Connect with your audience! The Relational Labor of Connection

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The theme of Console-ing Passions this year is cultivating community, a topic about which I have had a lot to say in the context of fan practices. Today I want to look at it from another vantage point by considering the kind of work that relating to a community of individual fans entails. Increasingly, part of the job of artists is to foster and sustain ongoing interaction with a community of individual fans. Artists must balance their audiences' need to connect with them and with one another with their own economic and social needs.

One question we were asked to consider as plenary speakers was future trajectories for feminist media studies. The nature of these relationships is of profound importance in understanding not just entertainment work, but the nature of contemporary work more broadly. Feminist media scholars are particularly well positioned to engage these issues for two reasons: relationship building is a deeply gendered realm with long histories of feminist scholarship and these relationships are enacted largely through media.

For the last several years I have been working on a project about how musicians understand their relationships and interactions with their audiences. I have interviewed about 40 musicians, spent countless hours following artists on social media, attended music industry conferences, and closely followed press coverage of the music industry, with a particular eye toward exemplars of audience engagement and advice that musicians are given. Most of the musicians with whom I spoke had audiences before MySpace happened and could therefore reflect on being a musician before as well as after social media.

What I've found, in short, is that musicians are engaging in a tremendous amount of *relational labor*. Their social and economic relationships have always been intertwined. However, as audiences have taken to social media to interact directly with them, expectations for more personal relationships have increased, as have the importance of such connections in shaping economic fortunes. Doing the work of being an artist often includes managing interpersonal relationships with audience members, even for those successful enough to hand some or most of that off to staff.

Pundits increasingly tell musicians that in order to be economically viable, they must "connect" with their fans in order to "monetize" them. This rhetoric of connection is reductive. "Connect" serves as a gloss for unspecified mechanisms through which the presence of interaction might be tied to income-earning potential and it obscures the challenging skills and effort that "connecting" entails. The use of "connect" and "engage" to erase this work echoes the erasure of female-gendered skills from discussions of work life in other contexts and discourses of labor (e.g. Adkins & Jokinen, 2008; Fortunati, 2007; Jarrett, 2014; Weeks, 2007).

Relational Labor

I'd like to offer three examples that span a spectrum of how artists think about relational labor. Toward one end, is someone who views a career in music as a means to relationships, the other end views relationships as a means to a career in music. Steve Lawson is a solo bass player who creates "ambient music for people who hate ambient music." He prefers playing in his audience's homes to clubs and other typical music venues. His income comes from a combination of these live performances, pay-what-you-want sales of his recordings on Bandcamp, teaching, and other odd music jobs. He is an ardent Twitter user, having posted over 130,000 tweets since he started. "I'm making friends with people who listen to my music," he told me, "and then I become a part of their life and they become a part of mine. And I am truly enriched by that. And the music becomes the soundtrack to that relationship."

Toward the other extreme is someone like Lloyd Cole, a singer-songwriter who released his first album

Rattlesnakes in 1984, enjoyed considerable success in the 1980s, and has continued to earn a living through selling recordings and touring in the years since, although that has become much harder. For years, he “didn't embrace the idea of trying to find an audience through any other method than putting music out there.” For him, music is about making “beautiful things and add[ing] beauty to people's lives,” a process he believes depends in part on the artist maintaining a mystique that connection can undermine. In contrast to Lawson, for whom relationships with his audience are the point, for Cole, those relationships have their pleasures, but are laborious. He spoke often of discomfort when describing communication with his fans, yet saw his ability to put his son through college and support his family as dependent on that communication. He has a forum on his website where a small group of highly engaged and supportive long-term loyal fans hang out and many more lurk. “At times I feel like I’ve got a second family with these people,” he said, “which is not really what I set out to have.” While some musicians with whom I spoke found time spent at the merchandise table meeting fans after a show deeply rewarding, he described it as uncomfortable. “Every now and again I get cornered by a drunk fan,” he explained, “and what can I do? Just I'm standing there and I'm just sort of nodding my head going, "Okay. This is how I make a living."”

Lawson and Cole represent two far – though not end – points on a spectrum of attitudes toward the balance of social and economic dynamics of interactions with fans. Somewhere in the middle is Zoë Keating, a solo cellist. She described meeting fans after a show whom she knew from Twitter. “They came to the concert just based on our social media connection, and they felt secure enough in our relationship that we could go hang out.” She felt secure as well, since “luckily my online self is not idealized so it’s not that hard to live up to.” She is an avid Twitter user and she strives to present herself honestly there, as this allows her to both humanize herself and explain to her followers that she supports her family on her music revenue. “I get these e-mails a lot,” she said, “people have been listeners for a while and then it wasn’t until they got to know me on Twitter that they bought my album.” For Keating, then, the social is a genuine pleasure, but is also strategically tied to economics.

I choose these examples to make a few points. First, although they represent different perspectives,

they all reflect awareness that such relationships are integral to their economic viability. They also share the sense that, for better or worse, social media pushes these relationships to become ever more like friendship and family. Each hints at the range of complicated interpersonal skills and demands that such engagement entails.

Contemporary Labor

Musicians' experience of increased relational labor is indicative of general trends in contemporary labor conditions, what Gill and Pratt (2008: 2) summarize as "post-Fordism, post-industrialization, network society, liquid modernity, information society, 'new economy,' 'new capitalism,' and risk society." In this environment, work is precarious, flexible, immaterial, service-oriented, and often tied to the management of one's own and others' emotions. Responsibility for success and failure falls on workers, who must engage in an increased amount of networking to create the interpersonal social conditions through which they can find continued employment. As Marwick (2013) describes, social media figure centrally as sites through which people can do the relationship building, and acquire and display the markers of status, that make them marketable. Several scholars identify creative work as exemplifying labor in the new economy.

The sociologist Lisa Adkins (2001) describes labor shifts since the 1970s as the "cultural feminization of work" in which, regardless of gender, more workers are expected to incorporate relational work into their routine practices. Many have looked at this in the context of caring work such as home health aides (e.g. Aronson & Neysmith, 1996; Piercy, 2000). They often note that like other forms of women's work, the effort and skills it takes to do this well are rarely considered, and when they are, tend to be seen as natural talents or evidence of being a nice person rather than as labor, especially, as Adkins (2005) notes, when they are performed by women.

There is no shortage of terms to describe contemporary labor; those that relate most closely to what I am calling relational labor are "emotional labor" and "affective labor" although "immaterial labor," "venture labor," and "creative labor" certainly overlap. Yet none of these terms emphasizes the

ongoing communicative practices and skills of building and maintaining interpersonal and group relationships so central to what these musicians describe, focusing instead on feelings, ideas, aspirations, emotional displays and symbolic production.

Certainly musicians are involved in all of these things. When Lloyd Cole smiles pleasantly at the drunk who has cornered him, reminding himself silently that this is how he makes a living, he is managing his emotions, but he is not doing so because he has been told to by a manager – indeed there are no employers to determine his emotional display rules. When Steve Lawson describes his music as the soundtrack to his friendships with his audience or Zoë Keating describes hanging out after shows with people she met through Twitter, they are engaging in affective labor, but they are also engaged in labor that may lead fairly directly to income. The challenges they face in managing boundaries parallel those that care workers describe, but are not part of the job in the same way that fostering a caring relationship with an elderly client is.

Conclusion

I hope this brief sketch is enough to stimulate your thinking about the hard work of "connecting with your audience" and the value of theorizing such work, both for understanding media industries and for understanding contemporary labor conditions across industries. New media ramp up demands for ongoing relationship building and maintenance in ways that may bear greater resemblance to friends and family than to customers and clients. As media scholars, we are particularly well positioned to make sense of how contemporary contexts and industries combine with media affordances raise these issues. We need to unpack the interpersonal and cultural tensions at play in relational labor, the perspectives that workers use to frame those tensions, and the skills they deploy as they negotiate them in each localized interaction.

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