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The work of humour in affective capitalism: A case study of celebrity gossip blogs*

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abstract

Humour has long been investigated for its power to reinforce and/or disrupt cultural norms and values but is has less often been explored from the perspective of political economy. This article addresses this research gap and explores through three examples from celebrity gossip blogs how humour is put to work in affective capitalism. Each example delineates a different way in which humour is linked to capitalism: The first instance shows that humour valorises and masks the tiresome and precarious working conditions of bloggers. The second case illustrates that humour serves to accrete value for capital by creating a buzz or conversation about a celebrity story. In the third example humour works to conceal how the ridiculing and shaming of seemingly 'trashy' celebrities functions to weave people deeper into economic circuits that create the very conditions under which celebrity is first made manifest. Each example combines the affective and material aspects of labour that create a particular value and relation to the economy. Overall, this paper argues that humour – far from being personal, unique and outside of economic considerations – can be an important and cynical ingredient of affective capitalism.

Introduction

In 2004 Mario Lavandeira started blogging 'because it seemed easy' (Stevens, 2013). Free blogging software and an abundance of online paparazzi photos inspired a blog that offered a different approach to celebrity: rather than

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promoting these public figures through flattering texts and images, the blog ridiculed and mocked them through snarky comments and image manipulations. This cynical turn seemed to pay off: in 2015 Perezhilton.com is worth $3,7 million and the daily income generated through online advertising is estimated at $1,153 (Mustat, 2014, see also appendix 1). Stories of such well-trafficked blogs are rare, yet those who are successful make their revenues mainly through online advertising. As I am writing this introduction, advertising banners and pop-ups for Vodafone frame Perezhilton.com and at the bottom of each celebrity photo appears an advert that Google's advertising software chose for me by tracking my prior online activities. Celebrity gossip blogs are cluttered with advertising because they are arguably 'eye ball magnets' for hard to pin down target groups such as millennials. These mostly female 14–30 year olds revisit gossip blogs several times a day, 'not just for the latest on Britney Spears, but also for what Perez and other bloggers have to say about it' (Meyers, 2012: 1025). This illustrates the central role of humour for the economic success of the blog: Only the amused user will return to the website. And only the entertained millennial will click, comment and 'share', thereby generating vast amounts of usable data that can be sold to advertisers. The economic value produced by gossip blogs is therefore based on their capacity to affect users. Yet not all value is reducible to monetary income for stakeholders. Gossip blogs are valuable to their users in ways that exceed value's economic definitions because they accrue cultural, symbolic, and social values to them (Karppi, 2015: 222). With their irreverent humour these blogs allow users to produce themselves as 'subjects of value' (Skeggs, 2004) that are different to those celebs who deserve social derision. In this sense, it can be argued that the pleasures that users gain through online interaction, is the affective/social value which drives the capitalist circuits of these blogs (Pybus, 2015).

This paper assesses how humour is put to work in affective capitalism. The idea to base this investigation on celebrity gossip blogs, was inspired by my PhD research for which I analysed U.S. gossip blogs such as Perezhilton.com and Dlisted.com. Here I explored the affective power of humour to push us into critical directions thereby enabling new ideas about femininity, queerness and whiteness. Such an affirmative reading of online humour was difficult to follow through, because it was continuously tampered by the commercialised nature of these blogs which diminished humour to the status of a commodified exchange. In this sense, this article can be seen as a necessary extension of my prior work. Another reason for the case study of celebrity gossip blogs is that they provide a

particular example of the kind of cultural and creative industry that appears to be flourishing in times of affective capitalism[1].

Affective capitalism describes an economic system in which the production and modulation of emotions, feelings and gut-reactions is vital for the creation of profit.[2] This kind of capitalism taps into and mobilises the emotional resources of workers and customers because it recognises that these 'inner' sentiments are not action *per se*, but they are the inner energy that propels us towards an act which can be economically exploited (Hochschild, 1983; Illouz, 2007). Celebrity gossip blogs are manifestations of this kind of capitalism because they profit from the modulation and organisation of affect. They represent an industry in which mobile, autonomous freelancers undertake creative, self-organised work while carrying all responsibility and risk in order to produce cultural signs and symbols that aim to effect blog readers in pleasurable ways. These affective jolts, in turn, interpellate readers, that is, consumers, to eagerly participate in the production of the experiences that they later consume. Celebrity gossip blogs provide, as such, ideal sites to map out how humour is put to work in affective capitalism in different ways.

The article begins by providing an overview of how humour has been studied so far and how it can be understood as an affective-discursive tool. It then describes three ways in which humour is put to work: It explores firstly how humour can function to mask the tiresome and precarious conditions of work for bloggers. Secondly, it shows how humour can help to accrete monetary value through the creation of a buzz or conversation about a celebrity story. And thirdly, the article demonstrates how humour conceals here the fact that the shaming of 'tasteless' female celebrities is not a rebellious act but a reactionary move that functions to weave people deeper into economic circuits that are already fully invested in affect. In conclusion, this paper argues for an extended understanding of the economic that allows us to study these affective forms of transaction in their cultural context. In other words, humour is used in these blogs to motivate different forms of labour but what is the content of this labour and how does it create value? Answering these questions will serve to illustrate that humour is not outside of considerations about work, economy and the productive aspects of the social but deeply embedded within them.

1 Creative (or cultural) industries are those companies and professions primarily responsible for the industrial production and circulation of culture (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011).

2 I do not regard affect and emotion as interchangeable and synonymous but for this specific topic I am using affect in a more elastic and composite way so that it can encompass also emotional states.

Making humour work

Humour has long been theorised in the social science for its relationship with power. Some argue that humour can provide spaces for rebellion against normative hierarchies by binding people together against formal power structures of authority (Bakhtin, 1984; Stallybrass and White, 1986) or by providing new, irreverent and unusual perspectives on a subject (Kotthoff, 2006; Gray, 2006, Graefer 2014). Other scholars, however, are critical of the subversive power of humour and illustrate in their work how – mainly as a discursive practice – it functions to cement social inequalities and mechanisms of exclusion (Billig, 2005; Lockyer and Pickering, 2008; Chambers, 2009; Weaver, 2011). Challenging the idea that humour is outside of economic considerations, research in sociology, managerial literature and organisational studies has also highlighted how humour can be used to generate value in the workplace. This research stresses, for example, that humour can improve productivity by facilitating teamwork, boosting intellectual and creative thinking by releasing stress and tension (Holmes, 2007). It has also been identified as a form of 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1983) which is necessary to perform stressful and/or dangerous jobs (Sanders, 2004). Management literature has discovered how humour can be a useful tool for effective leadership by promoting adaptability, decision making and problem solving (Consalvo, 1989; Holmes and Marra, 2006). In media and cultural studies scholars have investigated how interactive online media turn internet users into value creators, often by making work seem humourous or like play or fun (Terranova, 2000; Yee, 2006; Coté and Pybus, 2007; Andrejevic, 2008; 2009).[3] Notwithstanding their differences, all these scholars share a concern about how pleasurable feelings, engendered through humour or fun, dissolve the boundary between work and non-work thereby feeding into an advanced capitalism that seeks to commodify all aspects of interpersonal life.

This article contributes to this body of work by exploring how humour and capitalism are connected in three different ways: by masking work as fun, by encouraging user engagement, and by concealing how shaming feeds into an economic system that blogs seem ostensibly to critique. Yet rather than conceiving humour merely as a discursive practice, locating the various possible functions of humour first and foremost in texts and/or images, this paper approaches humour as an affective-discursive tool. This means that humour is recognised as a matter of language and text while also drawing attention to the sensuous and somatic component of humour.

3 Christian Fuchs even argues that the obfuscation of labour as play and fun is one marker of contemporary capitalism (Fuchs, 2014: 122).

Humour is often defined as a discursive practice that violates or disrupts what is socially or culturally expected and agreed to be normal (Morreall, 1987; Meyer, 2000). Yet not all disruptions are necessarily funny. Indeed, what makes humour happen or fail in a particular situation is often difficult to discern and cannot be reduced to the discursive only (Bruns, 2000). Humour can be slippery but it is tied to embodied beings, those who perform it and feel it. Thus, humour often leaves traces that are felt in and between bodies: It can, for example, create feelings of intimacy and closeness or distance between bodies (Kuipers, 2009). Or it can be felt in the body in the form of pain and anger but also in physical reactions like laughter and smiles. These contradictory feelings may even coexist as Katariina Kyrölä points out: 'humour that has potential to "hit close" and hurt us the most may also be the kind that makes us laugh the hardest' (Kyrölä, 2010: 76). Humour in gossip blogs might work differently, in the sense, that it cannot 'hit close' because it is usually not aimed to hurt us/the reader but the other/the female celebrity 'trash'. And yet, what feelings and affective reactions a funny post engenders cannot necessarily be predicted.

When we approach humour as an affective-discursive tool then we recognise that humour travels along already defined lines of cultural investments while highlighting that humour can move us in emotional and physical ways. This is not to argue that humour is a free agent that wanders freely without its relation to embodied beings who actively click, link and post contents on the blog. Blog users are wilful subjects who both reinforce but also challenge this kind of online humour, thereby building a sentimental public sphere where dominant ideas and values are negotiated. This article takes these considerations as a starting point in order to explore how humour's capacity to move and touch us is economically exploited in celebrity gossip blogs.

The work of being funny

With their jokes, irreverent skits, pastiches and amateurish doodles, celebrity gossip blogs seem like the product of effortless fun. And yet, it is important to note that humour is not simply *there* but the result of the affective and material labour of the celebrity blogger. This section draws attention to these often overlooked forms of labour and argues that humour functions here as a tool that masks the hard work that goes into the production of a funny post. Through this obfuscation, humour creates a product that is seemingly more spontaneous, unique, authentic and innovative than 'mainstream' commercially produced gossip outlets. By revealing the tiresome work of being funny it becomes clear how humour is central, not peripheral, to self-exploitative forms of work in affective capitalism.

As is well-known, humour ceases to be funny when the joke is explained or its inner workings are made visible (Palmer, 1994; Meyer, 2000). Humour needs to seem effortless in order to fulfil its aim of being funny. Thus, gossip bloggers must hide the hard work that goes into the production of a funny blog post. This is done by convincing audiences that blogging comes naturally, as the result of an innate wit, spontaneity and talent (rather than hard work) and through *simply being true to oneself*. Blogger Michael K., for instance, explains his writing as an internal impulse or urge:

> I think it's unhealthy how obsessed I am. I have dreams about celebrities every night. ...I think I've always been into it, TV, movies, celebrities. It's just the way I was born. I was always into gossip and talking shit. It's been the biggest part of me I think. (Michael K. in Sachon, 2009)

With this statement the blogger suggests that his blog is the result of genuine interest and innate passion rather than simply a laborious task undertaken for instrumental reasons (Paasonen, 2010). It also seeks to emphasise the pleasurable, productive aspects of work – those qualities that might make it a compelling and attractive activity, beyond economic necessity. This, in turn, sets the blog apart from mainstream entertainment news media such as people.com or hellomagzine.com that cannot profess a similar claim, given their obvious corporate backing and 'depersonalised' institutional structures.

The amount of labour that goes into the production of a funny post is further concealed by blurring the boundary between private persona and product. As the above quote shows, no difference between professional worker and private persona is obvious. The funny blog and the humorous gossip lover are one and the same. Such forms of fusion are typical for the creative industries because they seem necessary in order to create a product which is original and authentic that is marketable. Mark Banks argues in this context that

> in the cultural, media and creative industries – organised worlds of symbolic production – the total integration of the creative person and the creative work has long been standard. ...The worker and the object of cultural work have often been regarded as two sides of the same coin; synonymous, even – the perfect fusion of human intent and material expression. Investing one's person into the act of creative production is merely the asking price and guarantee of an authentic art. (2014: 241)

The fusion of product and producer is especially important for celebrity gossip blogs because they gain their affective appeal and branding potential by being closely related to the figure of the blogger. Some have a picture of the blogger on the website or banner, whereas others show through their writing style and by sharing private stories that the blogger is creating a funny diary with private thoughts about celebrities rather than a marketable text.

Whereas in nearly all other aspects of contemporary life hard work is a sign of the successful entrepreneurial self and needs to be made visible, in regards to these humorous online representations the producer is not 'allowed' to undergo hard work in order to create the blog post. Hard work would dampen the fun. Thus, whereas Banks highlights the concentrated nature of this 'being in the zone – where persona and product become one', writing gossip blogs is often framed as fun rather than concentration:

> I don't see blogging as a real job. And people don't either, people are like, oh when are you going to get a real job? It's like, good question. It just doesn't seem like a real job. I think because it's still fun, and I feel like I'm just messing around. (Michael K. in Sachon, 2009)

Such a rhetoric of fun might be good for the marketing of the blog as it presents it as the product of an individual personality, engaged in autonomous and unfettered work motivated by pure enjoyment. Yet it obscures the fact the blogger is also, at least partly, 'in it for the money' and so hides the affective and material labour that she/he undertakes in order to produce and maintain the blog[4].

Analysing humorous celebrity gossip blogs through the lens of labour shows that the blogger is under constant pressure to keep the blog up to date, to keep readers engaged and amused even if he or she feels exhausted. Blogger Brendon from the gossip blog WhatWouldTylerDurdenDo.com describes this situation in the following words:

> ...if I go three hours without checking my email I start freaking out. Because you never know what's going to happen. I remember the day that Britney shaved her head. My girlfriend and I took off a night and a morning. Got home at like 11 at night, you know, and I had thousands of emails just saying — Britney shaved her head! Britney shaved her head! And so you don't ever want to miss...you don't ever want to be last. I mean...if something big happens...you just have to be on it all the time. And, you know, on a lot of days when I don't feel like writing, like I'm not in a funny mood, or I had a fight with my girlfriend or whatever, I don't want to do this. No one cares. No one cares if it's a holiday. No one cares if I'm depressed. They just want the website. And I'm the only one here. It's just me. (Brandon interview in Meyers, 2010)

This section of an interview shows that bloggers are pushed continually to the limits of their mental and physical capacities (Hewlett and Luce, 2006). The body and the mind of the blogger are geared towards efficiency and diligence with the assistance of new communication platforms. Furthermore, in order to produce funny blog posts, the blogger needs to perform emotions independent of how

4 Please see appendix 1 for a list of celebrity gossip blogs.

she/he really feels. This reminds us of Arlie Hochschilds's (1983) classical text *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, in which she argues that feelings themselves are the subject to 'management' in both private and public contexts, and that such 'emotion work' could be commercially exploited as 'emotional labour'. Brendon performs emotional labour when he picks himself up after a fight with his girlfriend and writes a humorous post, he motivates himself when he feels exhausted and overworked in order to stay productive. This shows that humour is not necessarily a natural or spontaneous matter but carefully crafted and often created under demanding conditions.

It can be argued that the entertainment industry has always been part of an economy in which affects and emotions are manipulated and modulated for the sake of profit (Hardt, 1999). And yet, the affective labour performed by 'funny' bloggers is different because their online workplace is available 24/7 and condemns them – at least theoretically – to a constant compulsive productivity. Consciousness of the ever-present potential for working is a new form of affective labour that must be constantly regulated. As the interview above demonstrates, the fear of missing out on explosive stories, and thereby losing readers or clicks, motivates the blogger to be attentive and productive around the clock. Michael K. from Dlisted.com is also aware of this commitment and confesses in an interview that 'blogging is so time consuming it takes up your whole life'. He claims to be blogging seven days a week and does not dare to go on vacation because his work is so invested in constantly monitoring a set of 'current' celebrities and unfolding events that must rapidly be responded to through blog posts engrained with his own personality and humour. This is work that cannot easily be done by someone else:

> A couple of years ago I decided to go on vacation and I had some guests post, and it was a disaster. I came back and I had so many emails that were like, don't ever leave again, they were total idiots, and the people who did it were like, don't ever ask me to do that again, those people are crazy. But I might have to do it again. It would be nice to have a Saturday. (Michael K. in Sachon, 2009)

Rosalind Gill and Andrew Pratt (2008) argue that professional workers in the cultural industries are involved in forms of labour that are characterised by high degrees of autonomy, creativity and 'play', but also by overwork, casualisation and precariousness. This ambiguity is also visible in interviews with gossip bloggers. Yet Gill and Pratt are quick to stress the costs of these informal and insecure forms of work in which all risks and responsibilities are borne by the individual (see also Sennett, 1998). In this sense, it can be argued that the 'funny work' of bloggers fits into the larger body of work in recent years which has examined the lives of artists, fashion designers, television creatives and new media workers (Ross, 2003; Lovink and Rossiter, 2007; Gregg, 2011;

Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). This research has raised critical questions about the much vaunted flexibility, autonomy and informality of these domains and has highlighted how this work is characterised by:

> long hours and bulimic patterns of working; the collapse or erasure of the boundaries between work and play; poor pay...and profound experiences of insecurity and anxiety about finding work, earning enough money and 'keeping up' in rapidly changing fields. (Gill and Pratt, 2008: 14)

Celebrity gossip bloggers might be seen as independent and creative labourers that only follow their prolific nature and the humorous, irreverent blog content is as such merely an effortless representation of the 'real' person behind the blog. Yet, I argue that humour – which is deliberate and crafted – appears here as a kind of fetish that masks the tedious and time-consuming work of trying to be always alert and always funny. The work of blogging is in this sense the precarious, thankless and mostly unpaid creative labour of the kind identified by many in the cultural industries. Often it is laughter and recognition – rather than a reliable monthly income that are the payment or compensation of this work. This shows that humour is *central*, not peripheral to self-exploitative work which marks affective capitalism.

The work of value creation and extraction

Many scholars have critically investigated how 'participatory' online media in the form of blogs and social networking sites interpellate consumers to 'work'. These affected consumers increasingly participate in the process of making and circulating media content and experiences (Terranova, 2000; Deuze 2007; Andrejevic, 2008; Banks and Deuze, 2009; Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2013). In such environments, according to the argument, value is created through the 'free' or 'click' labour of the consumer or Internet user. This section explores the click labour of blog readers and argues that these animated consumers create value by building the affective and emotional complexity of the blog and its attendant interactions.

In celebrity gossip blogs, readers work through clicking and commenting or by sharing online content on other social networking sites. These online practices can be seen as forms of immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996) that produce economic value for website owners and marketers: Clicking on an image or link creates page impressions which are one important metric which advertisers look at when considering advertising on a blog. Through commenting, readers inadvertently produce new online content for free. Sharing a funny blog post on any other social networking site potentially shepherds new readers to the original

blog and the more users a platform has, the higher the advertising rates can be. All these practices are carefully sought after also by the design of the website: Blogs invite readers to comment under a new post, icons next to each gossip story encourage readers to share this post on other social networking sites, and permanent buttons in the menu ask readers to send in their own gossip story particularly celebrity pictures or videos that they have taken with their own cell phones (McNamara, 2011). Through these techniques the time that readers spend on blogs is transformed into labour time because 'all activities are monitored and result in data commodities, so users produce commodities online during their online time' (Fuchs, 2014: 116). In this sense, it can be argued that any kind of user engagement can be translated into monetary value for the blog owner and marketers.

It is, however, important to understand these contributions also as forms of affective labour because they ultimately build the affective complexity of the blog which can be monetised. Thus, readers are here not only participating in the process of making and circulating media content but they also produce and circulate its attendant feelings and emotions through their online interaction. The affective investments that consumers put into a brand or company have long been recognised as an important intangible resource for value creation but it has been difficult to measure and quantify them. Adam Arvidsson and Nicolai Peitersen (2013) argue that social media networks and new data mining algorithms provide the possibility to measure social affective investments which in turn can function to create a common value horizon. They write:

> the proliferation of social buttons on social media sites like Facebook suggest that these devices are already becoming important channels by means of which affective investment by publics can be translated into objectified forms of affect that support consumer decisions and, increasingly, financial valuations. (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013: 128)

Arvidsson and Peitersen term this objectified form of affect 'General Sentiment'. General Sentiment is a bottom-up, peer-based measurement that translates individual expressions of affective attachment into objectified flows of 'potential' value which are then realised in the financial markets. As Alison Hearn notes, General Sentiment illustrates that value comes increasingly to depend on the ability of an object to induce flows of public affect (Hearn, 2010: 429). In other words, monetary value is by now clearly linked to the public display and mediation of personal emotion, and gossip blogs invite these performances through their humour. Humour works here like a lubricant for social online interaction: The funnier or the more scabrous a story is, the stronger readers might be affected by it and so impelled to act. This is clearly not an automated and therefore inevitable result. Users still have agency to resist or redirect such

an intensity, but as Paasonen suggests, 'the stickiness, or the "grab" (Senft, 2008: 46) of a discussion thread...depends on the intensities it affords' (Paasonen, 2015: 30). In other words, the higher the emotions, the higher the click labour which readers undertake and this click labour, in turn, determines the revenue that can be gained through targeted advertising. Gossip blogs represent as such a concrete social media space where the affective flows deriving from attention and consumer input are organised and controlled for value extraction. They illustrate the increased importance of affective investments as sources of value.

But how do readers build this affective and emotional complexity of a blog and add affective value? In order to answer this question I draw on Jodie Dean's notion of 'communicative capitalism' (Dean, 2010) and Sara Ahmed's notion of 'affective economies' (Ahmed, 2004). Dean argues that communicative capitalism relies increasingly on contributions for value production, for it is user contribution that keeps communication flowing and networks pulsing with new data to mine and exploit. Moreover, from her perspective, social media does not only spread content and attendant ideologies but also affect. She argues convincingly that it is online interaction which circulates and intensifies affect:

> Blogs, social networks, Twitter, YouTube: they produce and circulate affect as a binding technique. Affect...is what accrues from reflexive communicating...from endless circular movements of commenting, adding notes and links, bringing in new friends and followers, layering and interconnecting myriad communications platforms and devices. Every little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in. (Dean, 2010: 95)

For Dean, tweets or comments are not only texts but they are also tiny affective nuggets which cohere and fuel communicative capitalism. Thus, by commenting on a funny blog post about a celebrity figure, readers undertake not only the immaterial labour of creating new online content but they also add to affective value of the blog.

The accumulation of affective value through user interaction can also be explained through Sara Ahmed's concept of 'affective economies'. Here Ahmed draws on Marx's theory of capital to develop a framework that illustrates the way in which affect 'travels' and accumulates value through circulation. She writes:

> Affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value). Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become. (Ahmed, 2004: 45)

In the context of a humorous blog post we could say that a funny post accrues affective value when many users interact with it and touch it virtually through their commenting and re-posting. The more interaction there is, the 'stickier' with affect the post becomes.

Dean and Ahmed illustrate how affect and action combine to make a layering or accumulation of density that allows value extraction. As Ahmed reminds us, affect travels but it also comes to stick to certain bodies and signs through repetition and constant interaction. This section has illustrated that humour functions here as a catalyst for online interaction, thereby contributing to the affective layering of the website which, in turn, can be monetised. Humour fuels the constant shared interaction about essentially 'unimportant' or 'trivial' celebrity issues and is, as such, value creating. Similar to the previous example, humour is not regarded as being outside of work, economy or the productive aspects of the social but deeply embedded within them.

The work of distinction

So far, this article has elaborated how humour can be understood as a form of affective and material labour and a source for value accumulation. This section adds a third way in which humour is put to work in affective capitalism by drawing attention to the content of these blogs. A focus on the content invites us to critically question what this free and affective work of bloggers and blog readers is used for. I follow here Chris Rojek (2010) and Mark Banks (2014) who argue that we should not automatically associate creative, autonomous and freely chosen work with positivity, change and empowerment but that we need to situate this work morally and ethically, by evaluating its context and content. Analysing the humorous content of these blogs brings to the fore that humour functions as an affective-discursive tool for social distinction, while simultaneously concealing the violent and reactionary character of this 'distinction work'.

The violent humour that both blogger and blog readers use and circulate in order to make fun of celebrities might seem at first sight both subversive and democratic: rather than applauding 'talentless' celebrities these gossip blogs provide a public sphere that seems to undermine the often carefully-crafted images that the entertainment industry works tirelessly to cultivate and maintain (Fairclough, 2008). The bitchy humour of these blogs seems to expose the 'true' nature of these (usually) female celebrities thereby challenging the fake or false ideals of talent, youth and beauty circulated by the commercialised celebrity industry. In a wider picture, gossip blogs can therefore be read as a populist

critique of an economic system in which wealth is not often the result of hard work or talent but of ego-driven personality, high visibility, and manipulation.

Such an affirmative reading of humour is complicated when we take into account that its targeting is not evenly distributed across all classes of celebrity but it is mainly directed towards female celebrities that violate traditional ideals of white, middle-class femininity. Celebrities like 'trailer trash' Britney Spears are regularly ridiculed because they are lacking the right cultural capital to manage their wealth and public visibly with prudence. Reality television stars such as Kim Kardashian are dismissed as 'improper' celebrities because their fame is not achieved through labour (hard work, education, training or the application of talent and ability) but through luck, manipulation or proximity to other celebrities (Allen and Mendick, 2013: 3). In an increasingly hierarchized celebrity culture, these female celebrities are judged as working-class femininities because 'they do not have the supposedly innate cultural tastes and decorum that wealthy middle-class people should have' (Cobb, 2008: n.p.). Regardless of their financial circumstances, they represent the undeserving and the undesirable and blogs provide the ideal environment to expel them through derision and laughter so that the knowing reader can position herself as different and superior. This can be seen in a recent blog post on Dlisted.com which contains paparazzi photos of Spears in a casual blue T-Shirt walking down the street (Michael K., 2014). Readers draw in their comments on a violent history of classist discourses about the 'dirty poor' in order to make fun of Spears:

> 'Brit. Girl, go check the mirror - you've got some white trash on your face.' Candypants
>
> 'Brit is in a desperate need of a good wash!' Seira67
>
> '... And a good bra.' Dog

These humorous comments are packed full with classist discourses which continually represent working-class femininities as marked by their excessive and troublesome bodies and lifestyles (Lawler, 2005; Tyler, 2013). Moreover, through deriding and shaming Spears as 'dirty' and 'trashy' readers can produce themselves as superior, or as Beverley Skeggs (2004) terms it, as 'subjects of value'. This dovetails nicely with the superiority theory of humour which states that 'humor results...from seeing oneself as superior, right, or triumphant in contrast to one who is inferior, wrong, or defeated' (Meyer, 2000: 314-315). Humour is here not amicable but hostile and serves to mark the boundary between those who are lacking 'symbolic capital' (status, reputation, the right to be listened to) and 'cultural capital' (education, competencies, skills, taste) and those who seemingly possess these resources and can mobilise them through

humour. Through deriding celebrity 'chavs' (Tyler and Bennett, 2010) they can produce themselves as superior and more valuable because they demonstrate that they have the right cultural knowledge to know who is worth of social derision. As Giselinde Kuipers explains:

> From Bourdieu ([1984]2010) we know that knowledge is needed to appreciate particular cultural forms, and that such knowledge is unevenly distributed within society. But knowledge is also required to understand humour. You have to understand a joke to appreciate it. This is one of the mechanisms by which humour marks symbolic boundaries: its appreciation relies on knowledge that some people have, and others do not. Only people familiar with a specific culture, code, language, group, field, or social setting, may be able to 'decode' a joke. (2009: 225)

Thus, knowing that someone lacks symbolic and/or cultural capital is value producing because it demonstrates that you have this knowledge – how else would you recognise that someone else is missing it? From this perspective it becomes clear how humour can be a convenient tool for the culturally privileged to activate their cultural capital (Friedman, 2011) and distinguish themselves from those who are arguably lacking them.

It is, however, noteworthy that this process of boundary making through humour/derision is not only a discursive matter but it is also highly affective. Derision is – like disgust – a bodily affective reaction that aims to expel the improper, the polluted and that what threaten the sense of the proper self (Tyler, 2008). As discussed earlier, the subject of value is produced in opposition to 'the trashy' and yet the trashy cannot do anything but repulse the subject of value. Humour intensifies these feelings of repulse, disgust and contempt which propel affective boundary making because it allows bloggers and readers alike to portray these femininities in excessive, distorted and caricatured ways. This can be seen in a comment which appeared under a blog post which ridiculed Kim Kardashian's swollen feet during her pregnancy:

> Ugh this bitch is so gross. I bet Kanye is going to drop her ass for being a fat piggy bitch. Those cankle looking feet are not sexy. She's just so fucking gross. I can't wait for her and her whole family to just go away. (user comment in Dlisted.com, Michael K., 2013)

Notions of disgust and contempt pervade the comment. It illustrates as such that ridiculing a celebrity is not only affective in the sense that it engenders laughter and smiles but it also elicits negative, visceral feelings: The commentator finds her appearance gross and wishes for them 'to just go away' – physically getting out of her space, distancing themselves from her.

So humour works here as a tool for social stratification by encouraging a derogatory class discourse. But to what extend is this linked to current forms of capitalism? It can be argued that this mediated hatred against the 'chav' celebrity is suggestive of a heightened class antagonism that marks an economic climate of austerity with harsh cuts on public services. In such a climate of deepening economic inequality and stagnating social mobility middle-class interests and values must be protected through symbolic boundary making and humour is a useful tool for doing so. The wealth and fame of those 'undeserving' female celebrities become judged as 'unfair' (Tyler and Bennett, 2010; Tyler, 2008; Jensen and Ringrose, 2014). This dovetails nicely with Jo Littler's and Steve Cross' analysis of Schadenfreude in celebrity consumption. They argue that Schadenfreude 'overwhelmingly works to express irritation at inequalities but not to change the wider rules of the current social system, and its political economy often actually entails it fuelling inequalities of wealth' (Cross and Littler, 2010: 395).

Thus, the Schadenfreude which often finds expression in cynic blog posts and comments, is does not challenge the privileged position for the rich celebrity. Rather this click labour boosts the celebrity industry that depends on the constant rise and fall of their protagonists. For instance, laughing at Kardshian's feet during her pregnancy adds to her marketability because it both actually helps to generate further stories about her while enabling her later 're-invention' as the 'young mother who tries to get back into shape'.

In *The Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk (1988) posits that the cynic is no longer an outsider position, but the default point of view in advanced capitalism, whereby cynicism and irony allow space for those who laugh to collude with the ideology they mock. This section follows his argument by illustrating how the 'funny' representations of gossip blogs might seem radical, irreverent and 'democratic' but are indeed very conservative. This is not only because they continue to police women for the physical appearance but also because humour taps here into feelings such as envy, contempt, disgust and anxiety that have always propelled social shaming and justified social inequality (Lawler, 2005; Tyler, 2013). It seems as if celebrity gossip blogs have found a productive way to capitalise in different ways from these 'ugly' feelings while appearing to provide clever entertainment for an elevated audience. Humour is here used to shame celebrities whom we want to shame because we can *see through* their fake star image. Simultaneously humour glosses over how this shaming through derision compels us to undertake click labour which keeps a capitalist system alive.

Conclusion

This article set out to show how humour is put to work in affective capitalism in three different ways. It has shown that humour feeds into affective capitalism because it encourages the kind of creative, precarious, and self-exploitative working conditions that are necessary for value extraction. It argued further that humour is central for the creation of economic profit in social media because humour has the capacity to stimulate online interactions of an affectively 'sticky', and therefore potentially profitable nature. Finally, it showed that humour can create symbolic and cultural value for those who participate in the blog's humour and deride femininities that cannot pass as legitimate. Here it was shown that humour is vital for the workings of affective capitalism because it enables the continuity of reactionary social stratifying and segmentation, under the cover of appearing to be 'just a bit of fun' or even culturally 'subversive'.

The work of humour in affective capitalism is therefore not only a question of identifying the precarious working conditions of professionals within the creative industries and of recognising how affect and action combine to a layering of interactional density that allows for value extraction. Rather, we also need to look at what socially stratifying and segmenting work humour might actually be doing in representational terms. The latter is necessary because representations are generating rather than merely re-presenting the ideas, norms and values that underpin affective capitalism. The role of humour in affective capitalism might therefore be quite a cynical one: Humour can give us the impression that we 'see through' an issue from an elevated position while simultaneously compelling us to engage in practices that only reinforce it. This compulsion to act in conformity with the system even though we 'see through' it is the force that makes affective capitalism so powerful and humour such an ideal partner in crime.

Appendix 1

Gossip Blog	Earnings per day in advertising revenue
Perezhilton.com	$1,153 USD
Egotastic.com	$1,046 USD
JustJared.com	$1,008 USD
Thesuperficial.com	$708 USD
Wwtdd.com	$471 USD
Dlisted.com	$412 USD
Laineygossip.com	$182 USD
Hollywoodtuna.com	$179 USD
Celebitchy.com	$177 USD

Drunkenstepfather.com	$173 USD
Theybf.com	$159 USD
Realitytea.com	$140 USD
Pinkisthenewblog.com	$33 USD
Icydk.com	$15 USD
IDontLikeYouInThatWay.com	$5 USD
Celebslam.com	$5 USD
Defamer.com	$4 USD

All data is retrieved from http://www.mustat.com/ on January 7th 2015

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