“Why I Left BuzzFeed”: Alienation, YouTube, and Creative Labour in the Digital Age

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Abstract:

Digital media companies on YouTube, exemplified by BuzzFeed, reinforce the perception of employment in the creative industries as an ideal opportunity for young millennials to make money “doing what they love.” In 2016, dozens of videos made by former BuzzFeed employees announcing their departures from the company went viral, challenging this view and granting the public unprecedented insight into the company’s labour practices. BuzzFeed thus serves as a valuable case study for digital labour in the contemporary creative industries during a time when formal companies, individual creators, and unpaid users compete for viewership on the platform. This research paper reveals and critically engages with the tradeoffs that creative workers face when negotiating the benefits of working for a company, versus “going independent.” Using Marx’s theory of alienation to analyze “Why I Left BuzzFeed” videos, this paper argues that the option for professional creative workers to become independent creators on YouTube represents a shift towards the ideal of “non-alienated labour.” This article concludes by examining how, despite this shift, independent creative workers are still subsumed under capital.

Keywords:

YouTube, BuzzFeed, digital labour, creative industries, alienation

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Introduction

On YouTube, BuzzFeed is a monolith. With over ten channels on the platform, it is known for churning out viral content like videos entitled *If Disney Princes Were Real*, *Women’s Ideal Body Types Throughout History*, and *We Eat Like Donald Trump For A Day*. Most videos have been viewed millions of times, and the company has been lauded as a “haven for millennial creatives” (Weissman, 2019, n.p.) seeking employment in the digital age. The idea of BuzzFeed being an environment where young creative workers can make money “doing what they love” is further established on their hiring page, where they claim to foster “a culture of experimentation, teamwork, equality, humble confidence, and infusing hard work and fun” (Jobs at BuzzFeed, n.d., n.p.). Additionally, a featured blog post on the page entitled *20 Reasons No Internship Will Ever Be Better than Interning at BuzzFeed* (Rispoli, 2016) paints a utopian portrait of work life at the company.

While BuzzFeed’s work environment and business model makes it ostensibly a “poster child for the future of media,” (Britton, 2015, p. 169) a video trend starting in 2016 challenged this view. On August 2, former BuzzFeed employee Kenny Moffitt uploaded the first “Why I Left Buzzfeed” video, which quickly went viral. Over subsequent months, dozens of other ex-BuzzFeed employees—often well-known for appearing in viral BuzzFeed content—made videos explaining their reasons for leaving the company, generating millions of views. One former BuzzFeed employee, Steph Frosch, highlights the perception of labour conditions at the company by saying:

I get asked this all the time, especially by young teenagers: ‘how is it working at BuzzFeed? Don’t you love working at BuzzFeed? What’s your favourite part about working at BuzzFeed? It must be this amazing magical place...’

I imagine it’s kind of like working at Disney—when you’re a visitor at Disney, you just see the magic and the fun, and the castle... it’s just a good magical time, but when you work at Disney, you might get to make the magic, but you’re also seeing all the characters with their heads off (Frosch, 2016, 06:23-06:56)

Through this viral phenomenon, the public gained unprecedented insight into labour prac-

tices of one of the largest digital media companies on YouTube. BuzzFeed thus serves as a valuable case study for digital labour in contemporary creative industries during a time when formal companies, individual creators, and unpaid users compete for viewership on the platform. This research paper seeks to reveal and critically engage with the tradeoffs that creative workers face when negotiating the benefits of working for a company versus “going independent.”

In order to do so, this paper relies on Karl Marx’s theory of alienation as a framework. As a theory “that decisively mediates between a worker’s living conditions and the relations of production, between the subject and its objects,” (Krüger & Johanssen, 2014, p. 633) it is useful in providing insight into the labour practices of BuzzFeed and the responses of its workers. Thus, using Marx’s theory of alienation to analyze “Why I Left Buzzfeed” videos, this paper argues that in contemporary times, the option for professional creative workers to become independent creators on YouTube represents a shift towards the ideal of non-alienated labour. However, despite the relief that these creative workers experience upon gaining their independence, capital still constrains them, which will be discussed in the final section of the paper. In this paper, “professional creative workers” specifically refer to employees of major digital media companies such as BuzzFeed, while an “independent content creator” refers to an individual self-employed creative worker (Craig & Cunningham, 2019, p. 71).

Methodology

This case study consists of a qualitative content analysis of a sample of “Why I Left Buzzfeed” viral videos from 2016 to 2017. A qualitative approach is appropriate as this study seeks to understand experiences and perspectives of ex-BuzzFeed employees (Hammarberg et al., 2016). A content analysis is used to identify and engage with patterned themes from the videos (Content Analysis, n.d.). After gathering data, videos are manually coded, revealing patterned themes, which are then analyzed through the lens of Marx’s theory of alienation.

The creative industry is constantly changing and there is little transparency on BuzzFeed’s current practices and how they affect the experiences of current employees. Therefore, this study presents a snapshot-in-time of the creative industry as represented by BuzzFeed, focusing on the

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period from 2016 to 2017, the peak of the “Why I Left BuzzFeed” viral video trend. Virality is determined by view count: I examined the top five “Why I Left BuzzFeed” videos by views and verify that videos are created by ex-BuzzFeed employees and are not parodies by other content creators. While not all videos in this study are explicitly entitled “Why I Left BuzzFeed,” all videos are centred on the former employee’s experience at the company and the rationale for their departure.

The videos ultimately selected for analysis were created by the following ex-BuzzFeed employees: Allison Raskin and Gaby Dunn (4.4 million views), Safiya Nygaard (14.4 million views), Kenny Moffitt (5.6 million views), Chris Reinacher (4.1 million views), and Steph Frosch (4.1 million views).

Marx’s Theory of Alienation

Marx’s theory of alienation is outlined in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. The theory describes how, under capitalism, industrial workers are estranged or alienated from their labour in four ways. First, workers are alienated from the product that they create. Second, workers are alienated from the labour process, which they do not control. Third, workers are alienated from the “spontaneous, free activity” (Marx, 1932, p. 31) that constitutes their human nature, or “species-essence.” Fourth, workers are alienated from other people. Marx’s conception of alienation does not merely refer to a subjective attitude or feeling; instead, it is primarily an objective societal condition and structure that capitalism gives rise to (Cohen, 2012, p. 142; Horowitz, 2010). By analyzing the results of the content analysis through the lens of this theory, it is possible to discuss the specific ways in which the labour practices at BuzzFeed motivate its most prominent creative workers to leave.

Alienation from the Product of Labour

The alienation of BuzzFeed employees from the products of their labour is demonstrated through three issues raised in the “Why I Left BuzzFeed” videos: BuzzFeed’s ownership of its creative workers’ intellectual property, its employment contract non-compete clause, and its ownership of creators’ online identities. In *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx states: iJournal, Vol 6, No. 1,

The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor become an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. (Marx, 1932, p. 29)

As emphasized by Dunn, Nygaard, Moffitt, and Reinacher, creators do not own any of the ideas they have or any of the video projects they create at BuzzFeed. This is explicitly reinforced by Ze Frank, a former BuzzFeed executive, in a staff memo: “The work created by you and the collaborative teams you’re a part of while at the company is owned by BuzzFeed” (Frank, 2016). This means the surplus value generated by the worker is claimed entirely by the company, and that, furthermore, after leaving the company, employees cannot continue shows or projects they originally conceptualized. This leaves some like Dunn to wonder: “Do I give them my best ideas?” (Dunn & Raskin, 2016, 02:31-02:35). Having the option to own their content as independent creative workers is therefore appealing to BuzzFeed employees who are passionate about the specific projects that they create.

Additionally, the exclusivity or “non-compete” clause within BuzzFeed employee contracts stipulates that they cannot work on projects outside of BuzzFeed. This reveals how products of labour are not only alien to workers, but also how BuzzFeed controls the products that workers create outside of their work for the company (Frank, 2016). For example, immediately prior to when the “Why I Left Buzzfeed” trend was popularized in 2016, two employees, Jenny Lorenzo and Brittany Ashley, were fired from the company for appearing in a non-BuzzFeed web-series (Sutton, 2016). A few of the “Why I Left Buzzfeed” video creators expressed concern with this, as they had hoped to develop their personal brands and YouTube channels outside of their work at BuzzFeed (Dunn & Raskin, 2016; Moffitt, 2016; Reinacher, 2017). Therefore, being alienated from potential external projects contributes to why creators choose to leave the company.

Some journalists, as well as executives at BuzzFeed itself, argue that restrictive contracts are a de facto part of the traditional media industry. Thus, Lorenzo and Ashley were rightfully fired, and employees should not be complaining about not having rights to their work. While it

is true that employees sign contracts containing non-compete clauses, there are a few issues with this—for instance, employees report that “the non-compete clause is enforced unevenly by management, and that the agreement is vague about what constitutes as a competing project” (Sutton, 2016, n.p.). As stated by Frosch (2016, 07:53-08:02), “if BuzzFeed doesn’t hand-pick you to have x-amount of power, they’re going to get mad if you start to get power.” Furthermore, the contemporary system differs from traditional industrial models as new media work is increasingly characterized by precarious, intermittent labour (Gill, 2010, p. 9). Hence, several “Why I Left BuzzFeed” videos outline, as stated by Dunn (2017, n.p.), that “not owning all of your ideas can limit a burgeoning career, especially in an era of job-hopping and layoffs—unlike in the old days, when employee loyalty could translate into a lifelong, unionized job.”

Last, Nygaard and Dunn explained that BuzzFeed maintains control of the online identities of its workers through ownership of their BuzzFeed-affiliated public personas—a new concern arising from the social media economy. For example, Nygaard (2017) was being associated with video projects that she was the public face of but had very little control over, and was concerned that her name and face could eventually be commodified by the company through merchandise. Dunn (2017) similarly states:

I left Buzzfeed in 2015, but they still own a Facebook fan page with my face on it. They can promote whatever they want there using my name and image. I still show up on their Snapchat account sometimes. They could conceivably cut together all the videos I made for them into a series, sell that series for millions of dollars using my work and my name and likeness, and not give me a penny or tell me about it at all. All of this is 100% legal. (n.p.)

These actions by BuzzFeed turn the digital image of creative workers into products themselves, which then can be exploited. As stated by Marx (1932):

...the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. (p. 29)

The alienation of workers from the products of their labour thus serves as a significant incentive for creators to depart the company.

Alienation from the Labour Process

According to Marx (1932), in addition to being alienated from the products of their labour, workers are also alienated from the act of production itself. For this, Marx (1932) describes how the labour process is a means to an end and not enjoyable in and of itself: the labourer “does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (p. 30). A key aspect of the creative industry is that professionals have passion and affective ties to their work in a way that is distinct from workers in other fields of production (Deuze, 2007a, p. 65; Gill, 2010). However, in their “Why I Left Buzzfeed” videos, creative workers reveal how they are alienated from the labour process in ways that make them so unhappy they want to quit, echoing Marx’s sentiment.

The theme of responsibility emerges in two ways in “Why I Left Buzzfeed” videos. First, Nygaard (2017) places significant emphasis on her desire for more responsibility in the labour process of projects that she conceptualized. In her video, she describes how she co-created a video series called “LadyLike” with her colleague, Freddie Ransome. In addition to being video producers, the workers both heavily feature in the videos as performers. After the series became popular, Nygaard expressed disappointment when BuzzFeed took control of the strategic direction of the series. She states:

It felt like the big picture strategizing and responsibilities were taken away from us. We were still expected to come up with the ideas for LadyLike episodes and produce a majority of them, but Freddie and I were not included in any high level conversations about LadyLike. (2017, 04:30-04:47)

After expressing her displeasure to her superiors and requesting to be a part of the meetings for the series she created, Nygaard was told “this is how things are; this is the way the company works and that’s not your role” (Nygaard, 2017, 05:04-05:09). Acknowledging that she was never going to get the degree of responsibility for her projects that she wanted, she decided to leave the company and start her own YouTube channel.

Second, Reinacher points to the “do-it-all mentality” fostered at BuzzFeed, which, while

providing creators with valuable experience, also contributes heavily to burnout. He states in his video “at BuzzFeed, one brain has to do it all” (2017, 01:15-01:17), arguing that if he did not have to multitask, he could perhaps make better content. Furthermore, he adds: “when you’re creating new videos every single week, you start to get a little bit tired. You justify it because it’s getting clicked on” (Reinacher, 2017, 03:28-03:37), describing how BuzzFeed’s enforcement of video quotas for its workers became exhausting. As video producers, both Nygaard and Reinacher were obliged to create a large quantity of videos while taking on multiple roles in the production process. In Nygaard’s case, her series was so successful that its strategic direction was removed from her control. In both of their situations, however, they experienced alienation from the labour process by not having control over their roles. As stated by Marx (1932): “the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another” (Marx, 1932, p. 30). Thus, if non-alienated labour can be described as the ability “to do what one does best according to one’s own ideas and to realize oneself in one’s very productive activity” (Arvidsson, 2008, p. 332), this ability has not manifested for Nygaard and Reinacher at BuzzFeed, thus incentivizing them to leave and pursue independence.

Alienation from Human Nature

Workers’ alienation from their human nature or species-essence is another key aspect of Marx’s theory, which is reflected in the theme of creative freedom in the “Why I Left Buzzfeed” videos. Saying that estrangement “changes for [the worker] the life of the species into a means of individual life... it makes individual life in its abstract form the purpose of the life of the species” (Marx, 1932, p. 31), Marx (1932) argues that creating for the good of the collective and “in accordance with the laws of beauty” (p. 32) is a component of human nature that has been transformed into individualized acts to benefit capitalists (Cox, 1998). For Marx, freely practiced labour is essential to human nature; however, alienation occurs when this is reduced to merely a means of survival (Christ, 2015, p. 556).

While in cultural industries workers are given some creative freedom, they are neverthe-

less constrained by the profit-driven goals of the company, as expressed in the “Why I Left BuzzFeed” videos. Creative freedom is a workplace ideal in the age of social media and its importance to creative workers should not be understated (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017, p. 4653). However, as reported by Reinacher (2017), BuzzFeed explicitly emphasizes the creation of viral and “relatable” content: “I made my living making relatable content... I always thought I could get a little bit deeper. But the filmmaking process didn’t really allow for that [at BuzzFeed]” (00:30-00:53). This suggests that Reinacher’s creative goals are in conflict with BuzzFeed’s. BuzzFeed’s goals are further reinforced by its known algorithm, “viral rank” (p. 35), which is used to determine popular topics and guide the creative direction of the company (Abramson, 2019). As stated in *Wired*, much of BuzzFeed’s success is due to this focus on algorithms and quantification: “If there is a science to BuzzFeed’s content strategy, it is built on obsessive measurement” (Rowan, 2014, n.p.). Discomfort over lack of creative freedom is also echoed by Dunn and Raskin (2016), with Raskin commenting: “we’ve been able to work on projects and strive towards projects that are so much bigger than I think what we could have done if we stayed there, and so much more our own” (04:07-04:17). Thus, since becoming independent creators, former Buzzfeed employees can have a greater degree of creative freedom, moving them closer to their species-essence than their work under the aggressive quantity-over-quality approach of BuzzFeed.

Alienation from Other People

Finally, Marx’s description of workers’ alienation from other people is seen in the “Why I Left Buzzfeed” videos through the theme of precarious labour. As stated by Marx (1932), “an immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labour, from his life activity, from his species-being, is the estrangement of man from man” (p. 32). Alienation through precarious labour at Buzzfeed is noted by Frosch (2016), who discusses hiring practices and high turnover rates in her video, saying how typical employees begin as interns for six months, then become fellows for three months, and finally, junior producers. Each stage is highly competitive, with a great amount of pressure due to increasing video quotas. At the end of each contract, employees either move on to the next stage or are let go. Frosch mentions that she was

hired informally—she was already a popular independent YouTube creator who offered to work for BuzzFeed—and therefore, she was held to different standards than other employees and was allowed more freedom. Furthermore, even when workers become full employees, they are subject to a quarterly “reorganization” where teams are shuffled, and people are let go in ways that she describes as “unprofessional” (Frosch, 2016, 03:57). As stated by Rosalind Gill (2010) in her research on new media work,

...the increasing prevalence of informal practices for hiring staff or issuing contracts raises grave concerns for equal opportunities – concerns that are extremely difficult to contest or even discuss, because of the lack of transparency in the process. (p. 15)

Employees at BuzzFeed Studios are also not unionized. In 2017, Peretti told employees that although he is pro-union in theory, he does not think that they are the right fit for BuzzFeed (Weissman, 2019). This thus prevents employees from taking collective action and maintains the individual nature of the workplace. Overall, as shown by Frosch’s statements about the competitive hiring process, BuzzFeed’s unstable work environment, and Peretti’s opposition to unionization, the precarious employment situation alienates workers from each other.

What Does Independence Look Like?

So far, this paper has focused on how Marx’s theory of alienation is helpful for understanding the departure of BuzzFeed employees from the company. While the new option for creative workers to work independently of large production companies represents a shift away from alienation as described by Marx, it is important to note that the workers’ labour is nevertheless still subsumed under capital. Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) argues in her book (Not) Getting Paid to do What You Love that

The characteristic features of independent work – creative freedom, flexibility, and self-directedness – are fetishized in contemporary discourses of entrepreneurialism... [however], the attributes of the enterprising subject are marred by work patterns that are less than idyllic. (p. 212)

In her research, Duffy speaks to Rachel, a YouTuber who describes YouTube’s AdSense

program as “not a good way to make a liveable wage” (Duffy, 2017, p. 211). This is further supported by an article written by Dunn (2015), who describes the “humiliation of not making a living wage when fans believe you’re famous” (n.p.). Dunn (2015) also describes navigating the fine balance of being “authentic” (n.p.) with her sponsored content, which she requires to make a living. This demonstrates how despite enjoying more freedom from when she was at BuzzFeed, Dunn nevertheless is constrained by capital.

Additionally, YouTube’s content is organized and featured based on an algorithm that restricts the ability for independent creative workers to have full creative freedom on the platform and profit from it. In her study of YouTube’s algorithm, researcher Sophie Bishop (2018) finds that “YouTube intentionally scaffolds videos consistent with the company’s commercial goals and directly punishes non commercially viable genres of content through relegation and obscuration” (p. 71). In this way, creators are incentivized to make content that is advertiser-friendly.

Despite this, the ex-BuzzFeed employees express in their videos that the tradeoff is worth it. For example, Frosch (2016) states, “after I left BuzzFeed, I became so much happier. I felt like this huge weight was lifted...there has been a lot of liberation in being my own boss and running my channel again” (11:13-11:31). Importantly, ex-BuzzFeed employees have an advantage over typical independent YouTubers, as “very few creators have had formal education or training in video production” (Craig & Cunningham, 2019, p. 83). Furthermore, these creators already come with a fanbase from their presence in BuzzFeed videos. Thus, the making of “Why I Left Buzzfeed” videos is arguably strategic, capitalizing on a viral trend to leverage an audience and launch ex-BuzzFeed employees’ new careers. Notably, all of the videos that were analyzed contained references to the creative workers’ current projects, or explicit pleas to continue following their work.

Conclusion

This paper presents a first look at the specific concerns of professional creative workers in the digital age through a case study of BuzzFeed’s video production company on YouTube. In current academic literature on digital labour in the creative industries, much of the focus is on freelance, independent creators. However, as stated by researcher Mark Deuze (2007b) in his book *Media Work*, it is also necessary to acknowledge that despite the increasing individualization of the media and creative industries, “still much of the work in the media gets done within the context of large, hierarchical, and bureaucratic businesses” (Deuze, 2007b, p. 88). This is evident in the growth and investment in BuzzFeed’s video production and the new media companies that have followed its footsteps. While the experiences of the individual creators featured in this paper cannot necessarily be generalized to all employees at the company, this case study is nevertheless useful in providing insight into a business model that has received little academic scrutiny.

This paper uses Marx’s theory of alienation to analyze “Why I Left Buzzfeed” videos, arguing that the option for professional creative workers to become independent creators on YouTube represents a shift towards the ideal of “non-alienated labour.” First, alienation from the product of labour is shown through BuzzFeed’s ownership of its creative workers’ intellectual property, its employment contract non-compete clause, and its ownership of creators’ online identities. Second, alienation from the labour process is demonstrated by creative workers’ lack of control—one creator is denied high-level responsibility for their project, and the other experiences burnout from BuzzFeed’s “do-it-all” mentality. Third, alienation from human nature can be observed through the lack of creative freedom. Last, precarious labour is a cause of alienation from other people for BuzzFeed’s employees. While all of the aforementioned points indicate that independence is a desirable option for professional creative workers seeking non-alienated work, I nevertheless demonstrate how freelance, independent work is not necessarily utopian.

Ultimately, this paper sought to interrogate the idea of professional cultural work as the antithesis of alienated labour (Cohen, 2012, p. 142). While there are both positive and negative aspects to working for a professional media company and working independently, it is clear that the

situation is complex. This topic presents opportunities for further research – BuzzFeed’s employee contracts have evolved since the “Why I Left Buzzfeed” trend. Furthermore, BuzzFeed has made an effort to retain their talent through the “Creators Program” started in 2019, which is an attempt to “strike the balance of retaining top talent while also allowing them to build their own brands with personal YouTube pages and the like” (Barber, 2019, n.p.). The topic of creative labour in media companies requires further study, and, hopefully, this paper provides a useful first step.

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