Porn Studies

ISSN: 2326-8743 (Print) 2326-8751 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprn20

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**To cite this article:** Bonnie Ruberg (2016) Doing it for free: digital labour and the fantasy of amateur online pornography, Porn Studies, 3:2, 147-159, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2016.1184477

**To link to this article:** http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1184477

Published online: 27 Jul 2016.

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**Download by:** [University of Calgary] **Date:** 23 August 2016, At: 07:30

PORN STUDIES, 2016
VOL. 3, NO. 2, 147–159
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1184477

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

# Doing it for free: digital labour and the fantasy of amateur online pornography

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**ABSTRACT**
To date, scholars of digital labour have not turned sufficient attention to online sex work, which constitutes a sizeable portion of contemporary web-based labour. In particular, the rise of unpaid amateur pornography, circulated through YouTube-style tube sites, points toward an important shift in how adult content is being produced and distributed in digital spaces. This shift also raises questions about the cultural narratives that surround sexual labour. This article explores the labour politics that underlie the unpaid work of do-it-yourself (DIY) porn performers who are populating highly lucrative tube sites with hundreds of thousands of amateur videos. In doing so, the article argues for understanding DIY porn in relation to the increasing popularity of other digital maker movements. As feminist scholars of digital media have noted, crowdsourcing platforms like Wikipedia are commonly idealized as empowering and democratizing, yet they often reinforce existing social biases and obfuscate conditions of difference. I assert here that a similar utopian fantasy operates around online amateur porn, which is frequently figured as ethically superior to pornography for which performers are paid. Recognizing the production of DIY porn as digital labour offers the opportunity to challenge this narrative and make the network of capitalist forces that drive free amateur online content once again visible. This also presents a valuable framework through which to critique the harmful misconception that sexual labour is superior if it is done for pleasure rather than for profit.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 29 June 2015
Accepted 22 April 2016

**KEYWORDS**
pornography; digital labour; DIY porn; online porn; sex work; digital cultures

## Introduction

At this very moment, thousands of amateur pornographers worldwide are shooting erotic home videos and uploading them to a multi-billion-dollar network of YouTube-style adult video-sharing websites, in exchange for little to no financial compensation. These do-it-yourself (DIY) porn-makers are using a variety of technological tools and techniques to film their videos. Some are keeping it simple, using the video functions on their smartphones to record themselves masturbating or engaging in sex with a partner. Others are staging carefully constructed and elaborate scenes that borrow from the cinematic rhetoric of professional pornography. Of these many digital DIY porn-makers posting to websites like XTube or XVideos.com, some will only ever upload a handful of videos.

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Others shoot, edit, and upload videos daily. The motivations of these amateur pornographers vary, whether they seek the thrill of public performance, the admiration of grateful viewers, or the satisfaction of expressing themselves sexually in a community that blurs the line between creators and consumers. It is safe to say, however, that most hope their videos will be widely viewed, positively reviewed, and broadly speaking valued by a subset of the millions of viewers who view videos on adult tube sites each day for free.

Given the recent rise in unpaid amateur porn-making and its widespread circulation through for-profit online spaces, the question I ask here is this: amidst this seemingly capitalism-free economy of adult content produced, hosted, streamed, and viewed at no cost, what is the role of digital labour? When no one is paying and no one seems to be getting paid, how do we identity the mechanisms of capitalism that nonetheless continue to underlie the internet's wealth of free pornographic content? How might digital labour politics, made visible through a discussion of DIY online porn, pull back the curtain on the illusion that the best way to 'do it' – whether 'it' means producing pornography or simply having sex – is for free?

Although many porn studies scholars have written about online pornography, the issue of sexual labour has gone ignored by the otherwise proliferating field of popular and academic writing on web-based crowdsourcing, user-generated content, and digital DIY cultures. Despite this notable omission, digital sex workers represent a considerable segment of the twenty-first-century online workforce. Much like sex work more broadly, the work of those engaged in online sexual labour takes many forms. On webcam sites, models charge by the minute to perform for clients tuning in from across the globe. Many escorts advertise their 'real-life' services in online databases. Arguably the most widespread form of digital sexual labour does not come with a pay-cheque, however. The rise of tube sites has propelled internet pornography into an age of largely unpaid amateur content – a shift that echoes broader, more widely studied, and often too quickly lauded trends in digital media-making, as seen in the overwhelming success of sites like Wikipedia and YouTube. My goal here is to demonstrate that those who study digital DIY cultures miss an important piece of the digital labour question when they overlook online sex work. No study of the work of the technology (or technological culture more broadly) can be complete without a study of sex, one of its primary driving economic forces. Additionally, the critical engagement that digital scholars might bring to discussions of online sexual labour has the much-needed potential to meaningfully counteract the dominant cultural narratives that currently surround amateur online porn-making – most notably, the problematic fantasy of DIY porn as the product of a capitalism-free utopia. Unchecked, this thinking runs the risk of obscuring the real labour conditions of digital sex workers and perpetuating many of the same harmful stigmas about financially-compensated sex work that porn scholars, performers, and activists have long worked to combat.

## The rise of DIY porn

A middle-aged man sits back on a floral-print sofa and begins unbuttoning his pants. The setting is a suburban living room; the light in the room is yellow and diffuse, giving the footage, shot via iPhone in 2014, the grainy quality of a 1970s stag film. After pulling out his penis, the man stops to adjust the camera angle, his freckled hand reaching toward the phone. Satisfied with the adjustment, he returns to his task, stroking himself

for two minutes and 12 seconds before reaching orgasm, performing a cursory clean up, and waving to the camera in a cheerful sign-off to his viewers. Titled 'Silver Daddy jerks off at home', this video, along with 15 others like it by the same amateur pornographer, was uploaded to XTube.com. As of December 2015 it has been viewed 25,562 times.

Hundreds of videos of this sort are uploaded each day in the amateur sections of tube sites like XTube (and its many sister sites), XVideos, Dino Tube, and TNAFlix, which offer free streaming videos of all kinds by the hundreds of thousands. According to Alexa, a web analytics database, each of these sites sees millions of unique viewers every day (as of December 2015). In addition to the proliferation of professional porn clips available on these sites, they typically offer a robust collection of amateur videos. XTube alone offers nearly 75,000 'real amateur videos', produced by unpaid DIY-ers and searchable by categories spanning a wide range of sexual acts, represented ages, and so forth. The homepages of these tube sites fittingly reflect the abundance contained in their expansive archives: they commonly feature row upon row of eye-catching video thumbnails, advertising seemingly endless hours of immediately accessible viewing. Site visitors can browse by hovering their cursors over the thumbnail images that stand in for each video. In response, the thumbnail will briefly animate; functioning like a preview that allows viewers to decide whether the clip is worth clicking for a closer look. In this way, the system, like a buffet of free samples, simultaneously encourages wide-reaching consumption and fickleness. While some professional videos hosted on tube sites are available only behind pay walls, the vast majority of truly amateur videos (as opposed to those professional videos which use the narrative conceit that they were produced by amateurs) stream entirely free. For this reason, the currency that viewers trade in, deciding to spend or to hold in reserve, is their time.

Tube sites and the popularity of amateur online porn in particular have grown considerably in recent years. It has become an often-reported and often-repeated fact that the pervasiveness of free online content has drastically shifted the business of the American pornography industry (Wallace 2011; Falzone 2013; Morris 2014). The tendency of today's digital subjects to increasingly seek what were traditionally imagined as 'real-life' pleasures in virtual spaces (e.g. online shopping, online dating) has had its impact on the day-to-day practices of almost every type of sex work, from escorting to phone-sex operating (Ruberg 2007). However, the expectations of low-cost immediacy fostered by internet commerce have arguably put no genre of sex work into greater crisis than the professional production of pornography. Torrenting is a big part of the problem. Videos produced by professional studios that are technically available only for purchase persistently turn up on file-sharing sites and tube sites for free. In the essay '"Ethical Porn" Starts When We Pay for It', activist and porn performer Jiz Lee (2015) explains how paying for porn helps ensure that the basic labour rights of performers are met on set – and how pirating, not paying, leads to exploitation. This sentiment is shared by the #payforyourporn movement, which discourages viewers from stealing professional content by spreading the message that 'porn is worth paying for'. In precipitating the shift of the adult industry, the rise of unpaid amateur porn is also an important factor. Sites like XTube are able to make considerable amounts of money through advertising revenue without paying to create original content. The expectations of pornography viewers are beginning to shift in kind. With so many free amateur videos by unpaid DIY-ers to browse, paying for porn is sometimes seen as archaic, one of many consumer nuisances rendered obsolete by contemporary digital business models.

While the numbers that measure the impact of DIY porn on the adult industry vary by account, the overall effects are clear, and many corners of the industry seem to be scrambling to keep up. In 2014, NBC News reported that the sale of pornographic DVDs had dropped by 80% between 2008 and 2013 (Morris 2014). Fox News projected in 2013 that the value of the porn industry had dropped by 66% since the early 1990s (Falzone 2013). According to *New York* magazine in 2011, even pornographers who distributed their videos primarily online said that they were making only 20% of their projected profits (Wallace 2011). Such reports underscore that in Los Angeles' 'porn valley', long the seat of America's professional porn industry, many longstanding studios have closed their doors. Meanwhile, since the reporting on the porn industry crisis began, the business of tube sites has continued to grow. Pornhub NETWORK, the conglomerate that reportedly owns eight of the top 10 currently most-trafficked tube sites, has built a 'porn monopoly' valued in the billions – although its parent company MindGeek has faced criticism for undermining its own business model by destabilizing the adult industry, whose videos still make up a sizable percentage of its content (Auerbach 2014). The future of the adult industry has yet to be determined, but it certainly appears that the production of content through the unpaid labour of amateurs, along with the underpaid labour of pirated professional porn, has become a standard *modus operandi* for pornography today.

Despite the effects of amateur porn-making on the adult industry, there are many who see the rise of DIY pornography as a very positive thing. For those who laud amateur pornography, the process of making homemade porn can represent a valuable opportunity for sexual self-expression. Hump!, the Seattle-based DIY porn festival organized by writer Dan Savage, which welcomes people from all walks of life to shoot their own videos and become 'weekend porn stars', epitomizes this perspective on amateur porn. The festival also demonstrates how the popularity of amateur porn-making has grown offline as well as online. Begun in 2005 in the Pacific Northwest, Hump! now tours the country annually, with stops in more than 20 US cities. Participants in the Hump! festival are encouraged to make videos that are not only sexy but also original, thoughtful, and even funny. After they are shown, most of the videos are destroyed; no recording devices are allowed in the screenings. These guidelines are put in place to ensure that anyone can participate in amateur porn-making without fear that their video might become public. In some senses, the type of DIY porn-making promoted by Hump! is similar to the amateur videos posted on tube sites: both are produced as 'labours of love' (save for the few winning films selected for modest cash prizes) and will go uncompensated. Instead, they draw their value from their contribution to a community. In the words of the Hump! festival's slogan, 'sharing is caring'. As porn studies scholar Katrien Jacobs (2007) has pointed out, producers of amateur online pornography are often similarly inspired and indeed empowered by the chance to create adult content that represents a wider range of body types, gender identities, and desires than is typically represented in professional pornography.

The rise of digital DIY porn has brought with it a strand of sexual utopianism that risks perpetuating the stigmatization of pornography and sex work. In this interpretation, the production and consumption of amateur pornography is cast as morally superior to the production and consumption of pornography for which performers are paid. Accordingly, tube sites are seen as democratizing communities whose gift economies herald a less ethically questionable future for the circulation of adult content in the digital age. This

perspective is usefully illustrated by Shaka McGlotten's (2014) *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality*. In his chapter on gay male amateur online porn, McGlotten makes the case that homemade videos uploaded on tube sites stand in contrast to what he sees as the deadening, exploitative imagery produced by the greedy corporate pornography industry. Professional pornographers, he asserts, churn out repetitive, unrealistic, and uninspired films for the purpose of 'arousing for profit' (2014, 102). By contrast, McGlotten portrays online amateur pornographers as liberated, joyful artists who reject the loathsome interests of capitalism and take charge of the politics of self-representation by creating pornography for pleasure rather than profit. This dichotomy, of course, is overly simplistic. The DIY cultures that McGlotten covers in this chapter themselves suggest this, but McGlotten chooses not to engage with these complications. He does note that popular DIY porn-makers often receive tips and other incentives through video sharing sites, but he dismisses such monetary exchanges as mere extensions of the gift economy: more proof that 'sharing is caring'. In short, in McGlotten's view, unpaid amateur pornography is better than professional porn, both artistically and ethically, because it is free and therefore given freely – or at least at a drastically reduced profit. The DIY porn-maker is portrayed in binary opposition to the vulgar profiteer, while the rise of the amateur maker is imagined to mark a broad-reaching shift into a more egalitarian sexual future.

I will talk more later about what makes this utopian vision of DIY porn problematic – yet it is worth noting that McGlotten is by no means alone in his idealization of the rise of digital making. Adult tube sites are only one among many corners of the internet where unpaid crowdsourcing is taking the place of expert content production: YouTube and Wikipedia are, as mentioned, prime examples of this, but so are social media giants like Twitter and Facebook. The dominant cultural narrative that surrounds this shift often rings a similar utopianism: the belief, given voice in bestselling books like Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everyone* (2009), that increased access to digital publishing platforms is placing power back into the hands of media consumers by transforming them into producers. No longer are professionals alone allowed their public voice; now 'everyone' can participate equally. Emphasizing disparities in access to technology and the hegemonic cultural biases that crowdsourcing tends to perpetuate, many feminist digital media scholars have pushed back against the claim that the digital DIY movement universally democratizes cultural meaning-making (Chachra 2015; Koh 2015; Ruberg 2015). In order to ensure that the vision of amateur online porn as a capitalism-free utopia does not similarly obfuscate social stigmas and disparities in privilege, critical perspectives of this sort must also be brought to discussions of DIY porn and digital sex work.

## Understanding DIY porn as digital labour

The first hurdle to addressing the labour politics of digital DIY porn-making is simply recognizing online sexual labour as labour. Unfortunately, to date scholarly interest in amateur porn has come almost entirely from those who study pornography and sex work, with minimal engagement by those who study digital labour. Porn studies scholars, sex workers' rights activists, and commentators reporting from within online sex-based communities have long recognized the importance of digital platforms for pornography's production, distribution, and reception. Over the past 20 years, many of those studying

and/or participating in digital sex work have spoken frankly about the business of online sex as an essential element of the digital landscape. Foundational writing by activists and authors like Susie Bright (1992), Audacia Ray (2007), and Regina Lynn (2003–2007) drew from first-person experience to reflect on both digital sex and digital sex work. Within porn studies, interest in amateur online pornography has driven research into digital sex work for more than a decade (Patterson 2004). Works by Katrien Jacobs (2007), Susanna Paasonen (2011), and Feona Attwood (2009) directly address the rise of tube sites, often pointing towards performances of realness in amateur porn. These texts also raise important questions about how amateur porn-making should be understood in relation to labour. As Attwood notes, shifts in online sexual cultures are making it 'increasingly difficult to distinguish between labour and play' (2009, 242).

In contrast to the research on digital pornography from within porn studies, scholars who study digital DIY cultures and digital labour have yet to engage with discussions of technologically-mediated sex work. As Adam Fish and Ramesh Srinivasan (2011) have noted, scholarship on digital labour tends to fall into two oppositional camps: one that celebrates user-generated content as the free and willful contribution of an empowered digital public; and the other that denounces this same content as exploitative unpaid labour. Many of the most popular voices speaking on behalf of digital DIY and the maker movement – such as Chris Anderson (2012) and Cory Doctorow (2010) – echo the former, utopian sentiment that new technologies are increasingly placing agency into the hands of media consumers. Unabashed proponents of the maker movement rarely raise the question of labour. Digital studies scholars, however, are bringing labour politics back to discussions of DIY content production and online work more broadly. Researchers like Trebor Scholz (2012) and Nina Huntemann (2015) are bringing together work that challenges the utopian narrative of digital making by considering the economic networks that underlie the production of user-generated content. Yet even in the most insightful and wide-reaching collections that explore the multifaceted issue of digital labour, the topic of digital sex work and DIY pornography has not been raised. Studies of digital economies similarly overlook one of the most important elements of the technological marketplace: sex (for example, Lehdonvirta and Castronova 2014).

Perhaps online sexual work has gone unrecognized by scholars of digital labour because it can be difficult to identify as labour at all. When sex work enters the realm of the digital, as it does when pornography goes online, it is bound to encounter many of the same biases as other forms of digital labour. Digital labour has itself long gone under-recognized as a category of work, due to its 'virtual' nature. Indeed, digital sex work, like the production of amateur adult videos, is doubly disadvantaged when it comes to receiving recognition as labour. This is because sex work falls precisely into the realm of digital labour that is perceived as too 'fun' to count as work (Scholz 2012, 5). In popular culture, sex is frequently still viewed as valuable in and of itself; pleasure is imagined to be its own compensation. This makes online sex work a perfect candidate for what Scholz calls digital labour that 'doesn't feel, look, or smell like labour at all' (2012, 2). In this sense, DIY porn has much in common with another type of digital labour often dismissed as too fun to count as work: fandom. Abigail De Kosnik (2012) has written about the politics of 'free' fan labour, such as the production of fan fiction and fan art, which is created at no cost to the owner of the original intellectual property on which these works are based. As it stands, fan production is considered largely a labour of love. Yet affective

fan labour has real economic implications: it profits intellectual property holders by expanding interest in their properties. In asking whether fan labour should be paid, De Kosnik is also asking implicitly whether unpaid digital work, even work produced and published for 'fun', represents exploitation. In their special issue of the fan studies journal *Transformative Works*, Mel Stanfill and Megan Condis (2014) state the stakes of the fan labour discussion more directly: 'Once we have conceptualized fan work as generating value', they write, 'we can also inquire into how that value is distributed and whether work circulating between fans in gift economies or among fans and industry is potentially exploited labour'.

Understanding online DIY porn as digital labour raises many of the same questions. I would not claim to be able to offer a definitive answer as to whether the circulation of amateur pornography represents exploitation – if any such definitive answer exists – without first polling the DIY-ers who make DIY porn: do they feel exploited? Rather, I believe that the basic act of considering online amateur porn-making through the lens of digital labour offers a valuable opportunity to critique and ultimately challenge the utopian vision of DIY pornography as non-capitalist and therefore ethically superior to porn for which performers get paid. With this critical perspective in place, the form and functions of the DIY porn utopia come into focus, and the hegemonic social structures that uphold the 'promise of pornotopia' (Mowlabocus 2010, 74) become evident, along with the stigmas about sex work they promote.

## The fantasy of amateur online pornography

The vision of amateur online porn as a non-capitalist utopia functions as a fantasy. This is not because the imagined egalitarianism of DIY porn is entirely fantastical or false (the truth of the situation is more complicated), but because the tale of the online pornotopia offers an alluring interpretation of what it means to work for free on the internet. Demystifying DIY porn and reasserting its status as digital labour requires deconstructing this fantasy. First and foremost, the utopian fantasy of DIY porn hinges on the belief that amateur pornography is free: freely made, freely gifted, and freely viewed. When McGlotten accuses the professional adult industry of 'arousing for profit', he gives voice to a broader set of cultural anxieties about the relationship between sex and money. As uncompensated sexual labour, produced 'for pleasure' rather than profit, amateur porn seems to offer an alternative to the perceived ethical murkiness of paying for sex – or, at least, paying to watch it. In this sense, the fantasy of the DIY porn utopia is inherently a fantasy of normative ethics. The pleasure of the pornotopia lies, in part, in the sense of relief it provides: relief from guilt that comes with paying into a system of professional sex work which, as popularly imagined, always borders on exploitation. Behind the narrative about sexual self-expression that circulates through this fantasy sits a narrative about power: if DIY makers control the means of production (e.g. cameras, editing software, uploading capabilities), they are less likely to be controlled and therefore the conditions of their labour need not raise moral qualms. As Melissa Gira Grant explains in *Playing the Whore* (2014), the stigma of sex work has long been tied to its association with money. Fittingly, says Gira Grant, mainstream media render sex workers acceptable for public viewing only when they have been stripped of their monetary worth and brought into an abject position of regret and victimization. In its own way, much of the reporting on DIY porn mirrors this divide between the acceptable

and unacceptable by depicting unpaid amateur porn-makers, especially young women, as self-actualized, while describing the paid labour of professional performers and models as degrading (Wallace 2011).

At the same time that it envisions DIY porn-making as existing outside capitalist concerns, the fantasy of the amateur adult utopia in fact relies heavily on a set of ironically dystopian socio-economic classifications. Far from universally democratizing the production of online content or removing money from the equation of sexual labour, the utopian vision of DIY porn reinforces divides between 'haves' and 'have-nots', mapping ethics onto differentials of privilege. The DIY porn-making fantasy is founded on a neatly constructed binary between amateur and professional (a binary which is itself oversimplified) and by extension between moral superiority and inferiority. On one side of the equation stands the corporate porn industry, which reportedly reduces all bodies to their mere use-value. On the other side stand amateur porn-makers: sexy, subversive anti-capitalists who perform for the camera as an act of self-sovereignty devoid of the concerns of finance. The implications of this vision are deeply classist. If good pornography is unpaid pornography, then only those who can afford to work for free are entitled to make ethically acceptable porn. By contrast, those who need to or simply invoke the right to be paid for their labour are cast as the exploited tools of a capitalist system. Capitalism is indeed a key figure in this fantasy. Capitalist subjects dream of a realm of sexual expression where their pleasures are no longer defined by economics, money, and their own status as consumers. Amateur porn-making, to follow the fantasy to its climax, heralds the way to a post-capitalist landscape liberated by pleasure.

It will be of particular interest to scholars of digital media to note that the fantasy of the DIY utopia is also an inherently digital fantasy. That is, it is a fantasy shaped by the broader cultures and affordances of contemporary technologies, such as the types of online communities made possible through the increasing accessibility of web-based consumer technology. For this reason, the online pornotopia shares much in common with other, equally problematic, digital fantasies, such as the fantasy of online post-racialism (Nakamura 2002). Versions of the fantasy can also be seen operating in other digital realms. When sex workers are represented in video games, for example, they frequently offer to 'do it for free' with the player-character. This can be seen in Anita Sarkeesian's video 'Women as Background Decoration' (2014), from her 'Tropes vs. Women in Video Games' series, which includes a number of clips from videos games in which women sex workers tell the games' protagonists that they are so handsome they will happily waive their fees. I would not call this a utopian vision of sexual labour. Rather, these in-game moments make clear that the fantasy of sex work 'done for free' is, at least in part, less a fantasy of democratization and more a fantasy of exceptionalism. The digital subject, like the player, is primed to navigate the virtual space in search of a set of pleasures that, whatever the cost incurred to others, must surely be made available to them for free.

## The problem with DIY porn as utopia

As is perhaps already becoming apparent, the vision of DIY porn as utopia perpetuates a misguided and unintentionally harmful set of perspectives on both digital labour and sex work more generally. Firstly, idealizing amateur online porn risks rendering invisible the real economic conditions of the labour that drives digital sex work. That is, it obscures

the actual capitalist forces that operate behind the distribution of unpaid DIY porn, while at the same time ignoring the work that is required to produce such videos – especially successful ones. It is a mistake to assume that DIY porn, or any form of user-generated content (no matter how 'fun'), does not represent the product of meaningful human labour. Jacobs' (2007) research demonstrates how the time commitment alone required to maintain a thriving amateur porn persona on social media can be sizeable. Amateur porn may appear to be available to consumers at no cost, but this does not mean that making it takes no effort. This applies as much to the production of videos as to the management of an online presence, While contemporary consumer technology has made it easier than ever to quickly shoot and upload footage, planning and producing a collection of videos requires real time and effort. Many of the most frequently viewed videos on top tube sites have been laboured over by producers in both pre-production and post-production. The amateur or 'gonzo' look comprises its own erotic aesthetic – a visual style designed to convincingly communicate the message (itself often a fantasy) that the bodies on screen are not the bodies of professionals, but rather 'real' people like the viewer – achieved not effortlessly but through the use of specific techniques. Also, the bodies on screen are hardly the only ones whose labour contributes to the production of DIY porn. Although many unpaid videos are shot by those who are participating in the sexual scenes, many more employ the efforts of additional amateurs who act as camera operators – also presumably working for free.

The following example serves as a useful illustration of how much work can go into the creation of successful amateur content – and how content that appears to be free often in fact emerges from a much more complex system of economics which surrounds the growing sub-industry of 'pro-amateur' videos. As of December 2015, the XTube account 'txcollegeboys' has uploaded 1270 videos. txcollegeboys videos are shot in what appear to be nondescript university dorms. Most of these videos feature white men between the ages of 18 and 21; the men masturbate solo or are joined by men or women for couple or group scenes. The text that the account holders use to describe their videos typically emphasizes how much fun the 'college boys' are having – yet maintaining the txcollegeboys account represents real labour. Whenever the camera is rolling, there are at least two additional participants at work: one filming, the other taking photographs. The videos themselves are then cut into various lengths, with position and perspective changes throughout. The account has 1218 friends and nearly two and a half million views. Responding to the fan messages alone is surely a leviathan task. None of that is to mention the body-work done by the young men and women who prepare themselves to appear on screen (almost all have completely shaved their genitals, for example). In short, the idea that making a meaningful contribution to a tube site does not require a significant investment of time and effort – and even also money – is simply erroneous. What is even more striking, however, is that the content provided by txcollegeboys, precisely the kind of content that McGlotten points to so enthusiastically, is decidedly not free. Short demos are available at no cost – but full videos cost between $4 and $5 for 24 hours of viewing access. Indeed, on the txcollegeboys website, where videos are also available for purchase, owner and videographer Steve Myer describes the men he shoots as 'everyday guys looking for some extra cash'. Although txcollegeboys features amateurs, and although its videos are uploaded to the amateur section of a major tube site, the account is itself a for-profit (as well as a for-pleasure) endeavour.

The fantasy of digital DIY porn as non-capitalist also overlooks the fact that amateur tube sites are big business. Whether or not amateur performers are getting paid, the companies that own such sites are making considerable amounts of money on advertising. Advertising represents a significant element of the experience of viewing amateur pornography online. Flashing banner adverts along the top and sides of the page link users to paid sites. Pop-up adverts for dating and escort services constantly overtake the viewer's screen. For some, the incentive to upload unpaid adult content may truly be the spirit of the gift economy: the sense that 'sharing is caring', especially when it comes to sexual self-expression. However, it would be naïve to imagine that the ethics of the gift economy could be understood outside the context of the advert-driven, intensely capitalist framework on which this gift is structured. The sites that host amateur pornography and the communities of viewership through which they circulate are not interested in 'pornography for pleasure', to borrow McGlotten's phrase; they are interested in profit (in particular, profit that is maximized by acquired content for free). Idealizing online DIY porn as non-capitalist means ignoring these economic realities, and focusing in on the imagined exceptionalism of the individual rather than acknowledging the persistent economic concerns of the larger system.

Overlooking the realities of labour and revenue that sit just beneath the surface of amateur online porn can lead to an ongoing obfuscation of the real conditions of difference that continue to stratify digital spaces. Those who embrace the utopian aura of DIY porn at face value fail to sufficiently interrogate the economic and political forces at work behind the privilege of digital sexual expression. Is the best porn, the porn that deserves to be most visible, really that made by those with enough disposable income and social capital to decline compensation? What is the gender and racial breakdown of unpaid posters on sites like XTube, and in what ways does that breakdown reflect stratified privilege in contemporary American culture more broadly? In order to begin answering these questions, we must first accept that digital DIY porn itself constitutes a form of sexual labour, and that online user-generated content that looks free is still deeply complicit in, and in fact inextricable from, a vast network of money and power. Importantly, acknowledging digital DIY porn as sexual labour is not the same thing as labelling it 'exploitation'. Rather, this formulation calls for an alternative approach to understanding the relationship between sex and work: one that values sexual labour on economic as well as human terms.

## Devaluing digital labour, devaluing sexual labour

In addition to obfuscating the conditions of labour that underlie online crowdsourcing, the fantasy of digital DIY porn perpetuates harmful stigmas about sex work. The utopian vision of anti-capitalist pornography, *à la* McGlotten, dictates that sexual labour is ethically superior when it goes uncompensated financially. It also repositions the work of online sex as flirtation or mere leisure: pornographic videos are gifts given freely between community members. If the best kind of pornography is the kind for which no one gets paid, what does that say about sex workers who make money in exchange for their sexual labour? Positioning free online sexual labour as synonymous with superior online sexual labour undermines the perceived value of sex work itself. It encourages an unfortunate cultural tendency to devalue sex work in all of its forms. Implicit in this argument is a

judgment on the very nature of sex work; that it is both illegitimate as a form of work and is sullied by its association with money. That is, sex work is either bad work or not work at all. Ironically, this judgment also dovetails neatly with many arguments made against pornography; that is, that having sex for money on screen fundamentally constitutes exploitation. Rather than confronting this dissonance, the fantasy of amateur online porn allows the consumer to justify their free viewing precisely on the grounds that sex workers should not be paid for their labour.

It is no coincidence that the discriminatory thinking faced by digital labourers mirrors that faced by sexual labourers. Much as for online work, Gira Grant (2014) notes that sex workers have long fought to have their efforts recognized as work; that is, as a job and/or profession with its own risks and challenges. Perhaps unsurprisingly, sex workers' struggles with politics and power are more and more coming to overlap with the realm of the digital – in ways that themselves speak to the largely under-explored implications of amateur pornography on tube sites. Gira Grant reports that today's prostitution stings most commonly begin with internet searches. Law enforcement officers patrol websites advertising the services of escorts, pose as clients, arrange hotel meetings, and orchestrate arrests. Notably, these operations, which begin with the simultaneously profitable and perilous visibility of the internet for escorts who advertise online, often circle back to their digital origins in the form of publicly available videos. In these videos, shot in unassuming hotel rooms by police officers or local vigilantes, sex workers meet with their 'clients' only to find themselves cuffed, verbally mistreated, or physically threatened. Such videos are then uploaded to websites like JohnTV, which specialize in amateur footage of sex worker arrests. Gira Grant specifically compares these sting videos with amateur pornography on tube sites, emphasizing the videos' dual status as records of institutional surveillance and masturbatory aids in the fantasy of the sex worker who meets her come-uppance. At no cost, viewers watch as the sex worker, who will pay a costly legal price, is arrested for attempting to work for fair compensation.

Like the sting victims whose arrests appear on JohnTV, many paid sex workers also find themselves 'doing it for free' on tube sites. A sizeable number of amateur porn videos show customers engaging in sex with paid workers, many of who do not appear to know that they are being recorded. It is reasonable to guess that quite a few videos which do not mention paid workers in their descriptions nonetheless also feature sex workers. In these videos, the paradoxes on which the fantasy of digital DIY porn is founded become visible. Real labour has been performed and real money has changed hands, yet this labour has also been stripped of its value by being captured on film, uploaded online, and circulated for free. The result is a contrast of visibility and invisibility. Whereas the 'sex' of sex work is rendered hyper-visible, publicly available for all to see, the 'work' of sex work is intentionally edited out. To include it would be to ruin the fantasy of sex acts performed for pleasure, recorded by amateurs, and shared freely for all to see.

## Re-valuing online DIY pornography

While digital labour in all its forms deserves recognition and critical engagement from scholars, it is particularly important to address the labour politics of online amateur pornography. This is precisely because amateur online porn stands at the intersection of two marginalized and often perilously devalued forms of work: the sexual and the digital.

The first step toward uncovering the mechanisms of capitalism that function beneath the internet's abundant wealth of seemingly free erotic content, and towards re-valuing sex work more broadly, is to acknowledge amateur porn-making as labour. Although consumers, energized by the spirit of the celebrated digital maker movement, may prefer to imagine DIY porn distributed on tube sites as more empowering and therefore ethically superior to paid pornography, the rise of amateur porn should not be used to justify the rejection of erotic labour as a culturally (not to mention economically) legitimate site of value. In arguing for the value of porn performances, I do not mean to suggest that the production of pornography should be returned to the hands of the professional adult industry; nor do I believe that amateur porn-making is itself problematic. As has been the case across the history of media, the ways that pornography is produced and distributed are sure to continue shifting in tandem with shifts in consumer technologies. Rather, it is the idealizing cultural narratives that surround the recent surge in the production of amateur porn – and digital DIY pornography in particular – that are problematic. These narratives run the risk of perpetuating harmful misconceptions about both sex work and the 'democratizing' nature of the internet that affect real lives.

What is gained by disrupting the idealized vision of free online pornography? What is achieved by shining a light on the labour and the money that make possible the circulation of sexual content supposedly operating outside of economic concerns? The answer is a much-needed shift in critical perspective on sex work for those who study digital labour. Valorizing sex 'for pleasure, not for profit' enables exploitation by silencing discussions around compensation, promotes harmful judgments about the legitimacy of sex work, and devalues the sexual expression of those who cannot afford to (or choose not to) do it for free. The virtual realm sits at the turbulent crossroads between embodied experiences like sex and daydreams of a world where wrongs are righted, ethical quandaries are resolved, and limitless consumption comes without qualms. Today, the future of online pornography as an industry is uncertain, but it seems that tube sites will probably continue to grow. As they do, we digital studies scholars need to ask ourselves how the fantasies that emerge from online cultures are themselves fantasies about the social functions of technology, and how those fantasies can perpetuate as much as challenge privilege, social stratification, and stigma. Digital labour has real value, and so does sexual labour. Rather than imagining a utopia in which those who work to produce online content do it for free, why not daydream about a levelling of the moral high ground? Why not get off on knowing that a dollar spent to compensate sexual labour is a dollar that, in the best of cases, supports and affirms those who do the difficult and beautiful job of bringing us pleasure?

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