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Work in the Media

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Abstract:

As media have become dominant players in society's affairs and, as an industry, represent a powerful economic and symbolic force, it is disheartening to see that work across the creative industries is becoming increasingly precarious. At the same time, media practitioners address this precarity in a wide variety of ways, often as groups articulating their agency within a structure that exploits the power of their labor. This essay advocates a program of study that explores the social, communal, and collaborative ways in which media professionals are able to do work in the context of an increasingly "workerless" industry.

Keywords: Community, Labor, Management, Networks

People spend more time with media today than at any previous point in history. The number of media channels, forms, genres, devices, applications, and formats is multiplying—more media are produced every year, and we spend more of our time concurrently exposed to media. At the same time, the news about work in the media is less than optimistic. Reports about continuing layoffs across all media industries—most notably, film and television entertainment, journalism, digital game development, and advertising—are paramount. This suggests a paradox: as people engage with media in an increasingly immersive, always-on, almost instantaneous, and interconnected way, the very people whose livelihood and sense of professional identity depend on delivering media content and experiences seem to be at a loss on how to come up with survival strategies—in terms of business models, effective regulatory practices (for example regarding copyrights and universal access provisions), and perhaps, most specifically, the organization of entrepreneurial working conditions that would support and sustain the creative process needed to meet the demands of a global market saturated with media.

The well-documented precarious nature of employment across the media industries—I respectfully refer to the published work of editorial board members of *Media Industries*—does not seem to scare off students choosing careers in the creative industries. Schools, departments, and programs in media, communication, journalism, and related disciplines are continually overflowing. To some extent, it is problematic that we tend to advertise our programs with unquestioned statistics demonstrating that a majority of alumni secured jobs in the media, often using a handful of high-profile alumni-turned-media-professionals to suggest that enrolled students are on their way to becoming just as successful. What we neglect to tell incoming students is that the majority of "jobs" these alumni have are based on temporary contracts (if

contracted at all), that these stars generally did not get to where they are now based on any predictable or stable career trajectory, and that even if they enjoy some kind of stardom, their environment tends to consider them only as good as the last project they completed. I am not suggesting that we should discourage students from pursuing what they are passionate about; I am just highlighting the ways that, despite our best intentions, media scholars contribute to the mythical status of media professions.

Beyond the popularity of degree programs and careers related to the media industries, it must be said that the developments affecting media industries and professions are not unique. Across the manufacturing, service, and creative industries, a new world of work is taking shape that seems to be premised on individual rather than industry-level responsibility, requires a high degree of skillset flexibility, and implicitly expects portfolio careerism. Media industries are notable in this context for their long history of manifesting these broader trends, and in some instances serving as an inspiration for management developments in other economic sectors. Moreover, media industries are unique with regard to the powerful link between work and self-realization that is generally evident in motivations to pursue creative careers. This individualization of work (in terms of motivations and careers) makes media professionals both easier and harder to manage: easier, because they are less likely to engage in collective action and bargaining, and harder because managing a more or less temporary network of fragmented individuals can be quite costly and complicated.

As students and scholars of media industries, we have tended to respond to these trends either by altogether ignoring the labor context of media production—considering the relative “youth” of what only recently has been conceptualized as media production studies—or by both celebrating and condemning the ways in which media work is organized. Celebratory accounts tend to emphasize the value of entrepreneurship, self-actualization, creativity, and freedom expected of a career in the media, whereas critical perspectives highlight media work’s (self-) exploitative, impermanent, and insecure nature. In fairness, most of the literature on the organization of labor in media industries tends to at least recognize both perspectives at work. Similarly, both our teaching and studying of media industries should always be mindful of both pleasurable and precarious elements that make up the lived experience of media work.

The key challenge moving forward, as I see it, is not so much settling normative debates about the quality of media work or the power imbalances present throughout media industries. We have an opportunity to better prepare students and to articulate a more complex view of media industries by looking at the ways in which media professionals navigate and negotiate the ecosystem in which they are drawn—neither as individuals nor as contracted and salaried employees of small or large companies but as more or less stable collectives moving through the field of work.

Media workers develop all kinds of tactics and strategies to counter the precarity embedded in their work styles. For example, they informally self-organize into groups or teams that tend to move from project to project together for a certain period of time. These so-called semi-permanent work groups (SPWG) benefit both employer and employee, as the first can outsource the hiring and firing of team members to those in charge of specific aspects of the production process (such as team leads in game development, magazine editors, or assistant directors in film and television), whereas employees can secure future employment through their (largely informal) personal networks.² These SPWGs are not without power, as the creative talent of their—generally informal—leaders can be an essential element in the production

process, allowing them to make certain demands. SPWGs are not just teams of individuals: the definition must be extended to include local or global networks of firms and companies, as well as temporary lineups of the interests of consumers and producers in specific user-producer communities (such as in the case of citizen journalism projects) or contexts (as in discussion forums related to television shows or computer games). To this list one could add start-ups – a typical feature in media industries such as advertising agencies and film production houses since at least the 1980s, and increasingly common in the news and mobile games industries.

Beyond specific organizational forms, an additional focus of study should be the ways in which media professionals collectively organize in order to reduce the precarity intrinsic to their careers. An example of this is a *Broodfonds*, or “bread fund,” defined on Wikipedia as a Dutch organization that helps independent entrepreneurs provide sick leave. Professionals who choose to participate can join or form a group of similar people and pay a regular amount each month; if a member falls sick, he or she is paid from the group's account to provide for primary needs. Other examples are organized networks beyond the scope of institutions, such as trade unions, including but not limited to online communities (often through Facebook and LinkedIn) documenting best and worst practices of employers in specific media sectors; professional associations of particular subgroups in media work (such as online journalists and below-the-line workers in film and television); and even social groups through which media workers gather to exchange information (and “war stories”) during and after work. Such social groups include atelier-style work environments, after-hours bars, specific teams at sport clubs and events, and so on.

My point is that beyond individual agency, creative autonomy, and self-realization, the experience of an active, critical yet supportive peer community is a key motivation to work in media industries. Because of precarity, the ongoing fragmentation of media companies, and the project-based nature of much media work, participation in somewhat stable peer communities is anything but guaranteed. It is clear that media professionals find all kinds of ways of reconstituting themselves as collectives, and perhaps it is there that what it means to work in the media is articulated most precisely. That intentional collectives catalyze the nature of media work raises numerous challenges for the researcher: how to find such places and people, how to procure and maintain access, how to develop ways to document this kind of research, and how to validate and report it effectively (to media scholars and students, as well as professionals). It must be clear that to study the way media industries do what they do is an exciting, emerging, and challenging endeavor. Beyond an understandable fixation on individuals and stars in production studies research and teaching, I would advocate a renewed focus on the social, communal, and collaborative aspects that make up much of the lived experience of media work today, because I feel it is there where instances of empowerment and agency for media professionals can most often be found.

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- ² Helen Blair, Nigel Culkin, and Keith Randle, "From London to Los Angeles: A Comparison of Local Labour Market Processes in the US and UK Film Industries," *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 14 (2003): 619–33.

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Blair, Helen, Nigel Culkin, and Keith Randle. "From London to Los Angeles: A Comparison of Local Labour Market Processes in the US and UK Film Industries." *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 14 (2003): 619–33.



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