Opinion **Silicon Valley**

Social media users of the world unite!

Might our data be better viewed as labour rather than capital?

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John Thornhill YESTERDAY

If Plato were alive today, he might well regard much of the work we do as leisure, and much of the leisure we enjoy as work. Those extravagantly paid Davosian chief executives who jet around the world discussing the great issues of the day are in fact indulging in an endless swirl of symposia. But Plato would probably look askance at others who enjoy fishing, gardening and cooking, and view those activities as laborious occupations.

So argued the Czech philosopher Tomas Sedlacek at a recent Financial Times conference, where he claimed to be working. His argument was intended (I think) mostly as an intellectual provocation to highlight how our definitions of work and leisure depend on cultural context rather than immutable social laws.

But it would certainly help us unravel some of the puzzles of our digital economy if we were to flip some of our conceptual classifications on their head.

Take social media, for example. Users of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube may believe they are simply sharing their special moments, witty insights and hilarious escapades with friends and families. All this activity is enriching our lives, deepening our social connections, and providing fun and free leisure time.

Looked at another way, though, all we are doing by pecking away at our mobile phones like so many digital battery hens is generating massive data sets for machine-learning programs to work out how to sell advertising against us. The genius of Facebook is that all its users are — unwittingly — working for the company for free, creating its most valuable product.

That enables Facebook to pay out the equivalent of just 1 per cent of the company's market value to its own employees, compared with 40 per cent at Walmart. We have all been seduced by the "siren servers", as Jaron Lanier, the author and Microsoft researcher, has called them.

Naturally, most of the Silicon Valley crowd see little wrong with our implicit digital contract. Hal Varian, Google's chief economist, argues that consumers receive immensely popular, convenient services for free. Advertisers benefit from cheap, effective targeting of audiences. If users do not like Google's offer then they can easily switch to other services. Rivals can generate, and buy in, their own data unencumbered. Competition is but a click away.

That argument may hang together if you regard user data as capital created and owned by the technology companies. But a team of technologists and academics, including Mr Lanier, has published a paper challenging that conception. They argue that data are better viewed as the product of labour, rather than the byproduct of leisure.

The data economy has developed by accident rather than design, is inefficient, unfair and unproductive, and should be radically rethought, they contend. They draw a distinction between what they call our existing Data as Capital (DaC) model, which treats data as the "exhaust" products of consumption and the feedstock for surveillance capitalism, and a theoretical Data as Labour (DaL) model, which would treat data as user-generated possessions that should primarily benefit their owners.

They appeal to labour market economists and entrepreneurs to help shape a real market for users' data. Such a market would pay people for their data, creating new jobs, nurturing a culture of "digital dignity", and boosting the productivity of the economy.

That argument is developed in *Radical Markets*, a forthcoming book by Eric Posner and Glen Weyl, which is both a savage critique of "techno-feudalism" and an idealistic appeal to share the fruits of our collective intelligence more fairly. "The current model of data ownership," says Mr Weyl, "is economically inefficient."

Mr Lanier and his co-authors acknowledge it is simplistic to view the DaC and DaL models as binary. They also accept that paying people for data is problematic in the real world. Some experiments by Microsoft and others to reward users for data have been immediately gamed by bots.

It may also be a hard sell to convince a sceptical public that some of the most Stakhanovite "workers" in their model data economy might be marginalised teenage gaming addicts, even if the authors argue their case well.

To shunt the data economy in the right direction, they suggest we need to strengthen three countervailing powers. First, greater competition and innovation are essential for stimulating real data markets. Big Tech should not be allowed to stifle smaller upstarts. Indeed, it may even take one of the big technology companies to break ranks and champion a new data economy given the daunting economies of scale.

Second, governments need to update and enforce competition policy, encouraging data portability and the growth of the DaL economy. Stricter regulatory regimes, such as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, which comes into effect in May, should help.

Finally, we consumers should wise up to our role as digital workers and — in Marxist terminology — develop "class consciousness". Data labour unions need to emerge to fight for our collective rights. The historic approach of labour to overmighty capital has been to strike. We may know the DaL movement is serious when we start digitally picketing social media groups under the slogan: "No posts without pay!"

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