

## Life as a prosumer in the post-industrial economy

TOBY MILLER THE AUSTRALIAN MARCH 25, 2014 12:00AM

**COCA-COLA hires African Americans to drive through the inner city, selling soda and incarnating hip-hop.**

AT&T pays San Francisco buskers to mention the company in their songs. Urban performance poets rhyme about Nissan cars for cash, simultaneously hawking, entertaining, and researching.

subway's sandwich commercials are marketed as made by teenagers. Cultural-studies majors become designers.

Graduate students in New York and Los Angeles read scripts for producers, then pronounce on whether they tap into audience interests.

Precariously employed part-timers spy on fellow-spectators in theatres to see how they respond to coming attractions.

Opportunities to vote in the Eurovision Song Contest or a reality program disclose the profiles and practices of viewers to broadcasters and affiliated companies so they can be monitored and wooed.

End-user licensing agreements ensure that players of corporate games online sign over their cultural moves and perspectives to the very firms they are paying in order to participate.

In other words, corporations are using discounted labour whenever and wherever they can and banking on hipsters and desperates alike colluding in their own exploitation.

Business leeches want flexibility in the people they employ, the technologies they use, the places where they do business, and the amounts they pay — and inflexibility of ownership and control.

The neoclassical economic doxa preached by neoliberal cultural chorines favour an economy where competition and opportunity cost are in the litany and dissent is unforgivable, as crazed as collective industrial organisation (you know, unions).

The way that marginal cultural labour, from the jazz musician to the street artist, has long survived sans regular compensation and security now models the expectations we are all supposed to have, displacing our parents' or grandparents' assumptions about steady employment.

Hence the success of concerns such as **Mindworks Global Media** (<http://www.mindworksglobal.com/>), a company outside New Delhi that provides Indian-based journalists and copyeditors who work long-distance for newspapers whose reporters are supposedly in the US and Europe. There are 35-40 per cent cost savings.

Or the **US advertising agency Poptent** (<http://www.poptent.com/creativenetwork>), which undercuts big competitors in sales to major clients by exploiting prosumers' labour in the name of 'empowerment'. That empowerment takes the following form: Poptent pays the creators of homemade commercials US\$7500; it receives a management fee of US\$40,000; and the buyer saves about US\$300,000 on the usual price.

This is the precarious world of the cognitariat, where high levels of skill and media savvy lead not to secure employment and health care, but marginality.

As the world wide web is celebrated for turning 25, we confront new patterns of labour exploitation fuelled by its reach and the fantasy world it enables.

Professor Toby Miller is a British-Australian-US interdisciplinary social scientist.

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