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Journalistic Labour and Technological Fetishism

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Abstract: This paper applies and develops Marx's concept of the fetish generally and technological fetishism specifically to how digital ICTs are influencing the craft of journalism. Although largely theoretical, its analysis of technological fetishism is applied to the findings of a survey conducted in 2013 among Canadian journalistic workers. The paper finds that these workers hold mixed and often contradictory views on how digital technologies are shaping their work and profession. By understanding ICTs to be both constitutive of journalism and, more precisely, the technological fetish as a mediating force in its development, the paper argues that the survey respondents are not 'wrong' to recognize that digital technologies seem to possess inherent powers. Because the fetishization of digital technologies is rooted in the relational conditions of contemporary journalism and neoliberal capitalism, redressing these – rather than just efforts to think reflexively about them – is what needs to be strategically prioritized. Indeed, both critical thought, using the concept of technological fetishism, and political action are needed if the insecurities and deleterious transformations taking place in journalism are to be modified and the democratizing potentials of digital ICTs fully realized.

Keywords: political economy, technological fetishism, digital labour, ideology, journalism

Introduction

Over the last two decades, digital technologies have been used in ways that have transformed the craft and business of journalism. As with other media activities, the future of print, broadcast and, indeed, online journalism is an open question. While the development and use of such technologies are implicated in the restructuring of news organizations and the search for new business models and revenue streams, they are also playing a constitutive role in how journalists understand their work and journalism itself.

This paper, drawing on the findings of a national survey of over three hundred Canadian journalists conducted online in 2013, examines the constitutive implications of digital information and communications technologies (ICTs) in the thinking and political capacities of journalistic workers. To do this, in conjunction with its empirical findings, we apply the concept of technological fetishism arguing that the precarious conditions experienced by journalists are being both understood *and* occluded through the fetish.

The survey demonstrates an array of perspectives concerning the state of the craft/profession – some extremely concerned, others remarkably celebratory, but almost all expressing the view that new technologies are inherently powerful forces. To comprehend these views, we reference hundreds of written comments provided by respondents and interpret them using the fetish and other useful concepts. We argue that different journalists in different positions of security or precariousness, organization or atomization, and degrees of what we call 'engulfment' [1], appear to have different conceptual capacities, all of which are being mediated through the fetish.

In what follows we present the survey's more germane findings. We then

explain the concept of the fetish generally and technological fetishism specifically, followed by a more nuanced and, in places, speculative analysis of both the survey's results and the political implications of technological fetishism for journalism and journalistic workers going forward.

The Survey

From September 4 to October 14, 2013, an online survey of 343 Canadian journalists was conducted on their use of digital technologies. Answering its 50 questions were self-selected journalists who either received an email invitation or responded to notices posted on public listservs (the survey also was publicized by the Canadian Media Guild). [2] Among the respondents, "reporter" is most commonly used as a means of primary self-identification (12.3%), followed by "editor" (10.7%), and then "writer" (8.3%). Among the many who identify themselves with several jobs (constituting 33.7% of all participants), many respondents call themselves "writers" (46.4%) while almost half (48.2%) use the term "freelancer."

In reporting how they are paid, only 57.9% say they receive a salary while two-thirds (66.4%) report their employment incomes to be insufficient. Predictably, a positive relationship was found to exist between those who are not paid a salary and respondents reporting a sense professional insecurity (significant at the .001 level). Respondents paid for their work on a per-piece basis or paid by the word conveyed more insecurity than others. Almost half of the survey's respondents (47.7%) state that their incomes are "less than adequate" to cover their living expenses (in fact, 74.5% indicated some form of dependency on non-employment income). [3]

According to the survey, the wages and salaries needed to pay journalists to practice their craft and sustain them as professionals appears to be in a state of crisis.

A remarkable 42.2% do not foresee themselves working in journalism after the year 2022 and those who are pessimistic about their future outnumber those who were optimistic (51.5% vs. 43.6%). Yet, when asked questions about their current jobs, just 6% say they have little or no autonomy, while 86% view their work to be valuable to society in ways that transcend its economic impact. As one respondent puts it, the "Press is important in a functioning democracy – digital journalism in particular, as it breaks down barriers for people who won't wade through a wall of text on a paper."

In broad brush terms, the survey reveals what may appear to be somewhat contradictory perspectives. On the one hand, most journalistic workers are dissatisfied with their incomes and the precariousness of their careers. On the other, they appreciate their craft, its contributions to society, and the autonomy they report experiencing. With these findings in mind, a diversity of views appear to be at hand. As one respondent summarized his/her career: "Great opportunities, low pay,"

Arguably, such dichotomous interpretations of the state of journalistic labour are even more apparent when reading comments in response to the survey request, *Briefly describe the effect digital technology has had on your work and workload.* Here is a small sample of the answers:

"It has completely changed the nature of every element of what I do."

"Digital technology puts a constant deadline on the shoulders of journalists, meaning more stories need to be done and faster."

"It's added to my job, but made me more productive. But has downgraded society's belief that they should pay for information."

"It's been great. It makes me more mobile, faster, better researched, and more effective."

"Digital technology has cheapened the craft of journalism. Everyone is a writer; therefore nobody feels it necessary to pay money for writers."

"Increased workload. Decreased quality of journalism. Cut down on time to verify sources and think before you write."

Despite obvious differences, these and many other comments regarding digital ICTs share an implicit or explicit understanding of technology as a force or some kind of agent in journalistic labour. As is commonplace in Canadian society (and many others, of course), things, including technologies, often are spoken about and treated as if they are inherently powerful. This is what Marx, in his assessment of the commodity, called a fetish. Importantly, both for Marx and for our purposes, to recognize the existence of fetishistic thinking is not to simplistically reference the presence of some form of delusion. Instead, the fetish – including the technological fetish that arguably is pervasive among contemporary journalists – is both the outcome and is itself constitutive of journalist-employer and journalist-consumer/citizen relationships. To explain this and its significance, we turn to more theoretical concerns in the next section.

Conceptualizing the fetish and technological fetishism

When something is experienced as an 'in itself' instead of the outcome of social agency, it becomes a seemingly independent fact of life. This thinking stems from the very socialness of human reality; by our creation, organization, and use of the things and structures we construct. Once these mediate our lives they, prospectively, also shape existential realities. Reified technologies (or religious beliefs, social customs, etc.) thus come to be encountered and utilized as objective taken-for-granted facticities (Berger and Pullberg, 1965).

Beyond this tendency, things, such as technologies, also can be invested with powers they do not possess inherently. As a technology or technique is registered and lived with – because it is used, thought of, and treated as if it is powerful – it *in effect* exercises power. Comprehending this condition is not reducible to some kind of real/unreal assessment. In Marx's concept commodity fetishism, for example, the notion that commodities have autonomous powers is not treated as some kind of twisted condition of the mind. Instead, *it is an experiential outcome of social life itself.* Not only, according to Marx, does "the social character of men's labour" *appear* to have "an objective character[,...] the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour" (Marx, 1977: 77). Marx is arguing that it is "*a definite social relation between men*, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx, 1977: 321) (emphases added). [4]

Fetishization is more than just reification. The latter, to repeat, concerns the taken-for-grantedness of human creations and the erasure of a conscious history about them. With the fetish, however, a more complex reality is at play. Under capitalism, relations between people are relatively mediated while those between things are more direct. Marx argued that what such (material) relational conditions yield socially and conceptually cannot be dismissed as mere delusions. He was well aware, for example, that the ever-calculating utilitarian (indeed, "rational") bourgeois individual in the nineteenth century recognized that money is not inherently powerful *yet* in his/her social activity such an individual conveyed (to others and him/herself) something very different. The individual is not, to put it directly, ignorant of the fact that money is a voucher entitling the holder to a share of the social product. Instead, as Slavoj Žižek

summarizes, through "your social reality, by means of your participation in social exchange, you bear witness to the uncanny fact that a commodity really appears to you as a magical object endowed with special powers" (Žižek, 1998). [5] In this sense, the fetish is something that, upon reflection, most know or have the capacity to know is false but, through the conditions of one's social relations, *act as if it is true*.

More generally, the conditions and relations necessary for fetishistic thinking are pervasive in predominantly capitalist political economies. This association should be kept in mind as it enables us to fully comprehend how and why journalists, their employers, state officials and others represent and conceptualize digital ICTs as they do. In recent decades, in keeping with neoliberal economic policies, powerful corporate interests have developed and implemented these technologies to achieve various ends, most focusing on increasing labour efficiencies, reducing costs, and expanding or accelerating consumption. Indeed, the past decade has seen enormous upheaval and change in newsrooms across North America with tens of thousands of journalists losing their jobs. Precarity is on the rise while journalistic labour is rationalized, in part, through the introduction of ICTs (Compton and Benedetti, 2010). Rather than reductively or instrumentally reflecting the interests of dominant corporations, however, we argue that through resistance *and* degrees of organized political consciousness, the technological fetish discerned in the survey's responses reflects or, more accurately, *refracts* the more general fetishistic thinking that pervades capitalist societies and, more pointedly, 'common sense' interpretations of individual and collective experiences. [6]

Although the power of ICTs has been abstracted into something that is somehow an autonomous (and even magical) force, this is not to deny that the technological changes that have become so very integrated into daily life are not all

too real. Revisting Habermas's (1970) technology as ideology thesis, Eran Fisher (2007) argues that:

> The strength of ideologies comes not from them being a veil on reality but a *particular* uncovering thereof. Vis-à-vis neoliberal theory, in the context of a technologically-saturated society, where more and more of social life is weaved into information technology, the digital discourse, as an ideology of technology, is all the more 'truer', making itself all the more ready for affirmation by technological reality; a 'self-evident truth'. (Fisher, 2007: para. 51)

Indeed, we argue that the power of the fetish lies in the fact that digital technologies have become constitutive features in the moment-to-moment labour of the journalist and his/her interactions with others. The individual, whether a full-time, part-time or freelance labourer, working primarily as a news reporter, feature writer, social media blogger, editor, or something else, increasingly acts and thinks – independently and in relation to others – *through* such technologies. "Reporting has become internet based," states one survey respondent, "with the majority of source contact coming electronically." According to another, reflecting on his/her constant connection to others through digital media, "God help us when the next major platform becomes a 'must-do' – our brains may implode." And yet another says that because of ICTs "I am never 'off the clock'."

Let us quote one more who puts it as follows: "Digital technology doesn't affect my work -- it is my work."

Again, while these statements reflect the inarguably concrete role played by digital technologies in contemporary journalism, the powers attributed to ICTs are not just straightforward reflections of material relations. They are, more precisely,

refractions. By using this word, conceptually we are able to recognize both the relative autonomy of human agency (i.e. the thinking capabilities of the journalistic worker) *and* the magical qualities of the fetish. As we develop below, a number of respondents to the survey's questions demonstrate an implicit awareness of this complexity.

Our point that digital ICTs do not inherently possess the capabilities prescribed to them but that these powers exist because others relate to one another as if they do can be clarified through what Gramsci called *common sense* (Gramsci, 1971: 332–5, 419-25). Common sense is a way of thinking that, despite its empirical and logical shortcomings, serves as a shared and often useful guide in people's lives. As with the fetish, this usefulness involves the fact that others also act as if it makes sense. Gramsci contrasts common sense to what he calls *good sense* which, instead, entails a conscious understanding of the complexities, dualisms, and even the fetishisms that pervade everyday life. [7]

"Money can't buy you happiness" is useful common sense but, when applying good sense, it is questionable as layers of ideological baggage are revealed and complex structural conditions and inequalities become discernible. Similarly, as almost every journalist knows, the 'freedoms' and 'opportunities' associated with ICTs make sense but, when asked to exercise good sense on the matter, most (as some survey responses indicate) recognize their dependency on digital technology and that the freedoms and efficiencies at hand are largely outcomes of the impracticality of doing and retaining their jobs without them (Davis, 2013: 7-18). For one respondent, ICTs have enabled him/her to be "more flexible, creative and faster." Another says, however, that "Without digital technology, I would have no job."

The fetish, as a materially-based relational development, cannot be eradicated

through critical reflection alone (as with the application of good sense). Instead, it constitutes what Žižek refers to as an "objective illusion" (Žižek, 2006: 340). Rather than the predominance of some form of false thinking (for example, assuming that new technologies are themselves compelling journalism to change), the more pressing puzzle stems from people *recognizing the falsity of such claims yet acting as if they are true.* (Žižek 2006; Sloterdijk, 1987: 20).

Journalistic workers in Canada live and work in what is, of course, a predominantly capitalist society and, more directly, in the context of capitalist profit-motives, this implies the predominance of relations among and mediated through *things* (for Marx, "commodity forms"). Fundamental to these relations are businesses and other interests that are systemically driven to implement more efficient ways to produce, distribute, and sell commodities, while people are compelled to develop and sell their labouring capabilities for a wage. For both the capitalist and worker (or most employers and employees) this entails ways of living, relating, and thinking that are atomizing: social relations that tend to be individualistic, competitive, and explicitly or implicitly dominated by exchange values. In these general conditions, the fetish constitutes a lived *and* ideational expression of everyday 'thingified' relations. The possession of things – including the commodified capacity to labour (what Marx called "labour power") – becomes a condition for (and directly influences) the nature of one's participation (Burris, 1988: 6). As such, mediating things, including technologies, have no independent existence: they reflect and refract various other social forms (e.g. structured political economic interests, ideologies, professional ideals, etc.). According to John Michael Roberts, while "much of the activity of everyday life operates beyond the immediate confines of the capitalist mode of production ... [this mediated life is] enmeshed within the confines of capitalist social

relations wherein a diverse array of social forms permeate one another" (Roberts, 2002: 100).

Everyday relations and thoughts thus take place through the mediation of life through things and, today, a seemingly endless number of relations are mediated through *technological* means. As Val Burris puts it, social arrangements "once visibly the product of human agency now appear as technological imperatives... As technology acquires a particular social form, human behavior is made to 'personify' (i.e. accommodate itself to) patterns of social organization compatible with the accumulated mass of technology" (Burris, 1988: 16). This approach, Burris insists, avoids an instrumentalist conceptualization of ideology; one in which structured ideas are simply the direct products of some kind of imposed manipulation (10). Such a conceptualization "presupposes a degree of unity and class consciousness among the ruling class that is empirically questionable"; "it fails to explain why particular forms of ideological mystification occur rather than others"; it represents "ideologies as simple rationalizations of [self-conscious and freely created] ruling-class interests"; and it tends to treat members subordinate classes as "passive objects of manipulation" (11). By foregrounding reification generally and the fetish specifically, Burris follows Marx in countering these problems – problems that emerge when inter-subjective realities are assessed primarily as the outcomes of deliberate actions and manipulated beliefs.

Readers familiar with technological determinism – technologies and techniques as aloof yet decisive social agents (Webster, 1995: 39) – and, more particularly, *critiques* of it, will recognize this instrumentalism. While, for determinists, "technology will ultimately impose its own discipline and its own patterns over and above the efforts of specific agents…", critics, such as Raymond

Williams, emphasize the social contexts and powerful interests that tend to dominate a technology's development and implementation (Freedman, 2002: 427). And while, for Williams, technology has a "complex and variable connection with other social relations and institutions" (quoted in Freedman, 2002: 429), he argues that the seeming inevitability of a technology is "a product of the overt and covert marketing of the relevant interests" (Williams, 1985: 133). While we have no fundamental argument with this approach, our emphasis on technological fetishism allows us to go further in that its application transcends instrumentalist tendencies. By focusing on fetishism rather than determinism, more than the socialness and, thus, power implications of technologies and techniques are fleshed out in that the constitutive implications of technologies and techniques can be directly integrated into our analyses. As such, a direct awareness of the fetish enables us to escape a dichotomy in which material relations are prioritized over a somehow secondary ideational level. In sum, the fetish enables us to recognize that the technologies mediating social relations are deeply institutionally constitutive of capitalist relations both *in toto* and in the context of a particular place and time, such as Canada in the early twenty-first century.

Relating technological fetishism to the survey

The views garnered through our survey regarding the impact digital technologies are having on journalistic labour are varied. A relatively small number of respondents express enthusiasm, another minority have disdain for them, while most say they are both helpful and harmful. This mix entails one commonality, however: they involve some form of fetishistic thinking. Most commonly we see this in the view that ICTs somehow are acting on journalists and compelling employers to change their practices. "I work almost entirely in digital technology," writes one respondent, "it

increases workload immensely but seems to be the way forward." Another expresses a similar perspective but in a way that makes his/her sense of engulfment more explicit: "At present the technology threatens to disintegrate many jobs in the graphic design area of journalism. Instead of the technology being a tool to help people, it now seems to be destroying people's livelihoods." Yet another expresses a similar viewpoint, emphasizing the power of technology to the exclusion of the economic interests and political decisions underlying its development and use:

"It [digital technology] has added significantly to my workload. I'm still expected to complete the same amount of stories, but the work for each one has easily tripled. Instead of just writing an article, I now have to shoot video, take photos, come up with something for social media and try to add some kind of interactive online feature. There is no time."

These and many other respondents also convey the common sense perspective that contemporary changes to journalism are unstoppable. There is, of course, a concreteness to this view as fetishistic thinking is experienced in terms of the worker's very real alienation and insecurity. Common sense notions that, to quote one respondent, "There is more to do, but more tools to do it with", are popular perhaps because they constitute means of coping and/or making sense of a seemingly non-sensical or uncontrollable predicament.

A final theme that is discernible at least in the comments of a significant minority expresses both technological fetishism and this common sense in terms of what might be called the myth of entrepreneurial journalism. Briefly, this is a much circulated notion that digital technologies and the related transformation of journalism are liberating and perhaps even democratizing both for journalists and polities. Rather than news and other information services being dominated by a small number of

corporate entities, some laud the coming of more entrepreneurial forms of journalism, seeing these as a means of freeing journalists from formerly restrictive institutional practices and career possibilities. Celebratory comments in this vein in our survey are, to repeat, in the minority but constitute a significant and ascendant perspective. They include the following:

"I am incredibly grateful for social media outlets, especially Twitter, for giving me a platform to share and promote my work. As a young journalist, I don't know a better way to promote myself while also hearing feedback and ideas from a growing audience. In turn, editors recognize I have an audience, and I've been told recently by one editor that they want my ideas because they want a younger audience. I'm also grateful for my second-hand iPhone, which allows me to live-tweet and take notes and photos on the fly. It has made my job easier and faster."

Another respondent writes that "[w]ithout it [digital technology] I wouldn't have become a journalist. It means I can find out where interview subjects will be and when, so the whole of the English speaking world is a potential place to place pieces." Embracing the promotional notion that ICTs not only create more opportunities but they also provide journalists with the means of attaining the market ideal of efficiency is this text messaging-like remark: "Provided new opportunities. Enormous time savings. (No more lining up at libraries!)"

"My bosses," says another, "have deluded themselves into thinking they put digital first – they don't. Most decisions put print first and they've tied our ability to be nimble to the print front-end publishing system." In other words, if only the employer more forcefully compelled journalists to 'go digital' the company he/she is working for would do better by enabling them to be more "nimble."

Echoing this entrepreneurial zeal is one more who states that, quite simply, digital technologies yield "More jobs (++)".

We hypothesize that many of these respondents are, relatively speaking, young or inexperienced journalistic workers whose job security is limited. We also think they might be (again relatively) more 'at home' with new technologies than their colleagues given that they have likely used digital ICTs all their working lives and intimately associate them with their jobs. But if this is generally correct we are left with what appears to be an exception to our earlier explication of the fetish as something people (at least when pushed to think about it) know is false yet act as if it is true. Is this minority – echoing promotional literature about a new 'golden age of journalism' – an example of the insightful perspectives of a marginalized group *or* is it, more astonishingly, a reflection (*not* a reflexion) of the fetish itself as a medium of delusional thinking (to repeat, something that Marx argued was far too simplistic)? We think it is neither.

Following G.A. Cohen's analysis of Marx concerning what he calls "the dialectic of labour," (Cohen, 1988: 187-195) the tangible freedom experienced through the use of technology is not one free of constraints. The structural limits facing journalism in an increasingly efficiency-focused, multi-tasking, and tenuous occupation are critiqued by all but these more celebratory respondents. Here we have a glimpse of the contradictions experienced by journalists working in intensive digitally-mediated newsrooms. Digital technologies *do* open up creative possibilities for reporters and editors. Indeed, many of the journalism trade journals run features and commentaries on the potential to democratize the forms of storytelling that new media technologies make possible, including the participation of so-called citizen journalists. Again, these potentialities are not mere delusions; they are – seen

dialectically – utopian possibilities that are often negated by the dominant political economy of corporate convergence, labour rationalization and the short-term interests and demands of finance capital (Baker, 2007; Skinner et al., 2005; Winseck 2010). As Debra Clarke correctly notes, alongside the "digital 'ultra-optimism'" of media managers "there has sometimes been a regrettable tendency … to dwell upon digitization and the digital technology itself to the relative neglect of the underlying economic conditions and wider social structures into which the technology has been inserted" (Clarke, 2014: 97-98).

In this political and economic context, it is quite possible that a worker can recognize his/her dependency on technology while not fully comprehending its role as a barrier (a barrier, for example, to one realizing some kind of job security or having the time to fully assess information and sources before filing a report). To use an analogy, someone might clearly see a closed door but, thinking he/she is free to come and go, remains unaware that it is locked. The point to be made here is that in order for the engulfing mechanisms of the fetish to be removed, the worker must at least understand the material nature of their contradictory situation – a situation we elaborate further below.

Organization, political capacity, and the fetish

The role played by technological fetishism is further understood by reading responses to the survey's questions concerning union representation. Several tensions are found in these answers. One that is important in the context of this paper involves a general division between the views of what we assume are newer/younger journalists in relation to their more experienced colleagues. For many of the former, unions are described as exclusionary and protective of more established workers, and we know from the survey that older journalists tend to be more unionized (or members of some

other collective organization). The survey also reveals that non-unionized workers are less likely to be paid for all their labour: more than half (51.9%) report that they are not paid for all their working hours while those who are unionized say that they are more likely to be fully remunerated (this situation among the non-unionized, we speculate, is due to their relatively tenuous status and their integration into work through mostly continuous and untethered digital connections). Despite these conditions, some of these respondents (among others) blame unions for slowing or retarding their employers' adoption of technology (which they mostly rate as a necessary advance) while others (most of whom we believe to be more experienced and secure workers) see unions as a means of buffering some of their negative implications such as being over worked and the threat of job losses.

We suggest that the technological fetish is mediating these different views. While fetishistic thinking is pervasive in capitalist political economies, we postulate that the extent to which digital ICTs have been, constitutively, the tools of one's everyday labour, the journalist's understanding of his/her craft and professional capabilities are embedded through their use. Newer journalists, we assume, have used an array of digital technologies all of their working lives while the more senior may not have this background (at least not in terms of the depth and breadth of their everyday application). To repeat, more experienced journalists are more likely to be unionized and hold more secure positions. These two conditions, in some instances, may structurally and conceptually help them to be relatively detached from (rather than engulfed in) what has become a norm for most: the full integration of ICTs into their labour and thus their dependency on utilizing such technologies to do, find, and retain work. [8]

To further investigate this seemingly odd embrace of technologies especially

among some of the less experienced and unorganized journalistic workers – technologies being used to facilitate the very insecurities and inequalities that appear to be at the core source of tensions and divisions among journalists – we now turn to comments made in response to survey questions concerning unions.

"The union," states one respondent, "seems more interested in protecting pensions and senior workers who don't contribute much. Their actions prevent the hiring of younger journalists with much-needed digital skills." According to another, "If it wasn't for the union protecting jobs in bloated corporate departments and stomping their feet over short-term contracts, I would likely be employed right now." To quote a similar perspective: "Unions are resistant to changes in job roles that we need to make in order to keep up with digital transformation." Others, however, recognize the potential worth of unions – one stating that "It's good to have union protection for this industry these days", while another perceives them to not care "about work conditions like tasks definition, workload [sic] and never tries to stop multitasking."

In other comments, respondents share their experiences and perceptions of digital technology as an indispensable and, indeed, powerful force. In fact, this objective illusion appears to be mediating how some conceptualize the implications of organized labour itself. "I think a union would impose too much structure on a profession that requires flexibility," remarks one, who continues that "Unions are resistant to changes in job roles that we need to make in order to keep up with digital transformation." Another writes that while "[i]t's great to have support and advocacy for things like wages, overtime and security ... [unions] can also lead to some workforce inertia where things don't evolve, and that can limit opportunities." One respondent who seems to be expressing what might well be a refracted assessment of

new technologies states that "[i]n an industry that is under siege, union membership at least allows the illusion of having some control over my work environment and conditions."

The fetish, to reiterate, stems from very real 'thingified' relations but is not simplistically determined by such conditions. Instead, the power of a thing is accepted largely because it is acted upon by others. Money, for example, really does have power – not inherently but, rather, in a society in which people use it to express, exercise, or resist power. Similarly, digital technologies, even though they are just things, are developed and used to empower some over others and to enable workers to do powerful things for themselves and others. Journalistic workers, especially those who use them or are dependent on them in ways that are deeply constitutive, thus are not 'wrong' in recognizing the power of technology. Nevertheless, as we have suggested, this power has disempowering implications in terms of the technology's direct mediation and thus obfuscation of engulfing conditions and dependency relationships – conditions and relationships within still more complex political economic relations (and, in the terms of common sense norms, sometimes contradictory ways of thinking and acting). However, it is important to point out that a small number of respondents to the survey demonstrate some keen insights that reveal, we think, at least a fragmentary recognition that the predominant common sense may not be good sense. Some comments, like the following, while peppered with industry jargon, show some amount of awareness regarding the relationship between economic forces and assumed technological capabilities:

"The workload has more than doubled, without a corresponding increase in salary, staffing or revenue for the company. Ad agencies do not know how to connect with the clients of their clients, so they are pushing a digital agenda that we need to

buy into in order to secure revenue... Younger buyers push digital without concern for whether it will reach the desired audience... It is not unusual to generate a quarter (or less) revenue from a digital property that takes the same amount of work as a traditional media project. This is part of the reason most print publishers have simply pushed responsibilities for digital projects (website, blogging, social media) onto existing print staff, and that is stretching the staffing levels dangerously thin, and weakening the deliverables considerably."

Other respondents similarly recognize that the economic and technological developments at hand are having deleterious implications for the quality of what is produced:

"Publishers want copy for the web but pay very little for it. They also want it more quickly than copy for traditional print. There seems to be little to no concern about quality or fact checking."

"The ability for everyone to self-publish has devalued the written word and make media employers feel justified in paying next to nothing."

"I am often expected to tweet and send copy to the web during the news event I am covering. This distracts me from the event that I am covering and makes it more difficult to analyze the event and ask effective questions."

"It [digital technology] has increased the stress level, workload, you name it. Everything must be tweeted as information is available, sitting down and writing a coherent, well-thought out story seems an afterthought."

Others are even more explicit in expressing a sense of powerlessness while also understanding the profit motives underlying technology's rapid deployment:

"[Digital technology has d]ramatically increased my workload and expectations of me... no real room for intelligence given constant demand to feed the

goat..."

"The fact is the more one can produce the more you must produce."

These and, we argue, most other journalistic workers, have some awareness of the political economic interests and dynamics behind the radical changes underway yet there is also a palatable sense of resignation, acceptance, or celebratory enthusiasm which we take to be varied expressions of the technological fetish in action.

Conclusions

> The struggle starts from where we are and what we are; the struggle is a refusal of where we are and what we are: we are in-and-against, against-and-in. But more than that: in order to be sustained, the struggle in-and-against must become a moving against-and-beyond...
>
> -- John Holloway (2005: 39).

Given the precarious nature of contemporary journalism and in light of what our survey suggests is the now deeply contradictory experience of journalistic labour and potentially unsustainable nature of the craft/profession, other ways of structuring journalistic labour and the institution of journalism are urgently needed (Compton and Benedetti 2015; McChesney and Nichols 2010). Furthermore, given the relative security and economic resources of the unionized journalist, our findings suggest that this alternative structure might well involve some focus on the widening and deepening of Canadian journalists as an organized workforce. Beyond this general point is the complex of relationships referenced in this paper involving digital technologies, political economic dynamics, and vested interests. We have suggested that the technological fetish is playing a significant but under assessed role,

particularly in how different journalists (influenced by their experiences, job security, and organizational status) perceive their work in light of technological change.

Digital technologies, we have argued, are constitutive of journalistic practices and, indeed, the political capacities of journalistic workers. The common sense that journalism 'must change with the times' is variously challenged by different (i.e. relatively autonomous) journalists whose capacities to exercise good sense involves a number of material conditions and structured capabilities.

We have also argued that despite the secondary status of good sense thinking, through its development the fetish itself is at least *conceptually* penetrable. For all involved, however, we conclude with the general observation that journalistic workers *are* experiencing (and in our survey have articulated) a sense of empowerment through their use of digital technologies yet this has been accompanied by a less discernible form of *dis*empowerment. For some, this state of affairs – what might be termed an engulfed freedom [9] – is not readily perceived while, for others, this engulfment is recognized but seen to be largely inescapable.

As Marx understood, a person can only be suitably independent and free of such engulfments after the constitutive media and relations of this condition are recognized and structurally reformed or removed. The puzzle as to why journalistic workers continue to act on something they know to be false is now comprehensible as the technological fetish is rooted in relational conditions and everyday practices and it is here, and not just not just in the mind, that political action is required.

[1] "Engulfment" refers to a condition of unrecognized constraint. Someone who is aware of being in some way constrained has the capacity to at least conceptualize what stands in the way of her freedom, while the individual who cannot recognize the relationship or condition or structure as such is engulfed by it. A simple analogy is that of the child engulfed by his parents: as G.A. Cohen puts it, "he knows them to be separate from him, yet does not know himself to be separate from them" (Cohen, 1988: 188).

[2] No self-identifying information was collected. The completion rate was 77%. An initial report on the survey was presented in the following year. See Nicole Cohen, Edward Comor and James R. Compton, et al. (2014) Journalistic Labour and Digital Transformation: A Survey of Working Conditions. Paper presented at the Canadian Association of Work and Labour Studies conference, Brock University, 29-30 May.

[3] Journalist incomes, on the whole, are similar to some comparable occupations, as the median wage is in the $40-60,000 range. In recent years, however, these wages generally have declined in relation to inflation. By factoring in the rate of inflation between 2008-2012 (when prices in Canada rose 6.64%), 56.3% of respondents experienced a significant reduction of their real incomes. Almost 43% depend on the income of a spouse, 13.7% of respondents depend on credit cards, and 11.2% state that they depend on bank loans or lines of credit.

[4] According to Georg Lukács, reified capitalist relations undermine the bourgeoisie's ability to fully comprehend its own structural conditions. For the working class, however, its much different relationship to capital entails at least the potential to profoundly understand such conditions. For him, thought is both cognitive and creative; i.e. it does not simplistically reflect a concrete reality but, instead,

knowledge is the outcome of one's active engagement with it. Indeed, reification, as a structural outcome of Marx's more general commodity form, is seen to be nothing less than "the central structural problem of capitalist society…" (Lukács 1971, p. 83).

[5] In accordance with this dual reality, Marx also argued that workers, especially when experiencing a state of immiseration, collectively could recognize the constructed nature of their situations and thus their political capabilities in relation to capital. See, for example, Marx and Engels (1979).

[6] In arguing that the technological fetish *refracts* more general fetishistic and common sense thinking, we allude to notions of causality that are more complex and mediated than reductive or instrumentalist. Rather than arguing that the technological fetish is generally a direct reflection or mirroring of broader reified and fetishized conditions, we recognize that different and complex levels of causality are at work and each (while inter-related) involve degrees of relatively autonomous action. In turn, technological fetishism constitutes what might be termed a mediating abstraction: mediating what often constitute refracted interactions and conceptualizations. For an elaborating this methodological approach, see Roberts (2013).

[7] Common sense also reflects a form of knowledge attained through crude forms of empiricism or shared sensations, while good sense consciously (and 'scientifically') conceptualizes another form of knowledge that is both conditioned and open to reflexive analyses. Rather than reflecting some kind of false/true dichotomy, for Gramsci this common sense/good sense formulation constituted, in part, a pedagogical device crafted to impel reflexive thinking. "Philosophy," as Gramsci put it, "is criticism and the superseding of religion and 'common sense'. In this sense it coincides with 'good sense' as opposed to 'common sense'" (Gramsci, 1971: 326).

[8] In the survey, journalists who are not unionized report higher levels of job insecurity. A statistical analysis reveals a strong positive relationship (significant at the .001 level) between respondents who are not represented by a union and those earning an inadequate income. Unionized journalists – constituting 43.1% of respondents – are more likely to earn higher incomes and report these to be adequate.

[9] By "freedom" we include a person's freedom to sell his/her labour power to anyone who contracts it.

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