‘A very complicated version of freedom’
Conditions and experiences of creative labour in three cultural industries

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1. Introduction

A number of studies of artistic labour, based primarily on survey data, have generated clear findings. This research suggests that artists tend to hold multiple jobs; there is a predominance of self-employed freelance workers; work is irregular, contracts are shorter-term, and there is little job protection; career prospects are uncertain; earnings are very unequal; artists are younger than other workers; and the workforce appears to be growing (see Towsue, 1992; Menger, 2006 for valuable summaries of a range of studies). ‘Artistic’ here means a subsidised arts sector, but these features would seem also to apply very much to artistic (and informational) labour in the cultural and creative industries, especially given changes in these industries over the last twenty years that have seen increasing casualisation and short-term control of working. If that is so, then policies that argue for the radical expansion of these industries under present conditions, as ‘creative industries policies’ do, without attention to the conditions of creative labour, risk generating labour markets marked by irregular, insecure and unprotected work. This means that as well as the intrinsic importance of studying the quality of working life in these growing industries, there is also a policy reason to do so.

However, there has been a somewhat surprising lack of qualitative studies of working conditions in the cultural industries (as opposed to the working conditions of more narrowly defined artistic workers – see Shaw, 2004) and of the experiences of cultural workers. While there is a rich tradition of research on the political-economic dynamics and organisational structures of these industries (e.g., Miège, 1989; DiMaggio, 1977; see Golding and Murdock, 2005, and Hesmondhalgh, 2005 for summaries), surprisingly few analysts have addressed questions of labour specifically (the major exception is Ryan, 1992). In recent years, sociologically informed writers have begun to fill this gap. For example, using diary data, Paterson (2001) compared career patterns amongst three age cohorts of workers in the television industry, and noted the profound uncertainty that had entered the lives of television workers with the technological and organisational changes of the 1990s. Also studying television, and concentrating on the freelance workers who form the majority of the labour force, Ursell (2000) analysed the way that these workers had in effect to organize their own labour markets. Blair (2001) showed how entry into the UK film industry was highly dependent on social networks (cf. the earlier work of Faulkner and Anderson, 1987, on Hollywood) and that work there was intensive, demanding and highly interdependent.

Ursell’s research was significant because it paid attention to the particularly high levels of precariousment in cultural labour – something that had increasingly been noted by sociologists of work concentrating on other fields (such as Kunda, 1991), building on groundbreaking studies of ‘concept’ (such as Burawoy, 1979). Ursell acknowledged that processes such as union derecognition and considerable reductions in labour costs and earnings provided plenty of evidence to support a Marxist reading, focused on exploitation and property. But she also noted ‘an intensification of the self-commodification processes by which each individual seeks to improve his/her chances of attracting gainful employment’ (Ursell, 2000:807). This element of ‘apparent voluntarism’ needed to be acknowledged, she asserted, and Ursell turned to Foucauldian theory (such as Knights and Willmott, 1989) ‘not to dispense with [labour process theory] concerns but to approach them more substantially’ (2000:809).

Angela McRobbie (2002:517) followed by offering ‘a preliminary and thus provisional account’ of how notions of creativity, talent and work are being redefined in those burgeoning micro-businesses of the cultural sector associated with young people, including fashion and design, but also entertainment industries such as clubbing, recording and magazine journalism. She echoed Ursell in pointing to the ‘utopian thread’ involved in the ‘attempt to make-over the world of work into something closer to a life of enthusiasm and enjoyment’ (McRobbie, 2002:523), but also in focusing on how this leads to a situation where, when things go wrong, young people entering these creative worlds of work can feel they only have themselves to blame. In this respect, McRobbie usefully broadened the study of cultural work to include a wider set of conditions and experiences, including the way in which aspirations to artistic labour sometimes usefully blurred with artistic labour in the notion of creative industries. Ross observed how, in the eyes of a new generation of business analysts in the 1980s, Silicon Valley ‘appeared to promote a humane workplace not as a grudging concession to demoralized employees but as a valued asset to production’ (Ross, 2003:3). ‘New economy’ firms, he argued, aimed to provide work cultures that ‘embraced openness, cooperation and self-management’ (Ross, 2003:9). But this, he continued, was closely linked to long working hours and a serious erosion of the line between work and leisure. Whilst the dot.com working environments offered ‘bodies of autonomy along with warm collegiality’ (Ross, 2003:17), they also enlisted ‘employees’ freest thoughts and impulses in the service of salaried time’ (Ross, 2003:19).

These are only some of the contributions to studies of cultural work in recent years from sociology and relating it specifically to cultural studies. There is no space to offer a survey of this research here (and in any case Banks, 2007, has provided a comprehensive overview). Instead, we aim to build on that strand of research which seeks to explore the experiences of workers in cultural and media industries. We do so across a number of dimensions that have emerged in the sociology of work more broadly, and in these qualitative studies of cultural work more specifically. These dimensions are here grouped into the following three categories: pay, working hours and unions; insecurity and uncertainty; socialising, networking and isolation.

Our research goes beyond the existing studies discussed above in a number of ways. First of all, we conducted interviews across three very different cultural industries. The three industries were selected because they represent examples of each of three different ‘logics’ of cultural production, identified by Miège in his influential 1989 account of different ‘logics’ or models of production in cultural industries (Miège, 1989):

- Music as an example of the publishing model or logic (based on offsetting risk by producing a catalogue of repertoire, whereby inevitable failures are balanced out by occasional hits or successes – used in books, music, and film).
- Television as an example of the flow model or logic (based on a continuous flow of product, and the gaining of audience loyalty, as in radio, television and new media).
- Magazines as an example of the written press model or logic (the regular and loyal consumption of a series of commodities, in newspapers and magazines).

A testing of Miège’s classification was not our main aim. Rather, using these categories seemed the most effective way to draw upon existing classifications of the cultural industries to ensure a spread of examples of cultural work, including different working trade press in magazine journalism, and arts/history documentary, drama serials and ‘factual entertainment’ in television. A total of 63 interviews were conducted in England in 2006 and 2007, with between six and ten interviews undertaken for each of the genres under consideration. Interviewees ranged across the following characteristics: corporate and independent sectors; freelance and salaried staff; established creative personnel who have made their names in the industry, aspiring newcomers, and older practitioners; London-based workers and those in other locations in England; creative managers, marketers and creative personnel. We also conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a London-based independent television production company, which we report separately (see Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008) but refer to briefly here. Thirdly, our aim was to analyse more closely the emotional responses of cultural workers to their working conditions, information which could be ascertained from fieldwork interviews. By ‘emotional responses’ we mean states of mind such as pleasure, enjoyment and anxiety. We focus on these experiences and emotional responses in order to register with greater clarity the effects of the working conditions of the cultural industries on cultural workers. This includes some of the pleasurable and autonomous aspects of cultural work, as well as its downsides. As is appropriate...
2. Pay, working hours and unions

We begin with what is widely considered to be the most crucial way in which workers think of their work: how much work they do, and how much they get paid for it. Striking here was the use of language reflecting anxiety about the sheer numbers of young people competing for work. One factual producer spoke of ‘an army’ of graduates from media and journalism courses (Interview 21). When we asked the BBC journalist, ‘can’t expect to graduate and magically fall into a TV job because everyone knows how competitive the industry is’ (Interview 35). Documentary production told us that ‘hordes and hordes of kids... will do anything’ to get a position (Interview 43). And in our ethnographic research at a London-based independent television production company during the first half of 2007 workers expressed concern about their ‘employee’ identity – recognising, from their own experiences of job searching ‘between’ contracts, the sheer volume of young freelancers competing for the same pool of positions (see Hemsonhall and Baker, 2006).

2.1. Pay

This massive ‘reservoir’ (Mägi, 1989:83) of labour means that wages are depressed, and in many cases workers – especially young people – are willing to work for free. In her study of the UK television industry Ursell (2000:814) writes of the number of university students on work experience who ‘gift’ several weeks of free labour to production companies in the hope that ‘their gift will result in a career return in the future’. When many of these students graduate from their course, says Ursell (2000:814-815), they ‘persist in working for nothing’ as ‘freelancers’, or cash-in-hand, on ‘very low pay’ and this then results in ‘extremely low pay at the entry point to the industry’. Willis and Dex (2003:124) concurred, saying that the labour supply is bursting with ‘graduates willing to work for free or for very low wages to get a foothold in the industry’. One junior writer for a man’s magazine, for example, told us that ‘on the fashion desk loads of them are working for free, up to a year and stuff, and people do work experience as writers for a year and they work for free’ (Interview 12). In television the willingness to carry out unpaid or low-paid labour results, as one production manager of documentary films claimed: ‘they’re basically trying to prise the companies producing reality and factual television: ‘They don’t get paid properly, but it’s supply and demand... and people out and spitting them out the leaving the young workers ‘battered and bruised’ (Interview 43). Two metaphors conveying worker exploitation: ‘Employees who have a sense of employees want to work for them’ and, in the case of one particular company, become ‘incredibly rude’ and ‘arrogant’ towards their writers, treating them ‘like plankton’ (dehumanisation again). This lends an uncomfortable feeling in workers that they are dispensable: ‘there’s pretty much always somebody to replace you and do your job’, said one freelance music writer put it (Interview 41). And this in turn leads to greater pressure, and considerable self-consciousness about how workers might be perceived: ‘I try not to refuse work whenever I can, because then people think you might be being a bit too – not full of yourself – but something like that... because if they need somebody to do that, then there’s no reason for them to go elsewherel (Interview 41, music writer).

2.2. Working hours

According to Mark Banks (2007:36), being a flexible worker in the cultural industries: ‘essentially means that whatever is required to support commercial interests. It increasingly requires working longer or unsocial hours, taking on board additional responsibilities, relocating according to company demands and certainly committing oneself to the commercial imperatives of the firm over and above normal working requirements’.

This was very much confirmed in our research. One documentary camera operator explained how, in television, contracted working hours have extended, though there is an increase in pay:

‘On commercials you used to have an eight-hour day, that was your basic working day, and then after eight hours you’d be on overtime. Most commercials you did ten hours minimum anyway so you’d work two hours overtime and then production companies and budgets got tighter and they started saying your basic day is going to be ten hours. The same thing has happened in documentaries. We never had an eight-hour day; it was always a ten-hour day... but now people are trying to be sneaky and saying your basic day is twelve hours, but instead of saying ‘you’ll be paid for an extra two hours, you get the same pay for working twelve hours that you did for working ten hours, which effectively means that you take a pay cut’. (Interview 33)

However, as noted in Section 1, one of the key problems for cultural workers is that they are often, at least on the face of it, ‘free’ to decide whether to take on such long hours. This has its pleasures and pitfalls – the music industry outlines the kind of working week that results:

‘I tend to work six days and it tends to be mid morning to late evening. But the evening stuff is stuff that I tend to enjoy, seeing bands and artists and putting on gigs. I do a radio show as well: I forget that. I do a monthly radio show on the local music scene. It’s really varied, which is the thing I like doing. I’ll do anything at all’ (Interview 19)

‘Pleasure in work’ (Donzelot, 1991; Nixon and Crewe, 2004), then, is closely linked to self-exploitation. For example, a reviews editor of a national newspaper told us:

‘I’m one of those people who really love being busy but then I risk taking on far too much... and people presume you’re going to do it and then you realise you’ve got no time to do it. I went to my boss and said ‘I’m going to have a breakdown one of these days because I’m working ridiculous hours and working on weekends and doing all this crazy stuff!’ I enjoy it, admittedly, but when it starts affecting you, that’s really where the problems start’. Interviewees also told us of the physical dangers of working long hours, especially in television. One factual producer (Interview 27) spoke of a friend who after working extended hours and going on a driving course to avoid having a car accident. A cameraman told us: ‘Crews do crash on the road sometimes because they get overworked and flogged and they drive off the road or they crash and even get killed occasionally, and that’s because there’s a lot of pressure’ (Interview 29). Whether this is really the case or not, this worker can be understood as externalising his own fears about the pressure put upon him. Even as an established cameraman who tries to pace himself, say no and ‘be sensible’ he still finds there are ‘times when you are downing Red Bulls or taking Pro Plus and Pro Ringer and you are shitting and you have to work the most ridiculous hours and you’re in a terrible state, which you shouldn’t really be in’ (Interview 29).

Our evidence suggests that there is a strong tendency towards self-exploitation in the cultural industries. This may be a feature of a great deal of modern professional work. But why do so many young people want to work in these industries, in spite of the low rates of pay and long working hours that many of our interviewees reported, and which are confirmed in the survey data mentioned at the beginning of this article? Menger (1999:554) usefully distinguishes three different explanations for this phenomenon. The first is the label of love explanation (Freidson, 1991) – artists or symbol creators, have a strong sense of a ‘calling’, of potential fulfilment, and they are prepared to take the risk of failure. A second set of explanations emphasises that artists might be risk-lovers, or like lottery players, simply haven’t considered properly how likely it is that they will win (though risk and failure isn’t quite as arbitrary as in a lottery). A third explanation is that artistic work brings non-monetary, psychological rewards, associated with autonomy, community, the possibility of self-actualisation, and potentially high degrees of recognition, even celebrity. McCluskey explores the political implications of such work, when she writes about the way that the ideal of self-expresive work is mediated by new rhetorics of mobility and success (McCluskey, 2002:101). This has implications, we would claim, the degree to which cultural workers turn to unions for support.

2.3. Unions

What role can unions play in countering the problems of pay and working hours discussed above? As an official of the main UK broadcasting union (BECTU - the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph & Theatre Union) put it, ‘freelances arguably have more need of union support than do permanent employees’ (in Saundry et al., 2007:182). Though this may be the case, the uncertain nature of freelance work and worries about where next the short-term contract will come from means unions are hard to reach in the radar of many cultural workers. This was borne out in the interviews with music industry workers, none of whom spoke about the role of unions in the organisation, conditions or experience of their work.

With regard to the television industry, Saundy et al. state that ‘inexperienced workers in search of permanent employment and keen to build their reputation, are unlikely to insist on (union) rates’ (2007:182). Our research, a junior factual producer who had been on sequential, rolling short-term contracts with a regional factual company found his position frustrating because ‘although I’m kind of treated as staff... I’m just a freelance do the work’ (Interview 25). He works on a daily rate which does not specify the length of the day and although he knows BECTU sets out different wage brackets relating to hours worked he says finds
it difficult to go up to a production manager and say “I want that amount of money.” His concern is that the money for the BECTU rate you quickly price yourself out of the market and the company would find themselves a new cameraman when you go asking to change the BECTU rate for the 90s week. He believes that it would not be for another 20 years of working in the industry as a cameraman that his ‘sell’worth’ would have risen to the point that he will have no confidence to negotiate his pay with production managers. No wonder then that one young documentary producer (Interview 24) remarked ‘there’s one place that should be unionised it’s the TV industry. The exploitation is pretty severe’. Yet it was recently estimated that only one-third of UK’s freelance cameramen are members of the broadcasting union BECTU (Carlyon, 2006:22).

Similar stories come from the magazine industry, like the audio-visual industries, was once heavily unionised. In a discussion of the impact of union derecognition in magazine publishing companies Gall (1997:157 – 158) posits there is a distinct correlation between derecognition and increasing incidence of ‘lower starting rates, longer working weeks, the removal of paid holidays and various allowances, and reduction in holiday pay and redundancy pay’.

Those most affected have been ‘newly recruited full-time permanent staff, freelancers and casuals – because their terms are far easier to vary and worsen because of their relatively greater insecurity’ (Gall, 1997:158). One key issue for freelancers is the rate of pay per word. The NUJ (National Union of Journalists) promotes minimum rates but some of the freelancers we spoke to were not aware what these were. ‘They still quote, but I can’t remember what it is. It’s a minimum rate and it’s really misconceived. It’s something like 240 pounds for 1,000 words. Not much. Unless it’s 340 words! These are the sorts of things I should know as a freelancer but I don’t’ (Interview 32, writer men’s magazines).

In many ways the rate is a moot point because this writer foresees a similar problem to that faced by the junior cameraman: ‘I’ve asked for the union rate could jeopardise getting future work by associating him with ‘trouble’. Here again, the problem of self-consciousness in an industry where individuals have to sell their reputation is apparent (see Section 2.1 above).
The problem is that say I’d had a dispute with The Guardian [i.e. who had not paid him one third of what he thinks the minimum rate is], it could be that I would get the union in, they’ll be embarrassed, they’ll pay me an extra 50 pounds for the money they should have paid me in the first place. Guardian would just never use me again – ‘it’s a trouble making bastard’. So, it’s not worth my while for 50 pounds.’ (Interview 32)

This is a view supported by another freelance writer for one of the major magazines who has never been a member of a union. Whilst unions may, as he says, ‘look after your interests if you are being underpaid or stuff like that’, in his experience ‘editors just don’t want to be bothered with that sort of stuff. They just say okay, fine, we’ll pay you more, and then you never get any more work from them because it’s just a freelance gig’ (Interview 28).

A senior music writer (Interview 36) described how one of his worst discoveries was in being a freelance collective. He talked extensively about the time he, along with other freelance music writers, lobbied a large publishing house, whose magazine was union recognised in order to improve pay conditions. This ‘was almost unique in the British media. A bunch of freelancers get together in a house where the union is not recognised and negotiating pay agreements for freelancers when there’s no negotiation for staff’ (Interview 36). But even this optimistic organise notes that ‘any agreement regarding rates per word is currently in place it is at the whim of the company and can be revoked, and when we get a new gig it might well all end’ (Interview 36).

For the most part though, freelancers negotiate rates individually and as Dex et al. note, while on the one hand established workers have a strong position to negotiate their worth, on the other newcomers are ‘weak players’ chasing jobs ‘on unviable terms’ (Dex et al., 2000:285). The established freelancers we interviewed seemed more able and willing to negotiate rates. Note for example the assertive use of the first person in this quotation from a senior factudocumentary editor who told us: ‘If people haggle about what they pay you, and people do, they say “I am this company and I want this, this and this.”’ I just say ‘no’ and I charge what I want that I do’… So I am quite straight in saying I am worth what I do’ (Interview 14).

However, for those still in the early stages of a freelance career, negotiating starting rates was more likely to be dramatised in terms of the portrayal of the self as desperately needy: ‘The higher up you get the easier it gets because you’ve got more contacts, and perhaps people who regularly ask for you and the higher they get they generally get to pick their programme… But early on in your career you are thinking ‘anything – now’ because I’ve got to pay rent’ (Interview 24).

And it is not just rent that has to be paid. For as Ekinsmyth (2002:239) reminds us ‘freelances are responsible for their own development and training, pensions and social security; and home working freelances are additionally responsible for their capital equipment, their accommodation, lighting and heating’.

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3. Insecurity and uncertainty

According to Murdock (2003:31) moves in the cultural industries ‘toward outsourcing production, relying more on freelance labour, and assembling teams on a project-by-project basis, have combined to make careers in the cultural industries less secure and predictable’.

Researchers have noted how in television, for example, changes in regulation and developments in technology have led to ‘find insecurity’ for television workers since the 1980s and that these workers ‘find uncertainty a problem; they dislike it and it causes stress for the majority’ (Dex et al., 2000:283).

Some have described precarity as a concept that ‘employees welcome a sense of self-organization’ for when individuals organize their (our) own work it becomes more manageable’ (Banks, 2007:55). Banks argues that the offer of autonomy ‘is sufficiently powerful to override any misgivings, constraints or disadvantages that might emerge in the everyday reproduction of this highly competitive and uncertain domain’ (2007:55).

Cultural workers seem torn over the precariousness of their work – bemoaning the mental and emotional states produced, but also resigned to insecurity, and prepared to speak of it as necessary and even desirable. How do they cope? Some spread the risk by working in multiple sites to supplement income. One producer of arts programmes described how reductions in arts funding required him to take on teaching work as a production manager for factual and children’s television companies despite having her own arts-based production company (Interview 53). In the music industry, a jazz drummer outlined a familiar situation for musicians, whereby it is hard to get regular work, and he has to do odd jobs to make ends meet.

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‘One of the worries’, he says, ‘is always that … I’m not going to work again’. Few workers we interviewed, even those with salaried staff positions, seemed immune from such feelings of insecurity.

However some magazine writers set these worries about money and employment against the relative freedom that freelancing provided them. As one men’s magazine writer says ‘on the flipside I can go and have a round of golf on a Monday morning and I couldn’t do that if I had to work five days a week with a regular income’ and ‘I know a lot of people who are really unhappy in their nine to five work’ (Interview 32). Another freelance men’s magazine writer emphasised the downsides of stability: ‘I don’t have any pension, I don’t have many holidays, but then it’s kind of okay because I’ve adapted to the idea of obviously have some more time off and to spend some more time with my children, but I think it’s definitely better than 12 months a year on a job that I hated’ (Interview 28).

One music journalist described his working conditions as involving freedom, but ‘a very complicated version of freedom’ (Interview 32). While this writer worked freelance, the same is true of other cultural workers, including salaried employees, who in their own words ‘find insecurity and precarity is more advantageous than workers in other industries, but whose autonomy comes at a cost. As Banks (2007:55) puts it, ‘be or appear to be in control of one’s destiny is the price one must pay to endorse the systems put in place to expedite flexible production’.

Drawing on the work of Knappett (2011) who describes how ‘Employees welcome a sense of self-organization; for when individuals organize their (our) own work it becomes more manageable’ (Banks, 2007:55). Banks argues that the offer of autonomy ‘is sufficiently powerful to override any misgivings, constraints or disadvantages that might emerge in the everyday reproduction of this highly competitive and uncertain domain’ (2007:55).

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positive side of my relationship between doing other types of work in music was always that sense of I didn't really have to be that good. The gig and [without the teaching] I'd be forced to do that.' (Interview 63)

Another jazz musician told us that 'if you don't mind a bit of risk in your life do you consider a certain kind of gig - if you're stable, so to speak - you do another kind of job' (Interview 10). But the 'risk' she refers to is not always sustainable. In television, for example, a factual producer reported that he has to pay people not to get the 'risk' out of the way, 'because they found it ... just too uncertain' (Interview 21). And as another producer suggested 'with telly it's it's very much like you want to always get just to be thinking about what else you might do' (Interview 52).

4. Socialising, networking and isolation

In this next section, we explore the ambivalence of the sociability of cultural production. Workers discussed in detail the rituals of socialising with their colleagues but questions were raised as to the blurring of boundaries between socialising for pleasure and networking for work. Also, even with the emphasis on regular socialising and networking in these industries, a number of workers reported feeling isolated from both colleagues and their profession.

4.1. Socialising and networking

In all the industries we studied, there was a strong sense that the contacts which eventually lead to careers are sociable. For example, in many companies there was a ritual of going to the pub on a Friday night after work or, in the magazine industry, to 'celebrate' going to press. Nixon and Crewe (2004:137-139) describe a culture of hedonism in magazine publishing and the advertising industry noting that 'it was drinking with colleagues after work in the local pub on Friday nights, as well as frequently in the week, that formed a more regular social ritual for both sets of media practitioners'. This was confirmed in our research.

A review editor for a music magazine reports that: 'after we go to press we go out for a pint and to me and to the art director that's really important ... because the last week is all stress and panic and adrenaline going. you just really want to go and have a pint or two, a glass of wine, two glasses of wine, go home on the bus.' (Interview 30)

And such social events often bring people together from different parts of the same company, such as creative and marketing personnel: 'If you are working with the editorial team and they are going to the pub on a Friday night, you are naturally going to go with them because you are part of a team' (Interview 47, men's magazine editor).

For those who are less inclined to such forms of sociability, however, this emphasis on post-work bonding can be difficult. Many workers described experiences of the intense sociality of cultural work and the difficulty of maintaining a boundary around working life. This kind of 'schmoozing' (Interview 41, music writer), might not be enjoyable but is regarded as 'the nature of telly normally encourages you to talk to the people you are interested in talking to find you'. There were also questions of work-life balance to be taken into account: 'I'd rather be at home with my wife and kids than out getting drunk with a bunch of people. I am just particularly like, chasings a deal that I didn't believe was right for the band' (Interview 63).

Even in less 'glamorous' occupations such as trade magazine journalism, the expectation to socialise was strong. A junior reporter (Interview 44) described the visits to the pub as 'an extension of work hours really' and said that often 'talk can revolve around work' which can be frustrating on days where 'you want to switch off' but, she says, 'it's actually genuinely fun as well'.

Here again we see the blurring of pleasure and obligation, freedom and constraint. The blurring of networking and socialising means it becomes very difficult to maintain a boundary around working life. One series producer in the factual programming genre said that although he would like to keep his work and 'private life' separate, 'the nature of telly normally encourages you actually to bleed your work into your personal life, because that's how you build up contacts, how you get jobs.' (Interview 52).

As one music reviews editor (Interview 30) put it, networking is 'important for the freelance part of the job'. But although it tends to happen outside of work hours it is not necessarily pleasurable because 'lots of people are never off so you can't relax and socialise with them'. 'Never off': all hours become work hours. This added to anxieties about the authenticity of friendships in this world of work. As a men's magazine writer puts it: 'I tend to socialise with my editors in London once every two or three weeks, and I pretend that it's me being pally with them, but it's not really, it's me just maintaining relationships' (Interview 28).

The kind of 'schmoozing' (Interview 41, music writer) might not be enjoyable but is regarded as important because part of networking socially is letting people know who you are without making it too blatantly obvious that you want them to help you out. I do sometimes go for drinks with people, but doing that is pretty much the definition of networking. That is how a lot of people do get work and do get new jobs and things like that.' (Interview 42)

In the music industry, says this writer, networking is implicit and covert. 'People just being friendly with each other, just having a drink and being casual' is networking masquerading as socialising... 'You are basically being friendly under the guise of networking... it's like an unspoken thing where people are being friendly and being friends and not actually knowing each other to try out other things. At the end of it if you are kind of saying 'do you want to do this?' or something.' (Interview 4)

We are describing working worlds in which in many respects seem to conform to Andreas Wittel’s depiction of a new ‘network society’ on the basis of his observations of new media workers in London, characterised by many of the features of individualization in modern societies, such as high degrees of mobility and increasing ‘choices’ about relationships; but also, as Wittel points out, intense but fleeting contact between people, and an assimilation of work and play (though we are not sure that this will become ‘the paradigmatic social form of late capitalism’, as Wittel (2001:71) speculates). Moreover, we found evidence of many relationships that went beyond the professional. The difficult conundrum from which work is carried out can also lead to friendships that can enable workers to cope with the insecurity and precariousness of creative work. Take this documentary producer who described the friendship he has developed with a fellow producer: 'We're very close friends and we don't get together to talk about work anymore we usually talk about wine. He's a great wine expert. But I'm very close friends with [him] because we've worked together and we've been driving through the night, we've had huge difficulties, and it's an interesting thing about this process that when you've been really up against it in a really bad situation, it might be a violent situation, it might be just the plane didn't arrive and you've got to drive two hundred miles to the next place and the conditions are cold or difficult, or it might be that you have to turn something around in no time at all. There could be two things but you go through these really, really intense emotional experiences, and if the person you are working with is able to match your energy and actual drive or maybe exceed it, then you develop a bond, you've been through some powerful experience.' (Interview 37)

4.2. Isolation

Our interviewees, then, reported many ambivalent experiences of the intense sociability of cultural work. This was the case not only for those working as part of culture-making organisations, but also for freelancers and short-term workers who had to maintain contacts. But many freelance writers also reported a strong sense of isolation. For one of the music writers we spoke to one of the hardest things about being a freelancer is the isolation: 'you don't talk to anyone and you don't see anyone.' (Interview 46).

This can be ‘crippling’ as it has a powerful impact on motivation: ‘If I'm in the studio and I can't get any feedback then I just feel a bit of self-loathing that I've done nothing useful today’. He links this to his personality: ‘I am a born worrier, which probably means I'm not the best person to be a freelance. I prefer to know where the work is coming from, I'm concerned about where the work is going, whether my career path has any direction, and it's quite difficult when you are isolated to get reassurance because you don't see other people. You look at other people and think "how come you've got all that work, where is mine?"' (Interview 46)

The music writer we quoted earlier (Section 3), who referred to his work as involving ‘a very complicated version of freedom’, was referring to the fact that he didn’t have to ‘commute or work in an open plan office or deal with difficult colleagues’. (Interview 4). But the temptation was to take this freedom too far. He says: ‘I can write my copy in my pants if I want to but at
the same time it often feels like I don’t get very far away from my computer for days at a stretch and that some of the work I do is merely paper from the corner shop can just not happen for up to a week. And literally, you know, will not leave this flat for like three days.”

He observed that up until a few years ago it was almost expected by magazines that the freelance writers would go to the office regularly. At the time he didn’t quite understand the full extent of this but now, after spending the last couple of years in isolation, he reflects on the value of regular office visits: “It was beneficial to you because they saw you there, you went to your work and more importantly they knew you existed. But often you’d just think ‘what am I going to [the magazine] office for? I have no good reason to be there’. [Interview 2]

In ‘the connectionist world’ that Bolotniski and Chiapello (2005:111-112) identify as central to modern work, ‘a natural preoccupation of human beings is the desire to connect with others, to make contact, to make connections, so as not to remain isolated’. In an effort to combat the isolating conditions of freelance journalism, one men’s magazine writer (Interview 28) rents a desk in the office of a design agency which is located in a regional ‘creative industries’ precinct. But while he knows that such an office space can help to reduce isolation, workers can still feel removed from others in the same profession. As a music writer emphasised: “It’s the same with all magazines; I’ve never met anyone who works on them. I wrote for Esquire for two years and never met anyone. On and off I wrote maybe five or six pieces for them spread over a two year period, but I never met anyone at the magazine.”

He says that a positive side of this is that you avoid a magazine’s office politics ‘but then on the other hand you don’t see the fun and games and never met anyone. On and off I wrote maybe five or six pieces for them spread over a two year period, but I never met anyone at the magazine.’

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References