Seeing Meaning: Visible Labor and the Future of Work

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Abstract

As headlines warn that automation will replace human labor, the problem of invisible labor ironically persists. We propose a design approach to explore and intervene upon this tension between the automation of and the invisibility of human labor, in hopes of supporting a future that recognizes all human work.

Author Keywords

Future of work; meaningful labor; handwork; post-capitalist society; invisible labor; immaterial labor; automation; craftsmanship; automated society

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous;

Introduction

Labor has come to be associated with onerousness and precarity in view of technological pursuits that have placed workers in the shadows of algorithms and machines that mask or devalue their efforts [5, 7, 8, 9, 11]. On the other hand, labor is also a source of tremendous fulfillment and intimate connection between mind and body [1, 3, 12]. Our regard for manual labor is reflected in the high value we assign to handwork that visibly materializes the skilled efforts of the craftsperson. Moreover, technology in combination with craft affords us the possibility of fluid transitions between digital and physical activity that may awaken new sensibilities through our bodily, material, and digital engagements [4]. Thus, the future of work is hinged on our recognition of human labor as inevitably ever-present, valuable, and in many cases pleasurable and desirable, even as we move towards an automated society.

Post-Capitalist Society & the Future of Work

We are interested in participating in this workshop to explore how labor could be reimagined in the context of the future of work as a grand vision of how technology can make human labor visible to support a culture that values human work in a post-capitalist society. Following [7, 8, 9, 10, 11] making labor visible is recognizing how labor situates people in action, as they reconfigure their bodies to interact with technologies, and creatively appropriate tools and resources to meet their complex needs, in addition to decentering machines and technologies. Through our critical, material, and speculative investigations, we hope to interrogate how technologies can mediate creativity, self-expression, pleasure, bodily engagement, and fulfillment that make labor meaningful.

Design Proposal
Provoked by the common practice of "clocking in" and "out" of work associated with modern conceptions of wage labor that quantify human work in metrics such as time spent or money earned, while foregrounding concerns such as wage theft [5], income discrepancies, and the 40 hour work week, we propose a speculative design of an *employee clock* that keeps track of meaningful moments of labor experienced throughout the day, and displays them for others to appreciate, cultivating a culture that notices, values, and equally rewards the creative nature of all human labor. This design could foreground issues related to automation, notions of meaningful labor, and the ethics and the politics of invisible labor.

Inspiration
Conceptually, we are inspired by critical and speculative designs that investigate the invisibility of labor in relation to crowdsourcing, such as the *Spare-Cycle workstation* [13], and the tracking of productivity at work, such as our previous work, *Pee Timer* [14]. Aesthetically, we are inspired by craft, as well as every day and appropriated materials that bring people comfort, and delight. Critically and speculatively, we are inspired by visions of the future that are not necessarily technologically linear, or continuous, but that bring culture, nature, and technology into symbiosis.

Provocations
Some of the visions of post-capitalist society that we would like to explore and reimagine through design and prototyping include:

- How will humans find a sense of fulfillment in a future that is projected to be automated?
- What forms of invisible labor will a fully automated future bring, and how can we make it visible?
- How can technologies mediate self-expression, creativity, appreciation, and bodily engagements that contribute to meaningful labor?
- How can future societies and cultures value human labor, and how can we support this vision of the future?

Motivation for Participation and Prior Work
Under the auspices of our research group, Cultural Research in Technology (CRIT) Lab, we have researched gendered labor in domestic space [1, 3], DIY and tech entrepreneurship in relation to the future of work [6], and amateur creativity and the labor of online content creation [10], among others. Our work has brought us to reflect on what desirable futures

might be, and how we may work towards shaping them with design and technology, focusing our efforts on supporting meaningful and aesthetic engagements with technology, and ensuring that technology is designed with concern for everyone, especially those who are often left out of dominant agendas. As the world moves towards automation, envisioning utopian futures in which technologies work in service of deeper human needs is critical and a promising direction into actively shaping a future we desire [2, 7].

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