One author, Alan Wertheimer, lists sixteen definitions, all of them from serious, sustained treatments of the issue. Each involves some sense of one group taking unfair advantage of another. But that basic sense of the term only gets us so far. Wertheimer outlines a number of major differences and incompatibilities between them. Among other conceptual uncertainties surrounding the term, Wertheimer points to the question of whether exploitation necessarily involves coercion and to the many situations that we might want to call exploitative—because they involve one group taking unfair advantage of another—that involve some benefits or rewards to the exploited but create harm as well. Another complication involves work and labor. Exploitation has become particularly associated with labor, though, of course, it is often used beyond that domain. Given the focus of this book, my concern here is labor exploitation, especially media labor, but also the related realms of digital and cultural work.
The problems surrounding the term are undoubtedly compounded by the fact that exploitation is a word used every day to mean taking unfair advantage of others, but it also is a specialist technical term derived from Marxist and, to a lesser extent, socialist-feminist thought. When the term exploitation is used in academic publications or discussions, the speaker or writer often seems unclear about whether they are using the concept in the very general sense or in the Marxist/socialist-feminist way. Although this can lead to confusion, I am not advocating limiting the use of the word to the specialist sense. On the contrary, the argument here is for an inclusive use of the term—but one that differentiates the Marxian from the “everyday” use. So, in the first part of this chapter, I provide a reconstructed critical account of the concept of exploitation, one that incorporates systemic unjust advantage with questions of flourishing and suffering. Then, in order to explore what we might usefully and validly call labor exploitation in the media, I consider a range of cases of media work, emphasizing degrees of suffering (and, therefore, of exploitation).

Conceptualizing Exploitation

It is to the great credit of Marxist theory that it has paid serious attention to exploitation. Even political liberals committed to equality show little interest in the concept or reject it on the grounds that the broader problem of injustice is not actually rooted in exploitation. The classical Marxist conception sees labor exploitation as resulting from the ownership by the capitalist class of the means of production. According to this view, even if they are not directly coerced into working for capitalists, workers, because they lack the means of production, are compelled to labor in order to survive, and capitalists extract or appropriate the surplus that they generate. Libertarian conservatives (the philosophical wing of neoliberalism) would reject the idea that exploitation is the basis for a critique of capitalism on the grounds that people deserve to be fully rewarded for their efforts and talents, and “free riding” prevents that from happening, and also because excessive restrictions on personal freedom aimed at countering exploitation might potentially cause the talented to withdraw their contributions, leading to a greater loss for societies and communities. By contrast, Marx saw the good society as based on the beautiful but elusive idea of “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.”

However, preferring Marxist understandings of exploitation over liberal neglect or libertarian conservative perspectives does not mean that the conceptual problems surrounding the term will simply go away. There has been a strong tradition of Marxian thought that considers ethical and normative questions to be moot, and the mechanisms of the Marxian notion of exploitation to be the primary matter for consideration, outlined in strictly Marxian terms (a tradition associated particularly with Engels’s “scientific socialism” but found in many areas of Marxism). That tradition appears, thankfully, to be in decline. Many Marxists and socialist-feminists have recognized the problems and gaps in Marx and other Marxists’ conceptions of exploitation, and have sought to reconstruct an intellectually cogent and justice-based notion of capitalist exploitation in the face of liberal neglect and libertarian attack and beyond dreary Marxist doctrine.

How do we know capitalist exploitation when we see it? How is it different from other bad things such as oppression and domination? Erik Olin Wright has argued that exploitation in its Marxian sense is based on three principles. First, exploitation in its
Marxist sense occurs when the material welfare of one class is causally dependent upon the material deprivation of another. The capitalist class in modern societies could not exist without the deprivations of the working classes. Second, such causal dependence depends, in turn, on the exclusion of workers from key productive resources, especially property. Third, the mechanism through which both these features (causal dependence and exclusion) operate is appropriation of the labor of the exploited. The first two alone would just represent oppression; for exploitation (in the Marxian sense) to take place, the third condition must be present. Equally, appropriation is not the same thing as exploitation; the first two features, causal dependence and exclusion, must also be present as well as appropriation.

Wright is helpfully clear in specifying the Marxist conception of exploitation. The principal value of the concept for him is that it explains how the interests of capitalists and workers are made fundamentally antagonistic by this set of arrangements and how class involves relations of power as well as gradations of privilege. But this conception, focused mainly on understanding historical class antagonisms (and I am not denying the importance of those antagonisms for one minute), does not really capture the core of the injustice involved in exploitation. How might we explain what’s wrong about labor exploitation under capitalism to someone who isn’t convinced? One common way of thinking about exploitation is that it infringes on people’s autonomy. But autonomy is dependent on notions of self-ownership, and the philosopher G. A. Cohen has shown that superficially attractive notions of self-ownership—that “each person should enjoy, over herself and her powers, full and exclusive rights of control and use”—provide a very unstable basis for a socialist or Marxist case against exploitation. One reason is that even a socialist world, if it were ever achieved, would need its citizens to make sacrifices and to do things that they would rather not do in the interests of the common good. Another problem for socialist advocates of self-ownership is that their commitment to this basis for critiquing exploitation puts them in the same league with conservative libertarians, for whom self-ownership is often the most fundamental good. Instead, Cohen argues, capitalist labor exploitation is unjust primarily because it involves essentially forced and unreciprocated flows of products from workers to capitalists, which derive from the primary cause of an unjustly unequal distribution of resources, where some people (capitalists) own the means of production and others (workers) don’t.

Like Wright’s account, Cohen’s is helpful in specifying the Marxian case. But their Marxian concerns led them so far into specifying abstract principles that they fail to differentiate degrees of exploitation, including the degree of suffering and flourishing on the part of workers enabled by different sets of working arrangements, the degree and type of force or compulsion involved, and the extent to which any compulsion might be considered to be legitimate and subject to democratic and legal accountability. These thoughtful and sophisticated Marxian conceptions of exploitation, based on analysis of capitalism as a historically evolved system, are much weaker in addressing empirical and normative variation. A broader conception of exploitation, in something like its everyday sense of taking unjust advantage of others, might help us to bring into consideration a more varied set of exploitative situations than “capitalist exploitation” can and allow a more sociological and anthropological approach while still recognizing that capitalism exists and has real effects on people’s experience of the world. The best Marxian contributions (such as those by Wright, Cohen, and Callinicos) help us to grasp this, but they form a necessary but not sufficient component of an adequate understanding of exploitation.
Exploitation and Suffering

My claim then is that we need a critical conception of exploitation centered on systemic unjust advantage and suffering. In what follows, I want to explore what kinds of events and processes in contemporary media we might think of as involving work exploitation, using that conception, as outlined above, and applying it to a range of cases involving manufacturing and mining labor, symbol-making and technical work, and “prosumption” (a word I hate).

Before doing so, however, I need to briefly consider the separate issue of how we might define media work. Is it any kind of work that contributes to mediated communication? If we use this very broad definition, an analysis of media work should presumably incorporate electronics workers involved in, for example, the assembly of televisions and personal computers. That seems reasonable and helps draw attention to just some of the invisible labor that sustains media consumption, avoiding the commodity fetishism famously criticized by Marx. Including such workers also helps draw attention to ways in which problematic labor conditions sometimes are “exported” to places with cheaper rates of pay and lower standards of regulation on workplace safety, working hours, and so on. But should we also include cleaners or accountants in media-related companies in that expanded definition of media work? Their conditions might best be understood not in relation to media work but in relation to the conditions of lawyers, accountants, and cleaners more generally. What about call-center workers? They are involved in a form of mediated communication, but do concepts such as “media” or even “mediation” really help us to understand what happens in call centers?

Our answers to these difficult questions of definition will generally depend on what is the central focus of analysis. In the present context, where the focus is mainly on exploitation, a middle-sized definition might work best, one that is between the very broad definition of media work as including absolutely everyone involved in media work (with the strange consequence that an accountant who happens to work in a media company is considered just as much as a media worker who is a journalist), and the very narrow one confining analysis to “core” media workers—those most actively involved in the production of content. A “middle ground” definition would embrace workers whose work is affected by the fact that it makes a significant contribution to products that are conventionally defined as “media”—communication products such as television programs, films, newspapers, periodicals, books, musical recordings, and so on.

Let us now proceed to examine the potential cases of media work exploitation that I introduced above.

The media always depended upon the production of consumer electronics devices, and these have often been produced in poor working conditions. Long before the era of mobile telephony and personal computers, media firms took advantage of cheaper labor costs by moving production, often depriving communities of a relied-upon source of work, and/or requiring workers to uproot their lives in order to maintain continuity of employment. A groundbreaking but neglected book by Jefferson Cowie has traced the way in which the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) did this throughout much of the twentieth century. Such practices have only intensified in an era in which national and regional governments offer lucrative tax breaks to entice firms to invest in their area, destabilizing the lives of workers in the process.

The electronics industry has grown hugely, as a result of the global spread of information technology (IT) and mobile telephony. Now that media are themselves increasingly
computerized and digitalized, and now that most media devices use technologies previously associated with the IT sector, the media depend more than ever on the labor of workers in the electronics industry. As the opportunities for making profit for investors in that sector have grown, already poor conditions seem to have got considerably worse. A spate of suicides by workers at Chinese factories operated by Foxconn, a Taiwanese company that produces components for, among other companies, Apple, has drawn particular attention to this problem. A report for a respected journal for health and safety professionals—hardly a place where overheated political polemics tend to thrive—has provided a good overview, and the rest of this paragraph summarizes that report. The electronics industry has become a new key target for labor and environmental activists, displacing the sweatshops that made toys and clothing for western companies in the 1990s (which still exist of course). The electronics industry has responded to campaigns by stepping up its efforts at auditing suppliers as part of “corporate social responsibility” initiatives. But the codes of conduct are often rather limited (they fail, for example, to incorporate fundamental principles outlined by the International Labour Organization), voluntary, and extremely difficult to enforce. There is a strong sense that they are mainly driven by public relations agendas, rather than by genuine interest in the lives of workers. In an industry where practically all production is outsourced to suppliers and the company whose name appears on the final product is mainly involved in design, marketing, and branding, the name and location of supplier factories is almost never publicly revealed, making independent auditing and journalistic investigation extremely difficult. Working hours routinely flout laws, regulations, and outsourcing company guidelines, and there is routine falsification of records to comply with codes of conduct. There is also a massive use of agencies, resulting in widespread precariousness and the creation of armies of “permatemps.” Workers are hardly integrated into inspection regimes at all.

As Maxwell and Miller show in their book _Greening the Media_, such working conditions are often linked to capitalism’s hugely detrimental effect on the environment, with some workers suffering serious health problems as a result of their exposure to toxins. An important collection, _Challenging the Chip_, has provided valuable evidence of the conditions faced by workers in the electronics industries, including the numerous health problems caused by inadequate safety standards, a problem undoubtedly made worse by the lack of union protection available there. This includes the appalling conditions suffered by workers involved in the processing of electronic waste—often outsourced to the Global South and minimally regulated and monitored. A review by M.H. Kim, H. Kim, and D. Paek valuably summarizes the health impacts of the semiconductor production that is essential to most consumer electronics devices. Many of these health risks derive from the massive use of chemicals in the industry. They found a relatively clear association between reproductive abnormalities and fabrication work; reasonable grounds to suggest increased cancer risks, especially of blood, brain, and breast; considerable evidence of breathing and skin problems; and in common with other industries that make use of intensive and repetitious assembly, ergonomic and muscular problems (see Grossman in this volume).

The desperately poor conditions faced by many people involved in the manufacture of electronic goods and in the mining of the raw materials necessary for their construction are often striking examples of what some social theorists call intersectionality: the ways in which power inequalities and the identities that result from them nearly always operate on multiple dimensions. The people suffering these poor working conditions
are often members of the rural peasantry or the working class; they are often women; and they are often based in countries of the Global South, where wages are particularly low as part of an international division of labor, or in factories in Europe and North America that make prevalent use of “non-white” migrant labor (though, of course, there are many white working-class people working in very poor conditions). Such conditions are common in “free trade zones” like those on the US-Mexico border discussed by Castañeda and in the Brazilian Amazon discussed by Mayer, each involving significant amounts of television set production.26

How does this set of affairs relate to the inclusive critical conception of exploitation centered on unjust advantage and suffering argued for earlier? The potential for suffering in such circumstances seems clear. And the capitalist owners and senior managers undoubtedly gain unjust advantage—unjust not only because of the flows of product from one class to another (based on the original injustice of unequal resources, as in Cohen’s Marxian formulation) but also because workers find themselves in situations where they have little or no choice but to take on such work because they are often unaware of the conditions they will be facing, or don’t realize how bad they are until they actually live through them, and because they are usually insufficiently mobile, spatially and in class terms, to seek better kinds of work elsewhere. The Marxian concept of exploitation helps us understand how such a state of affairs can possibly exist. As Wright’s clarification of exploitation makes clear, capitalism depends upon the systematic exclusion of large numbers of people from ownership of capital, and this allows capitalists to enforce conditions in which large numbers of workers suffer terribly.

But what about workers further down the “value chain” of media and digital production? What about workers involved in symbolic and knowledge work (including technical and support workers) rather than mining, fabrication, and assembly?27 A considerable body of research has developed over the last fifteen years that provides evidence of such conditions via ethnography and other forms of sustained fieldwork among media, cultural, and IT workers. Common themes are overwork and associated emotions of anxiety and powerlessness, and high levels of risk and uncertainty, often summarized as precariousness or “precarity.” To save space here, I will only refer the reader to studies by Gillian Ursell on television workers; Helen Blair on film workers; Andrew Ross on a variety of workers, especially in web design companies; Angela McRobbie on fashion and music; Rosalind Gill on IT and other workers; and Gina Neff on internet workers during the dot.com boom and, with Wissinger and Zukin, on fashion modeling.28 More recently, Bingqing Xia’s doctoral thesis has provided evidence of severe overwork among Chinese workers in the internet industries, involving very long working hours and unpaid overtime; Bridget Conor has analyzed the precarious working conditions of screenwriters; and John T. Caldwell has shown how certain aesthetic discourses, such as those that claim that stress produces greater creativity, rationalize deeply problematic working conditions in the LA film and television industry.29 Freelancing and internships have rightly been a central object of study in much of the recent critical work.30 Many “freelancers” are in fact aspirant workers, who are seeking security, recognition, autonomy, and the chance to make their own talents and creative abilities central to their working lives. Interns undergo long working hours for little or no pay, and the greater ability of the wealthy to survive periods of unpaid work only increases class and other forms of inequality among media workers.

Many of the symbol-making and technical workers involved in these studies are middle class and often highly educated. Can they really be understood as exploited in the
way that many workers in manufacturing industries supplying media and related sectors such as IT clearly are? I think it is reasonable to surmise from a comparison of the research on these workers with the research on mining and manufacturing that there is less exploitation here, because there is, other things being equal, likely to be less suffering involved on the part of such workers. For many symbol-making and technical craft workers, as in many of the professions, low wages are accepted in the hope or even the expectation that higher wages might come later, perhaps in a different, easier-to-enter alternative profession. In such cases, levels of immiseration surely do not approach some of those that have been uncovered further down the value chain in manufacturing and mining. For that sense of hope often represents something of a (self)deception, and at the same time, it is what makes middle-class educated people in general more able than working-class people to cope with life’s challenges, by believing that their lives have a coherent shape with a meaningful future ahead. Nevertheless, the research on symbolic and technical work in media cited above provides considerable evidence of problematic conditions that are systematically poor in advancing the well-being of most of those involved. There is real misery here, alongside better experiences, in a complex mesh of good and bad.

But to what extent does this media labor market system involve unjust advantage—the other part of the definition of exploitation developed above? These are often middle-class educated people. Shouldn’t they know better than to expect a good quality of working life in the media? This is far too dismissive. There is a whole representational apparatus in modern societies that emphasizes the potential for pleasure, sociality, recognition, and self-realization in media and cultural work. That is not a conspiracy by the powerful to deceive middle-class educated children. Rather, it derives from the real ways in which cultural production and consumption at their best can promote human flourishing. It exists alongside a system of humanities education that (often problematically) introduces students to the rewards of culture. But media representations and education offer carrots that help to induce an oversupply of workers (freelancing and internships are now integral to this) that suppresses wages and operates to the advantage of capitalists. It would be in my view a terrible functionalist mistake to respond by seeing all positive visions of culture as doomed, mistaken, or cynical. But there is a tangled set of contradictions here, whereby unrealistic hopes are created to the unjust advantage of the powerful and privileged. Exploitation does not seem unreasonable as a term to describe much of what goes on in the media and cultural work of symbol makers and technical workers.

So what about recent arguments about new forms of labor exploitation in the era of “user-generated content,” “prosumption,” and so on? I have little space to address these debates in detail and, in any case, have discussed earlier versions of such claims elsewhere. But since my earlier intervention, Christian Fuchs has provided a long and problematic version of the claim that social media involve new forms of relations that can meaningfully be called labor exploitation. Fuchs argues that whereas labor under capitalism in general is based on coercion underpinned by physical violence—workers will starve if they do not work—social media users are ideologically coerced into their activities. What form does this ideological coercion take? If they don’t use social media, writes Fuchs, “their lives may involve a smaller number of meaningful interactions.” But this implicitly equates missing out on some mediated social contact with starvation—which seems wrong and demonstrates why I want to draw attention to the issue of degrees of suffering. Surely, the sacrifices involved in not going on social
media—or even not going on much—hardly qualify as a level of suffering that would take us over the line from irritating inconvenience to exploitation? Advocates of the idea that new forms of information production and circulation are generating new forms of exploitation are in my view still to produce anything like a convincing theoretical account of exploitation. As I have previously observed, there are plenty of other reasons to criticize social media besides the idea that its users are exploited.\(^3^9\) They include commodification, an empty culture of self-promotion and self-branding, pseudo-sociality, distraction, and so on. And I certainly endorse the quest, in the words of one of the most thoughtful contributors to these debates, Mark Andrejevic, for “a common thread between very different forms of exploitation” that might unearth “the potential basis for a recognition of solidarity.”\(^4^0\) But in my view, existing research has not provided a convincing account of the thread meaningfully connecting social media “exploitation” with other forms of media work exploitation.

**Conclusion**

Exploitation is a word with great moral force. Such words can lose their explanatory and normative force unless they are used with care. What I have tried to do in this short chapter has been to provide a basis for the better understanding of exploitation sought by Andrejevic and others, and to ground it in both Marxist thought and in more general notions of justice, both philosophical and everyday. At the core of my argument is the claim that exploitation has two main components: not only a sense of unjust advantage but also, implicitly, a sense that significant suffering results from it (and I admit that, for reasons of space, I have focused more on the second than the first of these two elements). While the Marxian tradition offers important insights into the systemic basis of exploitation, it needs to be conjoined to a more ordinary notion of what really matters about people’s working lives: whether they contribute to our efforts to thrive or prevent us from doing so.

**Notes**


7. I operate a broad definition of work to include any activities, paid or unpaid, recognized or unrecognized, that involve the production and achievement of something, a degree of obligation or necessity, and a degree of effort and persistence (see Keith Thomas, *The Oxford Book of Work* [Oxford: Oxford
University Press: 1999), xiv). I use “labor” and “work” interchangeably here. I’m aware of distinctions between labor and work. I find Arendt’s distinction (Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition [Garden City: Doubleday, 1959]) problematic and unconvincing, and debates about Marx’s use of the equivalent terms to work and labor in German ultimately insignificant for understanding exploitation.

8 See, for example, Wertheimer, Exploitation, and the essays by Steiner, Goodin, and Miller in Reeve, Modern Theories of Exploitation.

9 Obviously, the increasing complexity of relations between the information technology, media, and cultural sectors makes boundaries between these industries more porous than ever before. As a result, the relations between media, cultural, and so-called digital labor are highly complex. We might define media labor as all the work that goes into enabling the communication media as traditionally understood (television, the press, film, recordings, etc). Cultural labor usually includes media labor but also incorporates work in “the arts,” performing and otherwise. Digital labor can be defined as all the work that goes into computer-mediated experience. It would be a serious mistake to treat media, cultural, and digital labor as equivalent to each other, partly because there are such different dynamics in operation in the media and cultural industries, on the one hand, and the IT industries on the other, not to mention the different dynamics in different individual industries within these broader sectors. See David Hesmondhalgh, The Cultural Industries, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE, 2013), for discussion of these issues—and of divisions of labor within media. Nevertheless, there are sufficient commonalities to justify an inclusive treatment that draws attention to shared injustices across the different domains—which is the approach taken here.


16 On questions of legitimate and illegitimate compulsion, see another Marxist philosopher, Alex Callinicos, Equality (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

17 Wertheimer, Exploitation.

18 I believe this would be compatible with Nancy Fraser’s socialist-feminist analysis of capitalism, where capitalism is understood as an institutionalized social order in which definitions of boundaries between economy and polity, human and nature, and private and public are crucial background conditions for exploitation and domination, and therefore all crucial sites of struggle. According to this view, domination is as important a feature of capitalism as exploitation, and that is true of labor relations too. My focus here, though, is primarily on exploitation, for reasons of space. See Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s hidden abode: for an expanded conception of capitalism,” New Left Review 86 (2014): 55–72.


22 Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, Greening the Media (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). As Maxwell and Miller (118–119) and Fuchs (Digital Labor and Karl Marx, 172–179) suggest, conditions are even worse in the mining industries that supply the raw materials necessary for the production of electronics devices, especially coltan. The IT industry big names seem to show little interest in this problem. See also Michael Nest, Coltan (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

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27 Whether to study symbol makers or non-symbol-making media workers in discussing exploitation should not be treated as an either/or choice. A both/and approach is required.


31 Some Marxists would argue that such symbol makers and technical staff may actually be more subject to exploitation than proletarian workers because they generate a greater “surplus value” for capitalists. While the concept of surplus value helps to explain how workers get treated and how inequality partially results from work exploitation, my argument is that suffering and flourishing need to be central to our understandings of exploitation.


33 See Hesmondhalgh and Baker, *Creative Labour.*


35 Among the writers cited earlier who address these issues of ideology (even if they don’t use that word), see Ross, *Nice Work* and “Mental labor”; Banks, *The Politics of Cultural Work*; and Stahl, *Unfree Masters*. See also Scott Brook, “Social inertia and the field of creative labour,” *Journal of Sociology* 49 (2013), for a very different Bourdieuvian analysis.

36 Hesmondhalgh, “User-generated content, free labour and the cultural industries.”


38 Fuchs, *Digital Labor and Karl Marx*, 254.

39 Hesmondhalgh, “User-generated content, free labour and the cultural industries.” In defending his critique of social media work as exploited labor, Fuchs (*Digital Labor and Karl Marx*, 128) misunderstands my argument in that earlier article concerning the problems of certain critiques of unpaid labor, accusing me of conflating hobbies with leisure activities that produce a commodity. The point of my example of the unpaid work of football coaches was precisely that, through their unpaid work as talent developers, they are (indirectly) involved in the production of commodities—because the (often highly exploitative) business of professional football could not be sustained without a labor market based on the over-supply of willing workers.

40 Mark Andrejevic in Andrejevic et al., “Participations,” 1091.