The "Joy Hook," "Weird Feedback Loops," "Quick Hit Pieces," and "Usefulness"

Covering Digital Dance in Digital Journalism

Alexandra Harlig in conversation with Makeda Easter and Margaret Fuhrer

Contextualizing Labor Discourse in Digital Media

The ways the economics of dance has and has not changed in the internet era reveals enduring issues around race, gender, bodily labor, and dance's complex relationship to music. Despite ways in which new platforms and their revenue streams have purportedly democratized the production and distribution of creative forms, and the clear economic benefit dance has for those platforms, the choreographers, dancers, and videographers who create the multivalent world of internet popular screendance[1] continue to seek equitable remuneration, crediting, and rights.

This struggle intersects with the historical concerns of organized labor often centered in the protection and rights of the body; the recent move towards unionization in digital media organizations to secure better conditions for and control over the products of intellectual labor; and the vagaries of both the recommendation and advertising algorithms at the heart of monetized content online. Often working under their own auspices and even in competition with one another, internet-centric dancers and choreographers have few rights and little bargaining power on platforms and an uncertain exchange value of views and subscribers. While dance as a whole has captured much media attention and screentime, individual success and earnings are constrained by copyright issues, a devaluation of dance as a product, and anti-Black racism.[2]

These longstanding issues continue to gain the attention of creators, viewers, and participants on social media through content that circulates on the same platforms as dance videos themselves, including a surge of journalistic pieces covering labor and economic topics about mediated performance, especially in moments of controversy. Given the lack of writers who focus on dance at many publications, much of the important coverage comes from tech, internet culture, and music writers.

1. Following Douglas Rosenberg (2012), I use internet popular screendance to mean "*any* dance on *any* [internet-connected] screen" that is widely viewed and shared within the same technologies. My thinking on this is highly influenced by Harmony Bench and Sherril Dodds, among others (see e.g., Bench 2019; Dodds 2014).
2. In the US and Europe, where major internet platforms are based, while other forms of discrimination—including misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, classism, Enlightenment and Puritan values that condemn the body, and a disdain for youth culture—influence the lack of respect and remuneration for dance, anti-Black racism holds a particular historical weight and is the focus of the examples considered within this article.

TDR 68:1 (T261) 2024 https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000527
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000527 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While dance as a whole has captured much media attention and screentime, individual success and earnings are constrained by copyright issues, a devaluation of dance as a product, and anti-Black racism.

Although this provides important reporting on overlapping concerns, sometimes the nuances and particularities of dance are left out.

Staff and freelancers in online print and audio journalism, facing much the same advertising- and algorithm-based pressures as dance content, have been increasingly organizing their workplaces while simultaneously reporting on growing labor movements in other industries, as well as public support for them.[3] A similar critique of labor and remuneration inspired the #BlackTikTokStrike[4] of summer 2021—when Black choreographers and other creators withheld their labor to highlight their crucial role on TikTok and other platforms, and its media coverage. To look more closely at this complex ecosystem, I organized a discussion with Makeda Easter and Margaret Fuhrer, two journalists and dancers who have written for the *LA Times*, *New York Times*, and *Dance Magazine*.

While in the roundtable below we mention multiple instances of media coverage, we particularly reference pieces authored by the participants: Easter's "Rise of the Dancefluencer" (2020a), a web-only multimedia piece in the *LA Times* profiling dancers or groups who have risen to prominence through social media exposure and may not have found success in a previous era, whether due to race, gender, size, ability, or dance genre. Fuhrer's "JaQuel Knight: Changing the Game, from Choreography to Copyright" in *Dance Magazine* (2022a), which chronicles Knight's efforts to gain copyright protection for his work and that of other choreographers (Knight is best known for his work on Beyoncé's 2008 "Single Ladies"). Fuhrer's *New York Times* piece, "A Labor Movement for the Artists Who Make Popular Culture Move" (2022b) contextualizes the launch of the Choreographers Alliance, a group working in parallel to the Dancers Alliance, aiming to improve working conditions, crediting practices, and remuneration for their members.

Our discussion has been edited for length and clarity, with some reorganization by theme.[5]

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3. See the Cultural Workers Organize website for a comprehensive timeline of unionization in digital media organizations 2015–2022 (https://culturalworkersorganize.org/digital-media-organizing-timeline/). These collective bargaining agreements sometimes include terms for freelancers; the National Writers Union extends membership to freelancers and can offer some additional resources. See Molla (2023), writing in the unionized magazine *Vox*, for an example of this convergence. Molla covers the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes in conjunction with the overlapping auto workers, delivery drivers, healthcare, and service industry strikes of 2023.
4. See Mendez (2022) for an account of the strike, and reflection on what had and hadn't changed in the year following the strike.
5. We spoke over Zoom on 10 January 2023.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000527 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Making of Digital Dance Journalism

ALEXANDRA HARLIG: Much of how I've been thinking about the issues of credit and remuneration and labor in dance and in internet discourse, thinking about them in conjunction with each other, is because you both interviewed me for pieces you have done about these issues. So, what brought you to these topics? And what editorial support did you get?

MARGARET FUHRER: I started covering this kind of topic when I was assigned to work on *Dance Spirit* magazine, a teen-focused publication and so more involved in the world of screendance, because that's where younger dancers often are. So whatever expertise I have in this field comes from being on that beat for several years. I think I was assigned the story about JaQuel Knight and copyright for *Dance Magazine* [2022a] because I had covered JaQuel for *Dance Spirit* from "Single Ladies" onward. Then writing the story got me interested in copyright protections for screendance in particular.

With the freelancing I've been doing for the *New York Times*, I think partly I've ended up on a dance-and-tech beat or dance-and-new-media beat because of my *Dance Spirit* experience, but also because there are a lot of people who want to write about "traditional" modes of dance performance for the *Times*, but not a lot of people who are super interested in dance and new media—not among the more established group of critics and writers that the *Times* tends to pull from. So, when I started freelancing for the *Times* I thought, "This is a hole that desperately needs filling." I don't know if I'm necessarily an expert in this but I'm really eager to learn more about it. Because when we're talking about reach and exposure, and the dance that your average person sees on an average day, that's the way they're seeing it.

The Choreographers Guild piece [2022b] came about because I'd befriended the choreographer Dana Wilson over the years through various coverage in *Dance Spirit*. She reached out saying "Hey, I don't know if you know this is happening, but it's fomenting." That's my favorite way to start working on stories, telling a story that the artist wants told.

HARLIG: So Makeda, how did the "Rise of the Dancefluencer" [2020a] piece come about?

MAKEDA EASTER: So much has happened since I did that piece! I grew up dancing, I danced in college, I danced when I was working full-time outside of college, and a lot of my friends are dancers. Margaret touched on the dance that people consume: my Instagram is filled with dancers, I watch a lot of music videos for fun, I'm watching performances at awards shows, that's just how I've always consumed dance. So, when I got to the *LA Times* through a fellowship that was for "diverse emerging journalists," I had this idea brewing. It was 2017 and I thought, "Instagram dance influencers—it seems to be a thing," but I wasn't in a position where I could actually pursue the story because I wasn't on staff. I was just on this fellowship, which was a very hard experience.

But once I was promoted to a staff position on the arts team working closely with my editor, that idea was still in the back of my head. By that time—2019—a couple of outlets had already covered dance influencers and so I wondered "How can I do this story, but make it fresh?" So I went back to the drawing board, dug through my Instagram, and noticed that a lot of the influencers that I was drawn to were people who wouldn't be cast in a music video traditionally, or wouldn't have the same type of roles because of the way they looked. So the story formed that way: these are nontraditional commercial dancers who are making it big by building their own audiences and communities. Luckily my editor was super on board, and I got buy-in from the video team and the design team.[6] We made it a big visual package. That was important to me, because writing about dance is useful, but being able to see the dance itself is really important. I'm really proud of that story.

6. The published credits for this story reveal its multimodality and complexity, as well as an attention to labor: "Editor Craig Nakano and copy editors Steve Elders and R. Marina Levario. Story design and infoboxes: Vanessa Martínez with assistance from Alex Tatusian. Video: Claire Collins, Deveion Hicksonbottom and J.R. Lizarraga, who also edited the video. Social media promotion led by Alexa Díaz."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000527 Published online by Cambridge University Press

HARLIG: The multimedia aspect was something that I was curious about for both of you. This issue of *TDR* is about labor and digital performance and of course a lot of journalism is also digital now, and that's changed what gets covered and the speed that things get covered at. Margaret, you have the *Dance Edit* podcast[7] and I know Makeda you've got your email newsletter *the art rebellion*.[8] Your *LA Times* piece had so much video and animation that it was online only. How do you think that aspect has impacted what's being covered?

FUHRER: Coming from a magazine background, the pace is completely different than even five years ago—I think everybody's feeling that everywhere—but it used to be when pitching a magazine story, the idea of a time peg[9] could be nebulous. It was more "What are the ideas that people are ruminating on?" Now, because anything that's in a monthly magazine is still going to be published on the website—and probably get most of its readers through that medium—there's an urgency that editors feel that does end up affecting the way things are covered.

Also, and this is not totally new, there's this sense that the story that will photograph beautifully, or incorporate some beautiful videos, is always going to be an easier sell, no matter where you're pitching it. And that gets a little reductive for dance, because people think of certain modes of photography or performance, or types of [body] lines and dancers as "beautiful." So prioritizing that sort of visual presentation can actually reinforce some not-so-great stereotypes and problems that have always been part of the dance world.

HARLIG: Of course one thing that's sort of unique to digital circulation is that people can interact with you after reading your pieces. Do they tweet at you, do you get tagged in things that they're saying to other people?

EASTER: I'm thinking of the dance influencer piece. A lot of those dancers did tag me on Instagram when the story came out. It's not about me, but it did feel good to know that they appreciated the coverage. And in the opposite direction when you write something that someone's not happy with, they can reach out to you too.

In any creative labor context right now, in addition to whatever the thing is that you actually do, you have to also know about design and editing and publicity. You have to manage all of your outreach at the same time.

Some people know to keep me in the loop and email when something new is happening. There's a group of strippers in North Hollywood who are trying to unionize, who I got connected with when I did a story about some of them [2020b]; they were so happy with the story, they felt that it was really respectful and thoughtful. That led to a really fruitful relationship.

FUHRER: I think it's interesting that increasingly journalists are expected to have that kind of presence and to wade into that discourse. That's part of your packaging, that's part of your "brand." And those who are willing to enter the fray, for better or for worse, often do see benefits from that. There's also the other side where they can face extensive harassment. I think we all know the stories about Taylor Lorenz,[10] and it can become a nightmare quickly, but I do think that is an interesting further complication of what it means to be a storyteller, how stories get told.

7. See https://thedanceedit.com/podcast/.
8. See https://www.theartrebellion.net/.
9. A "time peg" or a "news peg" is the aspect of a story that makes it timely and therefore newsworthy.
10. Taylor Lorenz, whose impactful reporting named Jalaiah Harmon the choreographer of the viral TikTok dance "The Renegade" (2020) has faced right-wing harassment for her coverage of the tech industry and influencer sphere in particular. See Emily Dreyfuss's "What the Harassment of Journalist Taylor Lorenz Can Teach Newsrooms" (2022) for a thorough account of the types and methods of harassment Lorenz has faced, as well as their implications for journalism.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000527 Published online by Cambridge University Press

HARLIG: That's actually another parallel with the tasks that fall onto an individual dancer, which include running your own social media presence. In any creative labor context right now, in addition to whatever the thing is that you actually do, you have to also know about design and editing and publicity. You have to manage all of your outreach at the same time.

Scandal and Credit

Internet popular screendance most frequently enters nondance media publications through reporting and commenting on moments of contention. Reflecting the realities of the history and economics of popular dance in the US, controversies, and the stories about them, typically revolve around appropriation, crediting, remuneration, and their correlation with anti-Black racism and other systems of marginalization. Articles frequently recount and embed discussions from social media, and tend to multiply rapidly with often only slight, if any, differences in coverage between sites.

The issue of attribution—or lack of it—was at the center of a widely covered 2021 scandal when Jimmy Fallon invited popular white TikToker Addison Rae to demonstrate dances on *The Tonight Show*. Although Fallon held up poster boards with the name of the dances, there was no choreographic credit given on the cards (the most obvious option in my mind) or elsewhere during the network broadcast. When I saw the segment on YouTube, the handles of choreographers for each dance were given in the description box. However, because video is highly embeddable, and de- and re-contextualizable across other platforms where that information would not be visible, that act of crediting largely went unnoticed. According to Trevor Boffone (2021a), the YouTube credits did not even appear until after the controversy began. A practice of video-embedded citations (credit that appears on screen and therefore circulates with the video) might temper such scandals around authorship, but doesn't cover the issue of who performs or is compensated for the labor (see Harlig 2019).

This particular scandal shows the technological complexity and overlap of these discourses. The controversy as such started with the circulation of a side-by-side video on Twitter that juxtaposed a TikTok video of the choreographers of "Up"—Mya Nicole Jackson and Chris Cotter—paired with an excerpt from the official *Tonight Show* Twitter or YouTube video of Rae dancing (kara 2021). This video was then embedded in a different tweet comparing Rae unfavorably to Jackson and Cotter, which gained traction (sk 2021) and generated enough attention to bring coverage from *Vox*, *The LA Times*, *Buzzfeed News*, *Teen Vogue*, *The Theatre Times*, and others.

A week later, in response to what many articles called the "fallout" from the Rae segment, Fallon hosted the choreographers of the featured dances to perform them and discuss their creation. Many viewers were disappointed this was done by teleconferencing, rendering it what the headline in Black culture outlet *The Root* called a "TikTok Appropriation Consolation Prize challenge" (Stidhum 2021). This second TV segment, both its successes and faults, spurred an additional round of media coverage, with many pieces linking back to their own publication's articles from the previous week.

EASTER: Something I've noticed is that with digital media, in dance and many other types of stories, if someone picks up a story, then everyone races to cover it as well, and a lot of times they end up being basically the same story. I was thinking about when Taja Riley called out the Super Bowl last year because dancers were not paid, and there were so many different stories on the topic, but a lot of them were just quick hit pieces that didn't add much context.[11] I feel that sometimes nuance is lost when the coverage is digital.

11. Dancer and activist Taja Riley brought attention via Instagram on 20 January 2022 to a call for volunteers for the "field cast" of the 2022 Super Bowl halftime show, which Riley and many others felt should have been compensated. As is common with these kinds of stories, coverage on the web lasted a month or so. In January, this included summaries of the now-deleted Instagram posts and basic facts (Leibert 2022) and interviews with Riley and other dancers, showing screenshots of exchanged messages where the "volunteering" was discussed (Murphy 2022); an *LA Times*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000527 Published online by Cambridge University Press

FUHRER: Scandal does play into a lot of online storytelling but it's complicated because scandal creates momentum. So it's about figuring out a way to tap into that momentum without retraumatizing any of the people who have been involved. Often that's where story ideas come for me. "Okay, here is this thing that's generated all this controversy that's been endlessly posted and reposted by various outlets. But what is the side of the story that's not being told? Which voices are not being heard? What perspectives have not been shared that would be valuable to this conversation in a way that could further the change that scandal has started?"

HARLIG: I've written about this. I think scandal is central to the discourse of the internet as a culture, including dance [2019].[12] And then of course that informal or fan-to-fan discourse gets covered at a higher level, which then makes scandal central to not just social media discourse but also the bigger media conversation in a really interesting way.

Margaret, you mentioned there's often something bigger there. Do you remember that on *So You Think You Can Dance* there was a group, D*Day, that auditioned with choreography from Les Twins and there was this huge scandal;[13] people reacted strongly and D*Day was getting hate mail for their perceived bad behavior. But when I was researching it for my dissertation, it turned out that D*Day actually had given credit, but Fox cut it out. So the whole thing was because the producers and editors of *So You Think You Can Dance* fundamentally misunderstood the hip hop tradition. Or maybe they wanted to generate a scandal, who knows, right? It made me think of all the different layers of who's generating the media and who's in control of what gets out there and then what ends up happening after that.

Legitimacy, Clout, and Influence

The writings of Easter and Fuhrer, along with other pieces read widely by audiences, are part of an important circuit of creation, observation, discourse, and culture shifts among online communities of dance creators and consumers. In one example, advocacy, activism, and their analysis have led to the introduction of the choreographic attribution "dc" (dance credit) in the captions of many social media posts participating in dance trends, and to platform affordances like TikTok's new crediting tool that seek to formalize this practice.

Many of the examples in this piece show the complex interweaving of legacy media (e.g., Hollywood, broadcast TV, print newspapers) and new/social media that influences the watching, sharing, and discussion of popular dance. While there are important differences in production contexts, budgets, remuneration, and the potential for union oversight, it is largely the same dancers, choreographers, viewers, and writers who make, distribute, and discuss popular screendance and its discourse across platforms and media. Popular screendance and its choreography circulates widely on both official and individual "amateur" YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok accounts; and recirculates through side-by-side videos on YouTube, TikTok's Duets, Instagram's Reels Remix, Quote Tweets, and more.

The circulation of writing about dance is similarly multivalent. Fuhrer's *NY Times* piece is a good example, as it circulated both in print and online, bringing it to different audiences. When I inquired on my suburban neighborhood listserv about getting physical copies, in addition to many newspapers, I received congratulatory messages about my contribution, many from people who

piece forwarding the accusations but including the perspective of Super Bowl choreographer Fatima Robinson and representatives of Roc Nation production company (Gelt 2022); and articles entirely comprised of parts of the above, like one on *Complex* a few days later (Blanchet 2022). Riley posted screenshots of this coverage on Instagram, along with information about existing legal and organizational protections (see e.g., Riley 2022). Later stories in February included detailed results of the publicity campaign around the issue (Lucas 2022), a think-piece/interview about the implications of the situation (Simon 2022), and finally a longer profile of Riley in *Dance Magazine* (Smith 2022).

12. See also Anthea Kraut (2018) and Philippa Thomas (2014), who heavily influenced my work on the topic.
13. Merlyne Jean-Louis's legal analysis of the incident (2011) introduced me to the topic of copyright in popular dance. For more on the situation as an exemplar of scandal discourse, see Harlig (2019:101–05).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000527 Published online by Cambridge University Press

don't typically engage with these ideas. Fuhrer's article was also part of internet discourse. Its publication was declared on Instagram through posts by involved parties, who tagged me alongside choreographers I wrote about in my dissertation, like Kyle Hanagami and JaQuel Knight. These posts were reshared in Stories with links to the article itself including by people with large audiences, like actor-writer Rachel Bloom, whose post was then sent to me by excited friends.

HARLIG: One of the things I've been thinking about is the way the journalistic frame gives writers access to dancers, choreographers, scholars, industry experts, and other people.[14] So I'm curious about who you get to talk to, and what the difference is between being able to say, "I'm writing for the *New York Times*" versus writing independently online.

EASTER: I have noticed a difference in response rate after leaving the *LA Times* when I could say "*LA Times* story requests" in the subject line. I understand, because it is work to do an interview, so having a big name associated, someone may say, "Okay maybe this is worth my time." I recently did a freelance piece for *Dance Magazine* on Heels Dance [2023];[15] I reached out to a lot of people who didn't get back to me. I thought, "Oh, if I had *LA Times* in the subject line..." I'm still happy with the piece, but the name brand matters. Which is really fascinating because a lot of people who are in the dance community—especially screendance and social media—don't even read publications like the *LA Times*. The audience for the *LA Times* dance section is probably not the kind of people who would be engaging in screendance typically, so it is an interesting juxtaposition.

FUHRER: Building on what Makeda was saying, there's this idea of these old school mainstream media outfits still having clout. This is strange because what you're paying these potential sources with is exposure and many of them, especially in the commercial dance world, could post something on their own Instagram and get more exposure easily. So I think especially in that particular community it's like, "Well, love *Dance Magazine*, but I have more Instagram followers than they do." So, how does that speak to the perceived value of those old media publications, compared to what it actually is?

HARLIG: I think that the idea of legitimacy, and amateur versus professional, all these things are really in flux, sort of. Anyone can go viral and have a lot of followers, and yet we still have these institutions that have a lot of power and persist, despite the other options. Or we have people who are making it big on YouTube, but the goal is still to be in movies. Old media is pretty persistent.

FUHRER: I know that we talked about this a little bit, Alex, when I interviewed you for the Choreographers Guild piece [Fuhrer 2022b]. A lot of new media is seeking legitimization through recognition via old media, but then also old media is trying to legitimize itself by incorporating aspects of new media. So you have TikTok challenges on the Jimmy Fallon show, trying to make itself relevant, and the weird feedback loop that that creates.

HARLIG: Such a feedback loop! And of course the Fallon example is so interesting because the uproar when Addison Rae did the TikTok challenges on Jimmy Fallon, that was another site of scandal.

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14. I anticipated getting some answers from Easter's *Dancefluencer* piece about the earnings possible for dancers online, which I hadn't been able to figure out in my own research. The article features a chart of estimated earning on Instagram per type of post depending on numbers of followers, but it is a general rate sheet, not one particular to dance; in fact, I doubt that it is accurate for dance videos at all, which are not monetizable if they use copyrighted music. It may have been accurate for dance influencers selling other products, but not when "selling" dance. When we corresponded after publication, Easter shared my frustration and said that YouTube wouldn't provide clear ad rates, and that a lot of dancers and choreographers were "reluctant to share" their revenue streams and amounts.
15. "Heels dance (also called 'stiletto dance' or 'heels') refers to a fusion of different styles performed to popular music in three-inch, four-inch or even higher stilettos" (Easter 2023).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000527 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This brings up a question I had about how you think the shifts in the popular screendance world have been precipitated by journalism or by media coverage of an event or scandal. The Taylor Lorenz piece on Jalaiah Harmon on the Renegade dance [2020][16] was very impactful even though it was a *New York Times* piece, or maybe because it was a *New York Times* piece. It got to a new viewership that hadn't been thinking about issues of appropriation, and it legitimized the concerns of people who had been thinking about it for a long time. And then the Fallon thing was another big point of rupture. Those two events and their coverage led to and reinforced the introduction of the dance credit in captions—now TikTok has an actual formal technological way to give that credit.[17] Does that accounting seem correct to you, or can you think of other examples where you see a shift actually happening?

EASTER: I feel like Covid and the Black Lives Matter movement and the George Floyd protests really, from my perspective, shifted a lot of the conversations. I remember the Instagram black squares during the summer of 2020, and then the backlash over surface level displays of support. That trickled down into everything. It had an impact at the *LA Times* in conversations we were having around how Black journalists were treated, and I saw that trickle down into the dance world, and I think it probably is connected to crediting Black creators and Black choreographers. And then also with Covid, I've seen a ferocity of conversations around pay and people being exploited.[18] I think 2020 was a monumental year for changing and reframing the way that artists and creatives and journalists and a lot of other people think about these issues. I have noticed more posts, more conversations, people getting called out, and calling out things that have been wrong and damaging in the industry.

HARLIG: Not many of the shifts from that summer have stayed, unfortunately. I do think there has been some lasting change in the crediting practices at least, which is not enough, but it's something.

EASTER: I have seen a lot more crediting, and I think it's pretty cool that people are getting credited. And if you don't, you get shamed, so maybe there are people who don't want to or feel like maybe they do it for the reason of "Well, I don't want to get called out" but, it works!

FUHRER: I thought it was interesting that TikTok's implementation of that crediting tool was a bottom-up development; cries from users actually led to change at this huge institution, which is a big deal.

I agree with Makeda—the whole tenor of these kinds of conversations shifted. And in journalism itself there's sort of a chicken and egg thing happening: is the nature of the coverage changing because the nature of all of these discussions are changing? or is the kind of coverage changing the nature of the conversations? I think it's both. And generally speaking, in dance journalism and well beyond, there's just more awareness of conversations that previously were limited to a small group of people.

16. The Renegade, originally choreographed by Black teen Jalaiah Harmon for the now-extinct short-form video platform Dubsmash, is one of many dance trends subsequently popularized on TikTok by white creators, often without attribution. See Boffone (2021a and 2021b) for further discussion, including an accounting of the activism of Dubsmash users that brought the issue and Harmon's authorship to the attention of Lorenz as well as Rebecca Jennings, whose piece in *Vox* actually named Harmon in national media nine days earlier. Lorenz's article was nonetheless the turning point; perhaps in part because Jennings mentions Harmon only in passing whereas Lorenz's piece is a profile; but also, as Boffone states, because of "the cultural capital that comes from a feature story in the *New York Times*" (2021b:135). The Lorenz piece is almost always hyperlinked in subsequent stories about crediting or race and dance, and the connection to the introduction of "dc" gets mentioned too (see also Chen 2020).
17. For TikTok's announcement of this tool and a new "Originators" programming account (their term for choreographers and other trendsetters), see newsroom.tiktok.com/en-us/crediting-tools and www.instagram.com/p/CaBC_DIPFZT/. Anecdotally, my Gen Z students say they haven't noticed this tool or its use.
18. The pandemic increased public discourse about employment issues that it exacerbated, including work-life balance, job precarity, the pay gap for women and other primary caregivers, lack of sick leave, and exploitation of "essential" workers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000527 Published online by Cambridge University Press

How to Be Useful, How to Get Paid

Moments of scandal are the focus of so much coverage partly because they highlight crucial societal tensions. But controversy also generates value through high click-through and view rates. The Black TikTok Strike in 2021 shed important light on the question of value-generation. Largely as a response to previous moments of appropriation and lack of credit, and a feeling that despite wider discussions of those issues not enough had changed by the summer of 2021, many Black TikTok choreographers and dancers decided to refrain from creating new dances (Mendez 2022). This in turn sparked further media discussion of the underlying issues, often linking to previous coverage of scandals and successes pertaining to appropriation and remuneration, and their legal, technological, and cultural complexities. However, unstated was the fact that all of those publications were nonetheless extracting value from those creators who were withholding their labor so that value could not be extracted from them. This example alongside the others mentioned here show the difficult position of journalists given the important role that media coverage and analysis can have in an age of online organizing and the exposure economy. Are the journalists further exploiting choreographic and bodily labor, or are they adding value?

Moments of scandal are the focus of so much coverage partly because they highlight crucial societal tensions. But controversy also generates value through high click-through and view rates.

The question of value is not only relevant to journalists and the artists and events they cover, but to researchers as well. As a participant in an NEH-funded Digital Humanities Institute in 2020 (Salter and Stanfill), I was making a map of where the flow of money generated by dance on YouTube was going—mostly not to dancers. I realized that even though unlike journalists we typically aren't paid for our writing, I needed to be on that map as a researcher, whether it's thinking about academic reputation as a kind of value itself, or the exchange value publications have in the university hiring process. That was a turning point for me.

HARLIG: What do you think about the relationship of who's generating the value and the content, and who's benefiting from it?

EASTER: One of the reasons why I ended up leaving the *LA Times* is because I do feel like journalism has caused so much harm, and I would like to be working more in collaboration with people versus this thing where you just take and take to have your name on a piece. My platform now is focused on artists who are also activists. I'm thinking about how I approach that work: I want to do independent work that does not retraumatize someone or sensationalize anything. I think I see my role as bringing attention and awareness, if the people or group of people want that, and thinking about how they want to share their message. Have you heard of "movement journalism"? It's people working in community with groups to tell their stories versus being this outsider know-it-all voice. I feel aligned with that style of journalism.

FUHRER: I've been thinking about a lot of these ideas too. The idea of the journalist as the objective outsider on a pedestal with all this perspective and knowledge that the reader doesn't have, that is slowly breaking down even at a place like the *New York Times*, which has been really slow and anxious about letting go of it. One thing that encourages me is that the Arts section seems to be a place where there's more willingness to do that.

And then there is the idea of giving a platform to people, if they are searching for that kind of publicity. Just because somebody posted something on TikTok that they were hoping would go viral—or that did go viral—doesn't mean that they want a story in a national outlet. So navigating all of that has been incredibly complicated.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000527 Published online by Cambridge University Press

HARLIG: That brings up the issue not just of who gets talked about but how they get talked about and who does the writing. There are articles that bring race and copyright and labor and remuneration to the forefront, but they're mostly part of tech or music coverage. There's the Taylor Lorenz piece, and Rebecca Jennings did an article on viral dance ownership in *Vox* earlier that same week, actually [2020], and *Rolling Stone* did a piece about how record companies are making lots of money, but dancers aren't getting paid for music videos [Leight 2020]. *The Verge* sometimes covers dance in relation to tech; they did a piece on the controversies around the dance moves used in the *Fortnite* video game [Statt 2018] and have followed the subsequent lawsuits.[19] As dancers who are also dance writers thinking about and experiencing these issues, do you have any thoughts in terms of who's doing the coverage and how that all plays out?

EASTER: Well, there aren't many dance writers; not a lot of people get paid to write about dance. It's a really tough landscape. *The Washington Post* laid off their full-time dance critic, leaving only one full-time dance critic in the country.[20] There's just not a lot of journalists who have the opportunity to cover dance, so I'm glad that tech teams or publications are picking up these stories; maybe as a positive that brings dance to a new audience.

FUHRER: As Makeda said, there are very few dance writers. Not because there's nobody interested in writing about dance—there are a ton of people who want to write about dance! There are just so few paid opportunities to do that, and increasingly fewer.[21] I have mixed feelings about stories about dance written by non–dance writers. Like we've been saying, the idea of dance reaching any kind of mainstream audience via whatever channel is great, let's do it! On the other hand, most of these stories, partly because they weren't written by dance people, aren't about dance. Dance is sort of an incidental thing happening around the "real issue": tech, or copyright, or issues of ownership. These are also very important, but dance is a critical part of telling those stories; they are specifically complicated and interesting because they are about dance and dancers. And those stories miss that in ways that can be really frustrating.

HARLIG: So, given everything we've discussed in this era of covering digital performance, how are you two thinking about what you want to see and do next?

EASTER: Being at the *LA Times* and seeing the data of how many people read a dance story was really sad, seeing that only several hundred people read a story that I spent weeks on. It just made me question, "Who am I doing this for? What impact does this work have?" I think it's really important to document dance, to have it covered by an institution that has been around for 100 plus years. But for me personally, it's about how does this actually move things forward? I'm doing a journalism fellowship right now, and with my newsletter, I've been spending months thinking through how I want to approach the work that I do. How do I impact people? Do I change the way that I do a story? I've been thinking a lot about service journalism and the usefulness of what I do. So maybe I do more stories that actually help people, like, "How do you get paid for your work?" or "How do you show your work?" I've been really rethinking how I approach my work so that it reaches the people that I want to reach. And it's a tough question.

HARLIG: How are you thinking your labor would be compensated for that kind of work?

19. Also in *The Verge* see Adi Robertson (2019) for why *Fortnite* copyright suits might not protect popular dance community interests; Wes Davis (2023) for the most recent update on choreographer Kyle Hanagami's copyright infringement suit against *Fortnite* maker Epic Games; and a landing page on *The Verge* (2023) that collates all of their *Fortnite* copyright coverage.

20. *The Washington Post* laid off Sarah Kaufman in late 2022 as part of other staff cuts. See Ellison (2022) for a summary. This leaves Gia Kourlas, the *New York Times* critic hired in 2019, as the only full-time dance critic employed by a newspaper.

21. See Marina Harss (2021). She says "What we need is more voices, representing more of our world [...] But how can they be drawn into a profession that isn't really a profession? Many intelligent, ambitious young people give arts writing a try for a few years until, understandably, they form a more accurate picture of the labor situation and move on."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000527 Published online by Cambridge University Press

EASTER: That's the impossible question. Because my work is around artists I feel uncomfortable asking people to give me money, or putting my work behind a paywall, because artists are so underpaid, and if I want to help people, what good does that do? When I left the *LA Times* there was a year where I was freelancing a bit, and then I was an adjunct, and I was partially living off my savings, because freelancing doesn't pay enough. You put 40 hours into a piece and get $500, and then you take out taxes, and that doesn't cover rent, it doesn't cover anything. Right now I'm in an okay position because I have this fellowship, but me and a lot of the other fellows, we're asking, "How are we going to make money, what are we going to do after this?"[22]

FUHRER: I was glad Makeda used that word "usefulness" because that was the word that was floating around in my brain—the usefulness of what I write and why. The *New York Times* in particular is allergic to the word "advocacy"—in fact you can't use that word in a *Times* story. Yes, the idea of a journalist as an advocate is complicated, although I think a good piece of journalism can be a great work of advocacy. So, usefulness is the word that I've settled on, not as a compromise, but an in-between place where you maintain a level of "objectivity" for lack of a better word, while still thinking deeply about how what you are writing is serving the communities you're reporting on. And with a sensitivity to that, and to how it will be perceived, and how it will change or not change the lives of the people that you're talking about. And the visibility that comes with digital journalism just magnifies the stakes of all of these questions. We used to write a magazine article that a few thousand people would read and there'd be no forum for them to comment on it, and that would be the end of it. Now it lives on forever with many more eyeballs getting to it, so those questions become increasingly important.

HARLIG: This makes me think of the long-standing question of whether or not dance, or even humanistic inquiry, has to be useful. There's been so much argument about what is the place of joy and beauty and connection. What's the space for the things that are wonderful about what we do and what we're watching?

FUHRER: My own definition of "useful" doesn't have to mean utilitarian. I think joy is incredibly valuable. I've pursued a whole bunch of stories just because they bring me joy or might bring others joy. As long as they're not doing others harm, that seems like a net positive to me.

EASTER: I agree. The usefulness idea is my own personal work and project that I'm pursuing but also, I think the joy and beauty of dance should be showcased. And I wonder, how do we share this with more people? How do you meet people where they are? These are the things I'm thinking about.

FUHRER: I think sometimes the joy hook is how you get people to think about more complex ideas. Often if I pitch stories with a fun pop culture angle that allows me to get into the deeper ideas that I'd really like to talk about, they get much more traction from both editors and readers. And I don't mean that in a tricksy way like, "Ooh, I snuck that in there," but as a legitimate way to get more eyeballs on important ideas.

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