ELSEVIER

'A very complicated version of freedom': Conditions and experiences of creative labour in three cultural industries

David Hesmondhalgh [a,*], Sarah Baker [b]

[a] *Institute of Communications Studies, 16 Clarendon Place, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, UK*
[b] *School of Humanities, Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Queensland, 4222, Australia*

Abstract

This article investigates the experiences and emotional responses of interviewees to their working conditions in three cultural industries (the television industry, the recording industry and the magazine industry). Via semi-structured interviews with a range of workers, it explores working conditions and experiences in the following areas: pay, working hours and unions; insecurity and uncertainty; socialising, networking and isolation. Our research suggests that experiences are at best highly ambivalent, across all three of the industries we studied. We found evidence of feelings of victimisation and anxiety. Building on previous research, especially that carried out on IT workers, we also discerned complicated responses on the part of workers to the freedom and autonomy characteristic of much cultural work. Pleasure and obligation become blurred in a challenging way. Expectations of sociability and networking in these industries were also the object of some ambivalence, and some workers reported feelings of isolation. These findings suggest that creative industries policy has paid insufficient attention to the experiences of creative workers.
© 2009 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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 or 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 Towse, 1992; Menger, 2006 for valuable summaries of a range of studies). 'Artistic' here means the 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 contract 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 personal investment 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 'consent' (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 and expectations of autonomy could lead to disappointment and disillusion.

Such questions of quality of life and dynamics of 'self-exploitation' have also been investigated by writers such as Andrew Ross (2003) and Ros Gill (2002) in relation to culture-