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LABOUR AND DIGITIZATION

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When in 2011 San Francisco artist Andrew Norman Wilson stood outside Google's digitization services (or "ScanOps") building at its Mountain View, California headquarters, filming what would become the 11 minute "Workers Leaving the Googleplex", he was following an instinct that something really interesting was happening at the intersection of the corporate organisation of labour in the cool new world of web 2.0 and the cultural objects in its grip. He'd noticed that the workers entering and exiting the building next door had different working conditions to the majority of the workers at the site and discovered they were working on the secretive Google Books mass digitization project. He'd noticed that compared to the majority of Google employees who, he said, were white or Asian, these employees were mostly black or Latinx. He'd noticed they drove their own cars rather than using the Google shuttles, that they didn't have access to other legendary Google privileges such as the cafes, bike hire, free cinema viewings, celebrity speakers, foosball tables, onsite gym. They wore yellow Google employee badges, different to the white badges of full-time employees, red badges for contractors and green for interns. He hadn't noticed yellow badges amongst any other Google employee group (AN Wilson 2016). And the next day he was fired (Wilson AN 2016).

The labour conditions that underpin the Google Books mass digitization project are built on secrecy and exploitation, on different classes of worker, and yet, at least in its early days, the Google Print (later renamed Google Books) project sounded like the utopian dream of a company whose sole purpose was to make everybody's lives better (McGregor 2014). These tensions are a big part of what makes it to the surface in the arresting hand scans curated in, amongst other places, Krissy Wilson's "The Art of Google Books", a project that uses Tumblr to bring together an enormous number of diverse scan errors and oddities in the Google Books project. The scan errors reveal the complexities that the smooth surface of the digital scanner and its products elide. Other actors in the digitization network include the often crowdsourced and volunteer labour for OCR text correction - for example the Distributed Proofreaders, the National Library of Australia's Trove volunteers program, the use of gamification to procure OCR corrections, student media labour in digital projects (Mayer and Horner 2016).

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This paper considers the often invisible, contingent, omitted or assumed labour involved in digitization projects, using thinking from critical infrastructure studies (Liu 2016; Smithies 2017), new media studies, media archaeology (Parikka and Richterich 2015) and creative labour (Banks 2017; Eikhof 2017). Jerome McGann reminds researchers of the important task at hand “to surveille and monitor this process of digitization” (2013, p. 276) in order to understand its implications for cultural objects, for human relations with cultural objects and for interpretation and meaning making, and for preservation and access. This monitoring must take into account the broader systems and infrastructures within which digitization occurs, the policy and commercial factors, the labour conditions of people involved in the digitization process, the assumptions bound up in the platforms in which the digitized objects are packaged for consumption. These are questions that require an interdisciplinary perspective. In pursuing this aim, this paper responds to McGann’s call within the context of a developing cultural history of mass digitization projects underpinned in the first instance by a better understanding of the human investments of time and labour in different components of the projects (Fuchs 2016; Rossiter 2016). I explore the usefulness of applying work from the emerging field of critical infrastructure studies (Smithies 2017; Liu 2016; Drucker and Svensson 2016) to the examination of digitization as more than a technical function but rather as a cultural practice. I argue that critical infrastructure studies offers a lens through which to question the foundations of knowledge production processes. The concept of cultural infrastructure allows us to develop an understanding of the cultural object as the multifaceted container of different kinds of labour, energy, focus and so on. For Parks and Starosielski (2015) “a focus on infrastructure brings into relief the unique *materialities* of media distribution – the resources, technologies, labour, and relations that are required to shape, energise and sustain the distribution of audio-visual signal traffic on global, national, and local scales” (p.5). This holds true for digitization work. To Parks and Starosielski’s focus on the audio-visual, we can easily extend these concepts to textual, literary and informational objects. This approach provides a way to talk about the interrelation of objects, people and labour within a sociocultural and political context. James Smithies emphasises the relationality of infrastructure when he talks about “material culture, knowledge and practice” (2017, p. 114) operating in a relational context. Smithies cites Dourish and Bell (2011) who argue that “[i]nfrastructure itself is a relational property; it describes a relationship between technology, people, and practice” (Dourish and Bell, 2011, p. 28; Smithies 2017, p.114). And Jennifer Edmond highlights the interrelation between people and infrastructure in and beyond the digital humanities, arguing that people are at the centre of the knowledge infrastructure (2015). Notions of the particularities of digital labour of all kinds are central to developing a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of digital cultural objects, both born-digital and digitized. Using Google Books as a case study, this paper argues that increasingly digitized cultural experiences need to take into account the broader conditions behind the production of cultural infrastructure.

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