

TRANSFORMING WORKER EMPOWERMENT ON REDDIT: THE CASE OF R/ANTIWORK

Ari Stillman

University of Edinburgh, UK, a.stillman@sms.ed.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

In the United States, worker rights have deteriorated since the early 1980s along with union power and membership (Aronowitz 1991). Corporations sought to divest themselves of fixed costs, leaving employee welfare up to the individual and reducing full-time employees to maximize profit in light of market-driven fluctuations (Kalleberg 2016). Since then, precarious employment has risen, worker satisfaction has dropped, and the margin between average worker and CEO pay continues to rise (Loustaunau et al. 2021). Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, which spurred the Great Resignation among those who could afford to leave their jobs (Formica and Sfodera 2022), the rest of Americans have reported high rates of burnout (Launer 2020) with 60% living paycheck to paycheck (Lending Club 2022). In light of all this, stay-in-place orders rendered social media platforms the only acceptable social outlet to gather and vent their frustrations (Marroquín et al. 2020).

Reddit differs substantially from platforms like Facebook and Twitter in that its users engage anonymously, thus precluding professional or personal consequences for their comments unless users reveal their identities (Van der Nagel and Frith 2015). As such, user activity on Reddit tends to be more unhinged (Brown et al. 2018). In 2013, a subreddit called r/Antiwork was created “for those who want to end work, are curious about ending work, want to get the most of a work-free life, want more information on anti-work ideas and want personal help with their own jobs/work-related struggles” (‘Antiwork FAQ’ 2022). In January 2020, r/Antiwork had 100,000 global subscribers. By January 2023, its membership jumped to 2.5M (Subreddit Stats 2023). To apprehend this meteoric increase, my research explores what kind of activity occurs in r/Antiwork, what this activity does for its members, and what offline impacts it is having in their working lives.

Conceptually this research is a marriage between old and new subfields in sociology. Among the old, I draw from what historically was called the sociology of work but now has become elevated and specialized into management studies such as Organizational Behavior and Employee Relations (Halford 2009). This includes antagonism between employer and worker (Thompson 2003), the changing role and meaning of work (Strangleman 2015), and how job satisfaction is conceptualized differently by white-collar and blue-collar workers (Hu et al. 2010). Among the new, I engage with digital sociology and contemporary debates about platform politics (Gillespie 2017), algorithmic influence on community development (Seering et al. 2019), social media echo chambers (Cinelli et al. 2020), online communities of resistance (Massa 2016), and how online activity influences offline behavior (Althoff

et al. 2017). Synthesizing the concepts from these literatures has been vital for contextualizing the tremendous influx of members to r/Antiwork and their grievances against capitalism.

To understand the significance r/Antiwork has in the lives of some of its members, I began with digital ethnography in November 2021 to inform a portrait of the space. This stage of exploration allowed me to observe a range of activity in r/Antiwork before engaging with users thereon in an approach Tim Squirrell calls “lurking ethnography” (2019). As is typical of emergent online communities (Baym 2015), I noted insider lingo, the negotiation and enforcement of norms bounded by the subculture of the space, and how internal and external politics influenced the conversations therein. Following a self-imposed probationary period of three months, I began to post comments to engage in community conversations. At times I positioned myself as a researcher trying to illuminate specific issues to inform my findings. After over a year conducting ethnography, I transitioned to interviews of r/Antiwork members (n=50) to go deeper in understanding the role that r/Antiwork has played in their lives. I targeted my sample based on previous posting activity in which members expressed gratitude for r/Antiwork’s positive impact on their mental health and working lives.

Findings reveal activity that spans from airing grievances to soliciting and seeking social support to encouraging unionization efforts as well as individual forms of workplace resistance. These themes demonstrate stages of worker empowerment: first, identifying issues and recognizing that they do not exist in isolation; second, knowledge sharing in a community of peers toward their situational improvement; third, issuing calls to action ranging from individual ‘act your wage’ rhetoric in which workers are discouraged from performing more than the minimum to collective forms of organization such as supporting strikes and joining or forming unions. Rather than feeling alone and disenfranchised, users share how their membership in r/Antiwork has empowered them to challenge their exploitation, drudgery, and fatalism. Noteworthy as well has been a contingent of managers who have shared how r/Antiwork discourse has opened their minds to the plight of workers and caused them to enact pro-labor measures in the workplace.

Research implications point to the potency of anonymous online community for transforming the experiences of disenfranchised workers. With rolled back labor protections due to loss of union influence, workers are finding camaraderie and advocacy that transcends the historic support previously provided by unions and guilds. This is not to say that unions have become irrelevant and superseded by an unaccountable collective – far from it – but that anonymous online community functions as a nexus for pro-labor activity and advising members how to establish a union. Additionally, outspoken managers in r/Antiwork signify a departure from the archetypical role afforded by management of enforcing corporate policy toward more humanistic employee relations. While the scale of this shift is unknown and merits further exploration, the transformative role of an anonymous online community in facilitating such conversion narratives through sympathetic exposure should not be discounted.

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