Tech Labor
A New *Interactions* Forum

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Recent big tech flexes tell a story of an industry with increasing hubris and reach, largely acting with impunity. Whistleblower claims against Google representatives for their baseless firing of tech ethicist Timnit Gebru have led to little in the way of recourse or remedy, following a pattern of discriminatory dismissals that include the termination of employees who sounded the alarm over the company's racist and sexist practices [1]. Outside the tech company itself, firms take up strategies of regulatory avoidance or defiance. Disputing proposed Australian legislation that would have forced Facebook to pay publishers for use of their material, the social media conglomerate simply banned the country's news outlets from the site—suggesting both that it's too big to challenge and that journalistic labor is not worth supporting (despite the prevalence of news on Facebook). One observation from these examples may be that borders and boundaries appear irrelevant to tech companies, and that it is becoming increasingly difficult to hold them to account within nation-states.

Through these contemporary examples, we see the effects of a long history of large tech companies taking up increasing space on the geopolitical stage. Indeed, the current era suggests that techno-empires built on a legacy of colonial expansion and racial capitalism [2] cannot be viewed separately from techno-nationalism, typified by the U.S.-China spat over Huawei and TikTok. What does national sovereignty even mean when private entities like Alibaba, Amazon, Facebook, Google, Huawei, and Tencent base their business models on the collection and exploitation of unprecedented citizen and consumer data across the globe? Moreover, what does the rise of such techno-empires mean for the millions of people around the world whose labor sustains our collective digitally dependent cultures, but who often do not benefit from their profits? What kind of future do these shifts portend for *tech labor*?

When we speak of "tech labor," we are not simply referring to white-collar workers in the headquarters of the largest global firms. We are talking about all who work within the supply chain of technological production—from the "creusers" in the Congo [3] who descend into the

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Insights

→ This contribution launches a new forum called Tech Labor, with the primary aim of curating conversations about the conditions and futures of the human labor underpinning technology production and maintenance.

→ The Tech Labor forum welcomes standalone essays and interviews/conversations about all tech labor within the global supply chain of digital technologies.

earth to find the cobalt that powers device batteries, to the Taiwanese factory workers who make chipsets, the blue-collar workers around the world who sell devices, those working in call centers and repair shops from India to Kenya, the "disinformation architects" [4] in Manila who may not be motivated by ideology, and the content moderators in Arizona [5], who do not have mental health resources despite constantly fielding violent imagery. Yes, we include the designers and engineers in both Mountain View and Shenzhen, but no more than the cafeteria workers who serve them food, the janitors who clean up after them, the online order fulfillment workers, the drivers for platforms such as Uber, DoorDash, and Grab, and the families in Jidong and Mashan [6] who breathe the graphite air and feel the smoke burn their lungs as they work recycling discarded devices.

We link, with urgency, these various labors across borders and scales to underscore the shared experiences of rights, abuses, and working conditions *and* to highlight the hopeful spaces and alternatives that can inform the task of building global solidarity across class and geographies. This broad remit also reminds us that assuming strict boundaries, borders, and definitions can serve to preserve the status quo, where we reinforce the differential valuing of different bodies and the multiple labors they take on.

With this Dialogue, we launch the *Tech Labor* forum, with the aim of bringing these concerns into a sustained conversation in this issue as well as future ones. Drawing from various viewpoints, we will consider how the human labor underpinning technological change lives and works—how workers organize, how they are viewed by peers and supervisors, employers, the law, and academics, whose work informs the actions and policies that dictate tech labor. Following the editors in chief's lead in the March–April 2021 issue of *Interactions*, we use a global lens to not only draw attention to geographically situated work on tech and labor but to also underscore what is at stake—the survival and dignity of *all* who labor in the very globally connected tech industry—and hopefully to build worldwide solidarities.

For the first installment, Rida Qadri and Noopur Raval draw on their ethnographically grounded research with different kinds of tech labor in South Asia to make strong cases for seeing people, specifically platform workers, as the infrastructures of global technologies (Qadri), and to provoke us to question whose labor is rendered invisible in a globalized tech workforce and for whom the discourse of (in)visibility serves (Raval). Both highlight the continued importance of place—how particular sites work to interrogate taken-for-granted ideas about technology, society, and labor—and nudge us toward more-nuanced thinking about continuities and frictions of tech labor and what Anna Tsing [7] calls our "collective survival" in a rapidly changing world. The goal of specifying work from the Global South is not to reify unhelpful distinctions between the "affluent north" and the "poor south," but rather, as some recent HCI and CSCW [8] work has done, to show that particular labor and working conditions transcend geographic borders and are linked by powerful discourses of technology and labor, and sustained by longstanding issues of race, gender, class, and sex, among others. As Raval argues, a "fundamentally decolonial cosmopolitan ethic" is necessary for theorizing and

problem-solving on a more human level, one that, as Qadri shows, is attuned to local, national, and regional contexts *and* contemporary geopolitics and histories of capitalism.

We invite readers to become contributors and to pick up threads left by these authors in challenging accepted ideas about whose labor, where, and toward what ends. We welcome submissions in the form of individual standpoint pieces or conversations (i.e., interviews) that engage with topics related to tech labor, including, but not limited to, continuities in concerns about pre-automation [9] and fauxmation [10], accounts of whistleblowing and retaliation, explorations of transnational solidarities, and possibilities for labor movement futures. Our aim is to cultivate a space for collective thinking and generative criticism, and we hope you enjoy reading this new Dialogue section as much as we enjoy drawing these conversations together.

Endnotes

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