



# Analysis of Digital Labor Value Based on Marxist Theory of Labor Value

Zongrui Li

School of Marxism, Northeastern University, Shenyang 110169, Liaoning, China  
DOI: 10.32629/memf.v5i1.1602

---

**Abstract:** With the rapid development and progress of the information society, a new form of digital labor supported by "general data" has emerged, which can be regarded as a reflection of the changes in human labor forms in dimensions such as labor methods, content, and employment relationships. However, from the dimensions of value formation and labor capital relations, digital labor still conforms to the Marxist theoretical system. This article will be based on Marxist theory of labor value, elaborating on the value of "digital labor" from two aspects: transformative value and stable value. It will discuss its changes and unchanged content compared to traditional labor forms, hoping to provide theoretical reference for the development of the digital economy and related research on the value of digital labor.

**Keywords:** Marxist theory of labor value, digital labor, digital economy

---

## 1. Introduction

In Marxist theory of labor value, it is emphasized that "labor" in the process of creating resources and wealth also brings social history to human society. In short, labor constitutes the ontology of social existence. In the context of the new era, "digital labor" has also played a new driving role as a new source of value from the perspective of the digital economy. Combining Marxist theory of labor value and recognizing the transformative and stable value of "digital labor" can to some extent prevent digital labor from being monopolized and controlled by capital, and prevent the emergence of labor alienation problems.

## 2. The basic characteristics of "digital labor"

"Digital labor" not only covers the production forms of digital content, but also many forms such as industry, agriculture, and information labor, which promote the survival of digital media in modern society. Overall, digital labor relies on the professional fields covered by the Internet and various digital technologies. Therefore, it is believed that "digital labor" not only has the characteristics of traditional forms of labor, but also has its own unique characteristics.

### 2.1 Essential features

The essential characteristic of "digital labor" is the production and application value created by digital labor. In Marxist theory, "surplus value" production is the most essential content of capitalist production, and labor can be specifically divided into productive and non productive aspects. The difference between the two is whether there is an "employment relationship". In Marxist theory of labor value, it is generally believed that "labor" has duality, and digital labor also fits this nature. Concrete labor can create production and utility value, while abstract labor increases commodity value.

### 2.2 Concealed features

The hidden characteristics of "digital labor" are mainly reflected in its exploitative nature. Capitalist exploitation essentially means that capitalists occupy the "surplus value" of worker labor. In the digital economy environment, the most common form of capital exploitation is the reality of overloaded work hours and tasks such as "996" or "007", which is no different from capitalist exploitation and exploitation in traditional labor relations. It can be considered that the development of information technology has driven the development of enterprises and markets, but it has not truly liberated workers from exploitative relationships, but has shifted towards more implicit exploitation.

## 3. Value analysis of "digital labor" from the perspective of "labor value theory"

### 3.1 Changeable value

#### 3.1.1 Reform of labor mode

##### 3.1.1.1 Non-material labor

Marxist theory of labor value has laid a solid theoretical foundation for the formation of the theoretical system related

to "digital labor". In traditional labor models, places and times are relatively fixed, and workers participate in the production process of capitalist factory labor products, producing physical products. Moreover, the goods themselves have practical value and can meet the objective needs of people in society, belonging to a relatively typical "productive labor". However, in the context of digital labor, place and time exhibit randomness, and human brain becomes the main work carrier. The products generated are generally stored in data and processed appropriately to become "digital commodities". This labor process is also emphasized as "non-productive labor" in Marxist theory of labor value.

#### *3.1.1.2 Non-employment labor*

In the digital labor environment, spatial and temporal constraints are gradually decreasing, labor methods are becoming more flexible, and employment relationships in production have undergone significant changes, transforming from the form of a "labor society" to an "activity society". Compared to the traditional employment model, digital labor mostly coexists with "non-productive labor". The flexibility of production location and time makes the non employment labor relationship in digital labor more obvious, making it difficult to identify traditional employment relationships.

### **3.1.2 Changes in labor content**

#### *3.1.2.1 The transformation of product carriers towards the direction of data subjects*

Generally speaking, traditional commodity carriers are derived from material attributes, and digital information technology is constantly maturing, digital commodity carriers have also transformed into spiritual attributes, mainly including intellectual and knowledge-based labor, relying on technology and management as the main support. Compared to traditional labor, digital labor, as the objectification of data, generates digital goods at the end of labor, which can be better stored and disseminated through information technology. It should be noted that the digital goods generated by digital labor are different from subjective imagined information, and they are more easily disseminated or replicated.

#### *3.1.2.2 The transformation of utility value into spiritual utility value*

In the digital economy environment, digital labor relies on social communication and information exchange, such as common advertising and cultural promotion activities, which are the main content of digital labor. The increasing richness of digital labor cannot be separated from people's imagination and abstract thinking. Its physical utility value, which is different from traditional labor, is a key driving force for the development of modern social civilization.

#### *3.1.2.3 Value creation is transformed into continuous algorithm upgrades*

In traditional labor models, the proliferation of value generally relies on paths such as improving production efficiency and increasing labor time; In digital labor, although it also relies on the labor of workers, there are many ways of "proliferation", which are generally achieved through "algorithms". In the process of digital capital competing with each other, continuous optimization and upgrading algorithms have also become one of the paths to strengthen the value of their own commodities.

### **3.1.3 Transformation of exploitation methods**

#### *3.1.3.1 Unconscious exploitation*

Under the traditional labor model, the exploitation of capitalists is intuitively reflected in the exploitation of the health of workers. In "digital labor", information exploitation has become the most common form of exploitation. With the help of technologies such as the Internet, digital capitalists are able to monitor workers comprehensively and exploit them everywhere and no matter when. It is an implicit and unconscious form of exploitation that seriously deprives workers of their rest time and the time and energy to develop personal interests and hobbies. Moreover, this kind of exploitation mostly occurs in virtual worlds or online platforms, with strong entertainment properties, and workers may even find it difficult to realize that their certain behavior promotes capital growth.

#### *3.1.3.2 Implicit spiritual exploitation*

In the traditional labor model, capitalist exploitation is generally the physical exploitation of workers. In the situation where workers consume a large amount of physical energy, they will feel physical exhaustion more intuitively and realize that there is an opposition between labor and capital. In "digital labor", the exploitation of capitalists is more covert and thorough, such as emotional and interest deprivation. Workers exhibit monotony and formatting in their minds, are addicted to short-term entertainment, and exhibit obvious characteristics of spiritual poverty. It is worth noting that in the digital economy environment, it is more difficult for workers to find specific capitalists who output exploitative behavior, so this kind of spiritual exploitation will be more covert. However, from the perspective of labor essence, it has not truly freed itself from capital production relations and still conforms to Marxist theory of labor value.

## **3.2 Unchangeable value**

### **3.2.1 "Digital production" still highlights value creation and belongs to the category of productive labor**

Under capitalist production relations, to form a complete process of productive labor, two conditions must be met: first, it can proliferate on its own, which is also a fundamental characteristic of productive labor. The process of digital labor still emphasizes this characteristic, and it is still a labor activity formed under capital exploitation to create value for capital, which can be considered as a form of productive labor. Secondly, in most cases, productive labor relies on production value as its ultimate goal, rather than production utility value (labor activities that can produce utility value are not necessarily productive labor). Generally speaking, whether it is possible to effectively increase the value of capital and promote the reproduction of production relations between labor behavior and capital is a key indicator for determining productive labor.

For "digital labor", workers classify the various data produced by users and perform appropriate processing to significantly expand their value and obtain "digital goods". Subsequently, the ownership of these goods is transferred to capitalists, who then transfer (lease and sell) them to advertisers, who further expand their utility value. Ultimately, capitalists gained the value of digital goods. Throughout the process, digital goods enable capital to proliferate, which is in line with the basic characteristics of "productive labor" outlined in Marxist theory of labor value. Therefore, the labor process of "digital production" remains productive labor.

Combining the relevant exposition of Marxist theory of labor value, it can be found that the "source of value" is not physical labor, but more abstract labor. Generally speaking, digital capital does not require the payment of labor costs (or very minimal costs) to obtain the corresponding value created by workers. In the process of labor activities, although workers do not engage in material labor, in an abstract sense, "digital labor" promotes capital proliferation and creates value. Digital labor is still essentially a productive labor, and technological means are the objects of human labor in the application of capital.

### **3.2.2 "Digital goods" still conform to the law of value**

#### *3.2.2.1 Utility value*

The process of digital labor conforms to the "duality" characteristics of Marxist theory of labor value, providing spiritual satisfaction is the main external form of the utility value of digital goods, and its replicability reflects the infinite nature of this utility value (which can infinitely amplify the utility value).

#### *3.2.2.2 Exchange value*

Usually, commodity exchange relies on the market environment, and the exchange value of digital goods is generally related to the specific situation of the market. However, this exchange value usually does not change due to data workers or capital, and is generally influenced by digital capital and merchants who demand data.

#### *3.2.2.3 Surplus value*

Generally speaking, the value of digital goods in circulation and use is influenced by the production behavior of workers. The process of users using these goods (such as browsing short videos, reading messages) forms new data, and on the basis of this activity, it will also generate a portion of surplus value.

#### *3.2.2.4 Price*

Digital goods can still be exchanged, and prices are also influenced by changes in supply and demand or fluctuations in value laws. However, fundamentally, labor value is still a factor that directly determines the value of digital goods. In a more ideal supply-demand balance, the value of digital goods is directly proportional to the amount of labor (in short, as labor and commodity value increase, the price of digital goods becomes higher).

### **3.2.3 There is still employment relationships which presents two classifications in "digital labor"**

Fundamentally speaking, digital labor belongs to a type of productive labor, and workers engaged in related labor will also generate new value in their labor. In the digital economy environment, capitalists still rely on employment systems and other forms to use or purchase labor, and provide appropriate compensation in the form of hourly (piece) wages. However, unlike traditional models, there are two types of employment relationships in the form of digital labor:

#### *3.2.3.1 Typical situation*

At the beginning stage of digital labor, enterprises need to sign agreements (contracts) with workers to clarify the employment relationship. During the labor process, although labor itself presents obvious digital and information characteristics, labor resources and objects have strong particularity, making the process of labor value production and proliferation within the perspective of Marxist labor theory of value.

#### *3.2.3.2 Atypical situations*

Digital labor presents broader formal characteristics under atypical employment relationships. Generally speaking,

atypical employment relationship labor in digital labor can be understood as "play with labor", such as browsing information and playing games on the Internet. There is no direct relationship between "digital workers" and capital, but this does not mean that there is no relationship between the two. It tends to be an indirect and implicit connection. The relevant exposition of "labor capital relationship" in Marxist theory of labor value proposes that when workers are "overall workers", capitalists are more inclined towards the "personification" of capital. This "play with labor" model, that is, "specific workers", will not be exploited by a single capitalist, but will be exploited by "personified" capital as "overall workers". Overall, the development of the Internet has made this exploitation normalized. "Playing labor" is not labor from an individual perspective, but can create surplus value. Workers are not affected by the environment and time, forming indirect employment relationships.

#### **4. The realistic inspiration of "digital labor" from the perspective of "labor value theory"**

Digital labor has to some extent stimulated people's enthusiasm to participate in labor, while effectively enriching labor forms and paths. However, it does not mean that digital labor is safe, stable, without hidden dangers, nor does it mean that all "freedom" can be achieved. In the digital economy environment, it is necessary to have a clearer understanding of the core essence of "digital labor", to prevent adverse risks from triggering "negative consequences", affecting labor independence and initiative, and damaging the rights and dignity of workers.

Firstly, as a key technological foundation for the development of the digital economy, algorithms, combined with its updating and development, can promote the rapid development of the digital economy society. In the future, more attention needs to be paid to the innovation of various technological means in digital labor.

Secondly, strengthening the comprehensive construction of the digital regulatory system can help promote the stable development of the digital economy. In the process of digital labor, some inevitable data leaks may affect the vital interests of workers. It is necessary to strengthen the management of "traces" in labor behavior to avoid user information leakage.

Thirdly, to establish a digital management system to ensure stable economic development and civil rights, prevent algorithmic discrimination, hegemony and other issues, and enhance the creative activity of "digital labor". In addition, it is necessary to make a more in-depth assessment of the risks and advantages of "digital labor", so that it can have a more positive impact on the production and life of human society. Only in this way can we truly promote "labor" to become the primary demand of people's lives.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In summary, "digital labor", as a new form of labor for people in the context of the digital economy, has broken the constraints of traditional labor, but has not changed the essence of labor; The new features it contains can help strengthen the construction of the digital economy, but it cannot completely replace human labor forms. In the new era, we should fully recognize the advantages and potential risks of "digital labor", actively reflect on the development trend, limit it within a reasonable range, always ensure the concept of "people-oriented", and make full use of its advantages to explore the path of human liberation.

#### **References**

---

- [1] Wang Jingang. Research on the mechanism of digital labor value formation in media society — From the perspective of Marxist theory of labor value [J]. Journalism University. 2023; (2): 13.
- [2] Zheng Gaigai. Analysis of digital labor from the perspective of Marxist theory of labor value [J]. Modern Commerce and Industry. 2022; (21): 3.
- [3] Yang Huanghui. Dialectical connotation of Marxist theory of labor value - Centered on "Alienated Labor" [J]. Journal of University of Electronic Science and Technology of China: Social Sciences Edition. 2022; (1): 10.
- [4] Wang Aoran, Zhou Shangwan. Characteristics of Digital Labor under Digital Economy Conditions: An Analysis Based on Marxist theory of labor value [J]. Business Economics. 2023; (7): 15-17.
- [5] Wu Zhunhui. Critique of Fox's digital labor theory from the perspective of Marxist theory of labor value [J]. Journal of Yanshan University: Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition. 2023; (1): 88-96.
- [6] Ren Guiping. Interpretation of "digital labor" from the perspective of Marxist theory of labor value [J]. Economic Research Guide. 2022; (19): 1-3.