

## Content Management Systems, Value, and the Interface as a Site of Production

Below is a section of a paper I gave in two different versions at the this past year Cultural Studies Association Conference and Left Forum entitled “The Top 5 Ways to Make Money Off of Fans: Turning Passionate Sentiment into Value on the Internet” which is an admittedly awful title but a wink and nod towards both the [BleacherReport.com](#) (one of the subjects of the paper) towards the listicle and the title of several critiques of it. This is the last half of the paper, the first half consisting mainly of a explanation of Bleacher Report itself and synopsis of its critiques, which is done more effectively [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). To be fair, there is some sense that Bleacher Report’s model (pay virtually no one, pump out content as fast as possible) has changed a bit as they have begun to hire a number of higher profile writers that they have lured away from more established outlets ([not without a significant amount of turnover](#)). But, their rise to prominence and \$200 million sale to Turner Sports was built off that earlier model, so I still stand by what I’m saying here. This is still a work in progress, however, so enjoy despite or maybe because of its *in media res*-edness:

In exchange for a place to be active online, one offers oneself to the platform as value. However, the question is begged of any Marxist (or Ricardist or Smithian for that matter): if there is no “labor” how is “value” produced? It is my argument that, as Jonathan Beller has argued in his book [The Cinematic Mode of Production](#), attention, or what I’d like to refer to as “presence,” (for reasons I’ll get back to) is the source of value on the Internet. In the case of Bleacher Report, what is rhetorically structured as help and facilitation is in fact a way to turn value production into a process that is as cheap and as infinite as possible. The site endlessly renews passionate sentiments, filters them through an interface that transmutes them into metrics of abstract attention (measured as eyeballs and click-thrus), and then uses that attention as the basis for a very particular exchange: money from ad companies for the attention of its visitors and users. Ultimately, the work of both writers and readers is valuable merely as presence, produced by and for the interface. And it is the interface, or interfaces, that bear particular investigation.

But first, a definition of what I mean when I use the term interface in general and some thoughts about content management systems (CMS) as interfaces specifically. In Florian Cramer and Matthew Fuller’s definition of the interface from [Software Studies: A Lexicon](#), they suggest that software functions as an interface to hardware by acting as “tactical constraints to the total possible uses of hardware . . . In other words, they interface to the universal machine by behaving as a specialized machine, breaking the former down to a subset of itself.” They go on to say that interfaces “are the point of juncture between different bodies, hardware, software, users, and what they connect to or are a part of. Interfaces describe, hide, and condition the asymmetry between the elements conjoined” (149). The content management system used by Bleacher Report, as a software package that is both a software to software interface and a user interface, is a point of numerous asymmetrical junctures: between software that manages images, video, and other content from across the web; between the writer and the company that “employs” him or her; between the writer and the fan; between the writer, the fan, and their object of passionate interest; between the reader/user and the software that records their

presence and movement; between that analytic software and the advertiser; etc. This CMS actively makes visible and invisible, conditions and describes (as languages do) these conjunctures. And these relations are a part of every CMS, from Open Source versions like Wordpress and Drupal to proprietary systems like Kentico and Bleacher Reports. These asymmetrical conjunctures, these object relations, are the power imbalances implied in the everyday life of the internet, and it is through this imbalance that monetization is possible.

In a way, what I'm attempting is akin to the calls by a number of scholars like Ian Bogost, Fuller, Lev Manovich, and those who call for the critical interrogation and theorization of code, software, and platforms. However, what has been lacking from this literature is critical analysis of content management systems themselves. We talk of the ontology of hardware or the poetics of code but the software packages through which the content of the Internet must pass before it is seen/consumed/valued have received little critical examination, sociologically or otherwise. A search in academic databases for "Content Management System" turns up only one article that attempts a critical analysis: Michael B. McNally's "[Enterprise Content Management Systems and the Application of Taylorism and Fordism to Intellectual Labor](#)." Appearing in *Ephemera* in 2010, the article focuses specifically on business workflow software and the rhetoric employed by the companies that produce them, analyzing ECMSs through a relatively straightforward deskilling argument that leans heavily on Harvey Braverman's 1970s thesis from *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. In short, McNally makes a claim for the continuing relevance of Braverman in the age of "immaterial labor" or "cognitive capitalism" and foregrounds the negative impact on the worker control of the labor process by technology. To be sure, management as a technology of labor organization is certainly still alive and as obsessed with the efficiency of movement (both human and non-human) as ever. However, arguing about this through the lens of "labor" in the sense of labor in an office is perhaps a dead end at this point.

In the case of these blog networks, and the Internet in general, what is value producing is not "labor" as such but, as I've said, presence. A being-there that is measurable, that is coded as value. Contra Beller, whose term "attention" is by nature a phenomenological category which assumes consciousness/focus as its a priori, I look toward "presence" as the basis of value production on the Internet because it denotes the unimportance of the specificity of activity which the concept of attention hints at. In this way, I'm arguing that presence as it is structured by interfaces like CMSs becomes a kind of abstract labor, or more specifically, presence is the quantitatively homogenous metric that makes qualitatively distinct labor exchangeable.

However, does presence even need to be understood as labor? Qualitatively different activities, some understood as labor (some even waged), some understood merely as fun, some not even understood as anything other than browsing or surfing, is all made to be valuable through a universal metric. What these CMSs, these interfaces, do is to transmute all the activity they make possible into this metric. However, I don't mean to equate presence as I theorize it here with other theories of valorization in contemporary capitalism which argue that the introduction of the computer into the labor process reduces all that it touches into a homogenous relationship to the means of production. The issue is not that the work itself becomes homogenous through an interaction with the interface. The subjective experience of the interaction remains heterogeneous and in fact any CMS has built in relations of access (admin, author, subscriber, commenter, etc) which make sure that qualitative differences

remain. The issues is that the CMS employs “tactical constraints”, management techniques, that structure all of the activities possible through them (reading, writing, clicking, analyzing, watching, etc) as valuable presence, abstracting them into a value producing unit. In the last instance, everyone becomes an “end-user.”