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Lessons Learned from Researching Creative Careers

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Health Literacy, Mental Models and Love: Lessons Learned from Researching Creative Careers

Mark Deuze

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Throughout my academic career, from the late 1990s onward, I interviewed media professionals about their career, always wanting to know how they made it work.

What makes creativity possible when you are under so much pressure? How can you tell the kind of stories you care about while facing declining public trust? How can you stay true to your craft as constantly changing technologies augment and automate more aspects of the work? In the process, I always reveled in the commitment and dedication of journalists, creatives and creators, developers, crew members, actors and musicians.

At the same time, I struggled to come to terms with the fact that the passion and talent of so many gets rewarded with profound uncertainty and unpredictability at work, unsafe and unjust working conditions, and unstable jobs that consistently fail to provide for their own and their family's basic needs.[1]

I often felt frustrated and powerless when reading so many instances of discrimination, bullying, and abuse directed at newcomers, upcoming talent, and aspiring creatives. It is tough to see the numbers on how many of them at times contemplate suicide because of pressures at work. I felt complicit as my research and teaching benefited from their stories while I did not do much to help.

After all this time, I decided to frame the narratives of people pursuing creative careers exclusively through the lens of health and well-being. In doing so, I came to a series of insights that, I hope, can make more of a difference. This chapter combines key insights about the nature (and culture) of work in the global media industries, the way firms and projects generally get managed, and how professionals make it work—all from the vantage point of how this impacts people's health and well-being. The focus is on six key professional groups: journalists, screen workers, people in creative roles in advertising/ marketing/public relations, (rock and pop) musicians and music workers, content creators, and digital game developers.

In my work, I address the question of what makes artists keep coming back for more (in the course of turning their creativity into a career), even though they know or feel that this may make them sick. There looks to be a *cruel optimism* at play that determines people's attraction to the promise of a creative career while suppressing the risks of such passionate attachment.[2]

One could interpret such behavior in critical terms—seeing all these hardworking creatives merely as cogs in the capitalist machine, willfully buying into the inevitability of precarity while commodifying every single aspect of their lives. Instead, in precarity I find the possibility of *radical hope*: a way for professionals to collectively acknowledge and make explicit their shared exploitation and devastation to clear the ground for imagining a seemingly

impossible future comprised of fair pay, equitable treatment, empathic leadership, and professional accountability.[3]

Embodying the Creative Career

What is remarkable about the way artists work and what the work feels like is that it is not supposed to be "work" at all—and that it is exactly this promise of "not work" that makes creative careers so attractive.[4] At the same time, pretending that the work is not really like work inspires practitioners to underestimate or suppress the business aspects of their industry and undermines their acumen and agency to stand up for their rights, take collective action, and imagine things to be otherwise.[5]

At work in the media, it almost seems like everyone functions in a permanent state of pretense about what it is they are doing, and in the process working more than they conceivably should—more than is properly healthy, and more than they get paid to do.

This is not a new observation or insight. Observers pointed to the precarious and performative nature of the creative career since as far back as the 19th century, and professionals talk about their sometimes beautiful yet often bizarre working circumstances all the time. To people on the outside, it makes little or no sense how things work in creative industries. Just about everyone on the inside knows fully well that they are part of a problematic system that relies on its practitioners to make it work beyond the call of duty without offering much in return. This *personalization of precariousness* causes many to have all but given up expecting things to be different or to be better.

Nevertheless, practitioners genuinely love what they do—so much so that they stay even though working circumstances and workplace behaviors are stressful to the point where they feel physically and

emotionally wretched. Creatives can become so enamored of what they get to do for a living that they find it hard to explain industry practices, mores, and expectations to outsiders—*internalizing* and, before long, *naturalizing* the characteristic way of doing things, whether in a team, on a set, in a studio or a newsroom, or elsewhere across the industry (however dysfunctional, bizarre or stressful it may be).

Media professionals tend to be expected to bring their "whole selves" to the job, to be passionate about the work, and to be able to turn such intimate traits, dispositions and feelings into competencies and practices beneficial to the project, client or employer. They are to do this all the while performing the intense emotional labor necessary to keep clients at bay, managers happy, co-workers at ease, and audiences coming back.

To embody one's labor has strong symbolic meaning, as being "creative" and pursuing it as a career have noble and romantic connotations, befitting a making "art for art's sake" ideal that coincides with loyalty to an industry that supposedly enables such self-realization. As an artist, it seems to be required to buy into the myth of the industry and to believe that what you do matters, and often this belief is the only thing you can hold onto.

Embodying one's labor is a wonderfully engaging way to be at work, as much as it can also make work-related injustices and peculiarities harder to see, take responsibility for and remedy through (individual and collective) action. Moreover, understanding the embodied nature of the creative career makes one appreciate the disenchantment people experience when what they love and have come to rely on for their sense of who they are ends up betraying them.

The paradoxical and embodied nature of media work reminds us that for all the grueling and frustrating aspects of the work, there are also meaningful rewards to be had. Still, this does not explain why so many choose to work in these industries—they keep giving it all they have got to stay in, despite their misgivings, and even though so many fall by the wayside.

Disenchantment and Disillusion

The disillusionment people can feel about their "dream job" in the media is not exactly a skeleton in the industry's closet. Quite the opposite: everybody appreciates that the work is precarious, that much of anyone's triumph or failure depends on connections and other circumstances beyond their control, and that most people will not succeed. It is not uncommon to hear former media professionals talk about their life after work as being "in recovery" in the same breath as romanticizing past projects and peers. People tend to be acutely aware of the price being paid.

For example, when it comes to pluralism in media production and content, everyone in the media grasps the profound problems the industry has with diversity, equity and inclusion. Despite a rise in numbers over the last couple of decades, women still bear the brunt of the industry's perennial problems regarding bullying and harassment.

Practitioners around the world and across all creative professions face persistent racial and gender opportunity and pay gaps.[6] The #MeToo and #BLM hashtags, insofar as these were shared and applied to media work, did not "expose" anything. They amplified a deep knowing about what many expect to happen given the high-pressured intensity of the creative workplace.

The debates about discrimination, representation and psychosocial safety are all tied to health and well-being at work. For the longest time, these issues only seemed to affect those "at the bottom" and the already marginalized. However, research shows that in so many ways, everyone is miserable—even those who succeed.

Those at the top are desperate to stay there and often feel pressured to resort to anything—from stubbornly insisting that their position is solely due to value-neutral meritocratic principles to acting like entitled tyrants. The dark, miserable hell of transgressive behavior, locker room/boy's club/blokey cultures and workplace misconduct that destroy so many lives are certainly cause for concern.

For me, mapping all of this exposes a deep malaise felt and experienced by everyone at some point in their creative career. Something just does not feel right. Normal, well-regulated, emotionally stable and empathic human beings do not do this to each other—not this consistently, not for so long, and not in a way that gets normalized to the extent that it becomes expected.

This is acting out. This is illness made manifest. The rabbit hole of languishing and disenchantment among those making media professionally is deep. This is perhaps unsurprising, because most media workers love what they do, and unrequited love is very hard to move on from. The data on people struggling with poor health and a lack of well-being because of the work—of being unhappy and unfulfilled on the job, the commonness of unhealthy coping behaviors, and the extremely high turnover rate throughout the various industries—is clear: everyone in the pursuit of a creative career struggles.

Most practitioners respond by trying even harder to make it work. Their fear of losing out on opportunities, of being seen as causing

trouble, of missing a paycheck trumps not just effective responses—it is effectively being used by the industry to justify and perpetuate its indifference. This is especially noticeable in the tendency of media companies and firms not to consider their workers' problems as their own and to relegate deep-seated discrimination to issues of the people directly affected. In other words, the victim is made to be responsible for dealing with their abuse.

Working in the media and arts does not always live up to people's aspirations. The chasm between the aspirational labor practitioners put in and what they get in return—in terms of money, recognition, dignity and respect—can be vast. The various injustices perpetuated within groups, teams, companies and firms are not exceptions to the rule. They are the rule, as in: they come to be expected.

The system, despite many people within it having good intentions, does not work to support or reward its talent. Quite the opposite: it is engineered to rapidly replace people, clouding the homogeneity of its workforce with the meritocratic ideal—as if only the "best" or most qualified people end up surviving or thriving as writers, actors and creators.

What little is offered to counteract the dejection and dismay felt by so many spotlights the hyper-individualization of occupational risk: free counseling sessions. Subscriptions to mindfulness apps or a nearby gym. A family day or yoga class at work. Posters in the agency bathroom calling on people to report misconduct to an ombudsperson. The odd newsroom debate, wellness session, an occasional industry panel or symposium on mental health.

Despite the benevolence of such interventions, all of them share the tendency to make everyone's struggles their own. It reminds workers that whatever they may feel or think about their work or their

company is in their heads and, when yoga and fitness are involved, their bodies. Even when well-intentioned and possibly alleviating pain in the short term, such interventions tend to focus exclusively on the *individual* symptoms of sickness and do not address *structural* conditions, attitudes and behaviors.

If creative professionals are keenly aware of the problematic aspects of their work and industry, and research confirms the mechanisms at work that explain how and why practitioners get sick on the job, it is a legitimate question to ask what makes the creative career so special that people keep lining up to get into the field. There used to be a certain hopelessness in the scholarship on precarity, work and the role of professionals in being complicit in their exploitation. Fingers would be pointed to the unavoidability of precarity caused by neoliberal economic malevolence.

However, it is not all doom and gloom. Overall, I have consistently found many individuals, associations, specific teams and studios, and some enlightened managers and directors alike aiming to reverse the sickening trends at work in the media and arts. Consider the fact that almost all the data and research on health and well-being in creative careers comes from practitioners, professional organizations and industry associations rather than from the vaunted halls of academia. This indicates a field of work crying out for help rather than a domain of science pointing out a problem.

There are many practical, moral and affective ways in which practitioners increasingly organize, manage and give meaning to their creative careers despite widespread abuse, inequity and injustice. Practical examples include people cross-subsidizing their work and creating second careers to keep doing what they love or taking on specific projects and gigs with minimal effort (or other ways engaging

in acts of passive resistance) to pay the bills but without engaging wholeheartedly.[7]

Morally hopeful practices involve engaging in community-based work and social entrepreneurship.[8] Professionals are also getting organized (through unions, via artistic or editorial collectives, and in various other networks), often following specific events or in emotional outrage over particular circumstances such as sudden changes in funding and ownership, the treatment of freelance coworkers during and after the pandemic, and scandals regarding toxic workplace cultures.[9]

A Cruel Optimism

A more radically hopeful look at how creative professionals navigate, succumb to, or resist the various exploitative or otherwise hazardous aspects of their work appreciates what makes people invest in careers that they know can lead to so much disenchantment.

The creative career, for many, is truly an object of desire—to the extent that to remain invested, people have to find a way to downplay, deny or repress the risks attached to it. This is what the late cultural critic Lauren Berlant described as a "cruel optimism" of those among us who remain attached to the promise and conditions of what we so desperately want—for example, turning our creativity into a career—despite misgivings or knowledge about its harmful properties. Losing the object of our desire, Berlant suggests, might well be something we cannot endure, as "the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world … Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss."[10]

Berlant offered three options that help to explain why people's attachments are kept alive, regardless of all the disappointments, frustrations, negotiations, and tactical or strategic maneuvering to ward off the feelings and experience of being in a state of constant emergency regarding their creative career. In doing so, especially in the media and arts sector, people stick to a fantasy that everything is great and a belief in the benevolence of the work because the alternative is "nonexistence" or not living at all. In other words, to keep going is not necessarily being complicit in one's exploitation but rather a life-affirming rejection of all that is rotten and evil in the world (and especially in the dehumanized, bureaucratized and algorithmically organized corporate context of contemporary capitalism).

The first way in which practitioners remain cruelly optimistic about their plight relates to the promise of the creative career as a dream not realized but almost realized. This enables working with a sense of looking forward to fulfilling the promise of living a good life—as an autonomous reporter, an inspired creator, a developer and designer recognized and cherished for their talent and craft.

A second strategy, as Berlant articulates, engages the promise of exchange value: showing up first and leaving last, taking on additional responsibilities and never complaining, and having that be what counts to get ahead. In this case, one's choice is simple: "you work yourself to death or coast to nonexistence."[11]

The third road to take is all about the promise of being taught: all you have is the image or fantasy of what the creative career is about, given that you have no control over the conditions of the work or the machinations of industry. Sticking with it is a necessary optimistic delusion that people can hold on to in a rejection of the everydayness of exploitation omnipresent in the management styles and non-

transparent decision-making processes of companies. Funding bodies and firms—as people, including those in power—are simply doing their job.

In short, the cruel optimism inherent in the media and arts reminds us that people do not *have* a creative career—it is a *promise* of one, and people soldier on in the hope that it is just within reach, they are getting enough out of it by hustling to be able to stick with it, and in all of this they keep believing because the alternative is just too much to bear.

While this seems a bit sad, it does not have to be. I am determined to read my analysis of well-being in creative careers in a hopeful manner. Consider, for example, the notion of creativity—arguably the crux of all work and careers in the media and arts. Creativity, while the source of much inspiration and joy, also has a destructive quality as it often leads to the ruin of what came before, privileges individual endeavor over collective achievement, and tends to disregard the broader context of people, places, and policies that facilitated it. Chris Bilton and Ruth Leary, therefore, make a fair point about the need to embrace "uncreativity" in work, as engaging in innovative and valuable practices generally just benefits the business and only in rare cases leads to meaningful recognition for the practitioners involved.[12]

One way of turning *distress* into *eustress* (where the stress response gets channeled into positive and constructive outcomes) is by rethinking what it means to pursue a creative career—by changing one's mental model of the work and thereby contributing to broader cultural change.[13]

This would additionally enable collective resolutions rather than prevent them or render them uselessly individualized. In her interviews with performing artists, actors and musicians, new media

workers and fashion designers, Ana Alacovska tellingly finds that hope for them is a moral practice and a mode of existence that helps these workers "reorient, readjust and retune their self-image, knowledge, and agency as a method of constructing habitable, modest, sane and 'normal' work-lives."[14]

A hopeful perspective in people's agency vis-à-vis precarity and injustice at work is not just grounded in the actions and perspectives of individuals—it carries over to the cultures and structures of organizations. Here I side with Jonathan Lear's powerful notion of *radical hope* in that what is needed for things to change at the level of institutions is a collective recognition of the impossibility of the current situation continuing.[15] As Lear argues, radical hope turning into action that will make a real difference is only possible if we do not end up spending our time and efforts on all sorts of empty ways to keep things the way they are or how they used to be.

And I wish to note that the audience plays a role here, too. Not paying for the products and services offered by the cultural and creative industries, violently acting out displeasure and distrust of what certain professionals do, not respecting the passion and engagement of what goes into making media and doing creative work—none of this helps, and the light of a society's shared narrative diminishes.

There are countless initiatives underway by individuals, practitioner networks, charities and professional associations alike to address and counter the mental health and well-being crisis in media work. Companies begin to take this seriously, policies get drawn up, industry summits and symposia are held, and studies are commissioned. This seems to suggest that a genuine movement is underway to comprehensively address the mental health crisis in the media industry. A closer look at the initiatives and plans on record reveals something else: a labyrinthine maze of people, projects and

parties reporting a wide variety of data and providing all kinds of services, yet nothing much seems to translate into formal industry action or accountability practices.

What Can Be Done

What remains is the question of what can be done. There is something to be said for adopting a holistic vision and approach that would include idiographic subjective well-being (thus respecting everyone's unique conception and requirements for happiness at work) next to a commitment to principles of "good" work including fair pay, a duty of care toward workers, and professional leadership.

Importantly, any recommendation needs to be mindful of its inclusion (or exclusion) of particular people, and its application on different levels of industry practice and analysis—ranging from what we ask individual practitioners to do, what we expect of the many firms and companies large and small, and how the broader social and economic system within which media and art world functions needs to adapt and change.

First, it seems clear that the decades-long trend among governments around the developed world to deregulate the cultural and creative industries must stop. Insofar as policymaking concerning the power of the technology sector, this is already happening. More can be done to protect workers in the context of mergers and acquisitions, as well as their role in global production networks and international co-productions.

Given the technology industries' increasing role in the media—with all the major platforms commissioning original content and becoming major shareholders in film, TV, games and news companies—enforceable legal rules are sorely needed. Protective policies and tax

support also come to mind for freelancers and all other independent professionals, as well as the many small-to-medium-sized enterprises that do the bulk of the creative work in the media. Overall, more attention to well-being and care ethics in the context of workers' rights is needed.

What can change (and is to some extent already changing) in the media are improved contractual arrangements, talent development and employee assistance programs, and other resources allocated to retain and support workers. It must become easier for (independent or employed) practitioners to collectively organize and bargain, for people to demand adequate compensation for their time (rather than being paid for their productivity), for clear protocols to ensure firms and companies adhere to occupational health standards (standards that include physical, psychological as well as emotional parameters). Formally considering worker health and well-being as a key performance indicator would be a step forward in this context.

Second, on the level of the media workplace, options include projects to promote diversity, equity and inclusion in the industry; procedures for changes in the culture of managing media work regarding, for example, combatting toxic and transgressive behaviors; enhancing empathic and nurturing leadership; and providing safe working environments. Importantly, such processes need to have concrete benchmarks and regular structured assessments involving genuine accountability.

If not doing so already, organizations and firms should be investing in organizational "quality of work" support (such as paid leave, childcare and informal care provisions, and sponsored continuous education), and cultivate open learning cultures within their organization. Learning cultures thrive when workers feel safe to express themselves, experiment, and (sometimes) fail.[16]

Beyond management, it is heartening to witness a worldwide rise of all kinds of collective and affective organizing among practitioners to support each other in both formal (through professional associations and unions) and informal (such as via local cooperatives, on-the-ground networks as well as virtual communities) ways. It would be good if such networks started organizing across industry and professional lines, sharing protocols and best practices, and initiating cross-sector research on what works and what doesn't when it comes to making people feel they belong, creating a healthy working environment, and promoting diversity and innovation.

Third, on the individual level, I advocate for the development of work-related literacy regarding mental health and for the cultivation of different mental models about the role and meaning of work in the media. One could argue, especially regarding the remaining stigma around work-related stress and anxiety, that what media work seems to be missing is a certain degree of *mental health literacy*, defined as knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders that aid their recognition, management or prevention.[17]

Mental health literacy consists of:

- knowledge of how to prevent mental disorders,
- recognition of when a disorder is developing,
- knowledge of help-seeking options and treatments (insofar such options are available),
- knowledge of effective self-help strategies, and
- first aid skills to support others affected by mental health problems.[18]

Media and arts organizations tend to take little or no responsibility for the health and well-being of their people. Furthermore, the culture of much of the industry—especially in media with roots in a "tough-

nosed" style of masculinity, relentless focus on productivity and deadlines, marred by an overall lack of diversity, coupled with the normalization of precarious working conditions—is not particularly conducive to the development (and implementation) of mental health literacy.

This kind of literacy, furthermore, would need to be specific to creative careers. It, for example, must include a critical awareness of the fact that the very elements that can contribute to stress-related disorders—such as working in a permanently pressured, volatile, informally organized and precarious environment—also add to the attractiveness of the work.

An additional individualized recommendation concerns people's mental model of media work and the creative career. Mental models are people's beliefs, expectations and understandings of what the work is and should be. A mental model consists of several related propositions that people hold about how things are in the world and how things will be.[19] Not only are such propositions meaning-giving in concrete situations at work (for example, when it comes to job satisfaction, affective commitment, and level of engagement), people's mental models also influence bodily regulation (including whether someone is disposed toward more or less healthy eating, drinking and exercise regimens), decision-making processes and behavior—all of which directly reflect and affect one's well-being at work.[20]

The significance of such a cognitive and emotional belief state for one's functioning as a media worker or arts practitioner is apparent as these are, as noted earlier, *belief-based industries* where one's failure or success partly gets determined by self-belief, belief in one's peers, and belief in the "myth" of the industry as a romantic or noble pursuit of truth, creative expression, and craft.

Unmet expectations, institutional betrayal, and disenchantment about the gap between what practitioners want from the creative career and what the reality of the work is often like can result in feelings of cynicism and depression. Without a moderating or otherwise flexible belief system—next to the social support of peers, a well-resourced organizational context, and an industry fully embracing its ethical duty of care—workers would be prone to unhealthy decision-making and behaviors.

Developing different mental models as part of one's heuristic toolkit influences a wide range of workplace and career navigation tactics and strategies, providing flexibility to both analyze and participate in the inherently unstable nature of media work. Finding out what mental model someone has of their work—for example, what being a journalist or identifying as an actor, designer or creator means—provides important clues to how such a person would choose to conduct herself as a practitioner in those fields, which in turn opens possibilities to introduce and work with other mental models.

About Love: A Final Word

Across all the research I have done across the various media, culture and creative industries, three recurring themes emerge: the prevalence of exploitation of work and workers, widespread toxicity in workplaces, and high levels of health problems. And all this is moderated by a lasting labor-of-love and passionate belief in the virtues of a creative career.

Rather than questioning the love that people feel for what they (sometimes) get paid to do, I want to end by considering people's passion for turning their creativity into a career not as their source of weakness, but as a potential pillar of strength. If love for the work is not the heart of the problem, it is most certainly part of the embodied

nature of one's professional identity in the media and arts. And as such, people's passion for creative careers can contribute to possible solutions.

Rather than criticizing people for compromising their own physical and emotional safety or blasting the industry for gaslighting its workers into believing that their work is not really "work" at all, we need to consider the transformative power of love in the domain of work.[21] This means asking how we can turn love as a vital human energy that brings people to work in a creative career into something that can force or free people to remake themselves, each other, and their industry. While passion is beautiful, it can be a purely personal force that makes individuals powerless to change their circumstances. Genuine change has to start with turning this passion into the kind of love that moves mountains.

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