

The Divergent Worlds of New Media: How Policy Shapes Work in the Creative Economy¹

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Abstract

“New media” workers have joined the creative economy as digital designers, web page designers, and producers of entertainment products. Like many creative commodity producers, their work lies at the intersection of the technical (in this case code writing) and the expressive (through design). It reflects the tensions inherent in this intersection and the conflicts common to many creative workers who produce commodities but whose work also reflects some element of personal expression or authorship. The ways in which these tensions are resolved is central to the formation of new occupational and professional identities. Cultural economy perspectives offer us insights into the subjective experience of the tensions associated with creative work. They become more powerful, however, when combined with an understanding of the policy context in which new media has evolved. Drawing on both cultural economy and policy analysis approaches, I argue that while new media work emerged in conjunction with new technologies and reflects the tensions between technical applications and design, it also is a product of changes in broader regulatory frameworks that have shaped the work-world of new media. The “regulatory difference” has produced considerable variation in the occupational identities of new media workers among advanced economies. In some economies, new media work is evolving in a form that is closer to that of the professional, whereas in the United States it is better described as an entrepreneurial activity in which new media workers sell skills and services in a market.

To make this argument I examine findings from the growing body of international work on new media but focus on the particularities of the United States case. What this evidence indicates is that the character of new media occupations is defined as much by the policy context within which it emerges as by the technology it uses.

One of the most interesting questions to arise out of the cultural economy literature concerns how the identity of creative workers is formed and how it changes in interaction with broader economic and cultural transformations (du Gay, 1996, 1997; McRobbie, 1998, 2002). Many creative workers are in vaguely defined and rapidly changing fields, seemingly making up their careers as they go along. An inquiry into the process of identity formation can tell us how producers of cultural “products” view the environments within which they work and what factors are important to forming their identities in the emerging creative, knowledge-based economy.

“New media” encompasses a key group of creative workers in an economy that has been redefined not only by new technology but also by an increased emphasis on flexible work, that is, work time and skill applications more responsive to changes in market demand. They have joined the creative workforce as digital designers, web page designers, and producers of entertainment products. Like many creative commodity producers, their work lies at the intersection of the technical (in this case code writing) and the expressive (through design). It reflects the tensions inherent in this intersection and the conflicts common to those creative workers who produce commodities but whose work also reflects some element of personal expression or authorship. The ways in which these tensions are resolved is central to the formation of new occupational identities.

Cultural economy perspectives typically give us insights into the subjective experience of the tensions associated with creative work. They become more powerful, however, when combined with an understanding of the policy context in which new media has evolved. Drawing on both cultural economy and policy analysis approaches, I argue that while new media work emerged in conjunction with new technologies and reflects the tensions between technical applications and design, it also is a product of changes in regulatory frameworks that govern employment conditions and the media industries. The “regulatory factor” is producing some notable variations in the occupational identities and work lives of new media workers across advanced economies. In some economies, new media work is evolving along a professional path—with a gradually emerging occupational hierarchy and a set of delimited, recognized, and externally accredited skills that are applied in a relatively stable organizational environment. In the United States, however, new media work is better described as an evolving entrepreneurial field in which new media workers sell skills and services in a media commodity market. Necessary skills are undefined (or defined by the customers) and work is organized via projects with an arms-length relationship to ongoing organizations.

To elaborate on this argument I examine findings from the growing body of international work on new media, particularly in Sweden and Germany. I focus, however, on the particularities of the United States case. The available evidence indicates that new media work is being defined as much by the policy context within which it has emerged as by the technology it uses.

What Do We Know about New Media Work?

Empirical work on the new media workforce was slow to develop. Most of the early research on new media focused on firms, assuming that firm networks were the connective glue that held the emerging Internet-oriented activities together. In the late 1990s, however, as firms faced difficulties in obtaining skilled workers in Internet occupations, more attention began to turn to the workforce (Augustsson & Sandberg, 2004; Batt, Christopherson, Rightor, & Van Jaarsveld, 2001; Brail, 1998; Christopherson, 2002a; Gill, 2002; Indergaard, 2002; Laepple, Thiel, Wixforth, Menze, & Rathjen, 2002; Lash & Wittel, 2002; Michel & Goertz, 1999; Mayer-Ahuja & Wolf, 2004; Pratt, 2000; Ross, 1998; Sandberg, 1998, 2002; Scott, 1998, 2000).¹

These studies have contributed to a growing recognition that, in a creative, knowledge-based economy, the talents and capacities of the workforce are critical. Although chasing a rapidly moving target, they allow us to trace how new media work connects with broader trends in national economies, to see what is distinctive and what is simply “old wine in new bottles.” Because some of the researchers have followed trends in new media work over the course of five years, encompassing the rise and fall of the dot.com speculation era, their work sheds light on the maturing of these relatively new occupations. Beyond its significance for new media work, this research also raises a provocative and broader set of questions about creative work in the new economy, particularly about potential national differences in emerging occupations.

Who and what is included in “new media” is a matter of dispute, although the computer and the Internet are central to most definitions. New media workers

typically define their field as including the convergence of “old” media (film and television) with Internet distribution and computer-driven technologies that combine and manipulate text, sound, and images (this includes “multimedia” products such as CD-ROMs).

Because new media professionals produce numerous types of information, communications, and entertainment products in a wide variety of settings, they cannot be encompassed within any traditionally defined industry. Instead, their activities should be seen as transforming conventional industries, including cultural and entertainment industries.

Three characteristics define new media work and connect it with other, creative commodity production. First, *work is project-based*, that is, organized around production activities with a defined, short-term completion deadline and built of specialized inputs. Second, *the nature of skill*, including the tension between design and utility, is central to new media identity. Finally, like people in many creative occupations, new media workers face *challenges in building a career*. These challenges are a consequence of the project nature of work and the need to constantly upgrade and enhance skills. Skills are not enough, however. A successful new media worker must be “networked” and a font of new ideas.

Despite these common features, there are some considerable differences in the organization of work in countries where new media has emerged as an important occupation. Survey-based studies of the new media workforce have been conducted in Sweden and Germany, as well as in the United States (Augusstson & Sandberg, 2004; Batt et al., 2001; Laepple et al., 2002; Mayer-Ahuja & Wolf, 2004; Sandberg, 2002). While Sweden and Germany differ from one another in the political frameworks governing employment policy and industrial relations, they have some common features (such as employee voice in management decisions) that make for employment conditions significantly different from those in the United States. These policy-based differences affect the process of skill acquisition, the worker’s control over time and tools, and expectations regarding relationships with clients and customers. By comparing the ways in which new media work is evolving in these different national settings we can begin to understand the influence of regulatory and policy frameworks on this new occupation.

New Media as Project-based Production

One thing international analysts of new media work agree on is that the work is project-based. Projects occur within defined time boundaries and engage both abstract, conceptual as well as technical knowledge. They are built of specialized inputs and require complex organizational skills. They are evaluated by the quality and cost of the finished product—an event, photography exhibit, movie, architectural design, conceptual model, or plan.²

The skills and work organization associated with projects have drawn increasing attention in conjunction with the transformation to a knowledge-based economy. In this kind of economy, hierarchical forms of learning and knowledge embedded in organizations and transmitted slowly are being replaced by an intellectual style and practice that is oriented toward speculation, projection, expression, and innovation. New literatures have emerged in fields such as organizational theory and

the sociology of knowledge and work to examine the project and project production as central to knowledge-based economies (De Fillippi & Arthur, 1998; Grabher, 2002; Powell, 1990; Sydow & Windeler, 1998; Windeler & Sydow, 2001). In sum, the skills associated with accomplishing the project are both unusual and critical to the contemporary creative economy.

Project-based production has always been the norm in creative work as evidenced by advertising campaigns, fashion or trade shows, and art exhibits. Projects, however, have become much more common in the so-called new economy because they make economic sense. They meet requirements for flexible responses to rapid changes in markets and for enhanced innovative capacity. Projects are temporary systems that are constituted among individuals rather than firms. In this respect, they differ from other forms of flexible and innovative production, rooted in firm networks, "clusters," and industrial districts. Individuals, their skills, and their personal networks are at the heart of the project. It is "projectness" that links new media work to other creative occupations, such as fashion design, architecture, and graphic and industrial design.

Because project work is organized as a temporary system and because workers move from project to project rather than carrying out a continuing set of tasks, this kind of work organization presents particular problems to the workforce and to clients, customers, and employers.

Project workers, including new media workers, have unclear career paths and must continually invest in acquiring new skills. Recognition and accreditation of these skills is critical to success but is problematic for a lone individual negotiating with clients, customers, or employers. If every project requires a new contract, how is that contract to be negotiated and on what terms? How do project workers find out about new work opportunities and how do their employers find them? Since new media work, like other creative work, involves dimensions of authorship and intellectual property, how does the new media worker maintain an arena for personal expression, including choice of design media and software?

On the employer, client, or customer's side, there is an equivalent set of problems. How does the employer or client know that the new media worker has the requisite and up-to-date skills? How does he or she insure access to skilled workers when they are needed to initiate and complete a project? To what extent is it possible to control the work process in order to insure productivity and timely completion? What are the limits to authorial expression?

The literature on project work has provided partial answers to these practical questions. These partial answers focus on the information networks that all new media workers use to keep current in their field, to foster their creativity, and, in some cases, to find jobs and put together projects. They also point to the spatial dimension of new media work—its propensity to be located almost exclusively in cities despite the space-transcending character of the technology. The transactions-intensive nature of project-based work, the need for creative stimuli to develop new ideas and designs, and access to specialized information and training have worked together to concentrate new media work in urban centers.

What the emerging international comparative research indicates, however, is that national economic, employment, and social welfare institutions still matter in shaping the ways in which employers and workers solve the problems associated

with creative project-based work. Politically constructed policies, such as those supporting particular industrial relations institutions, create capacities for some types of solutions and constrain others. In addition, they create expectations among both employers and workers about what are possible and acceptable solutions.³

As a consequence, researchers have moved beyond network analysis to focus on the “interdependencies between projects and the firms, networks, localities and institutions that feed vital sources of information, legitimization, reputation and trust,” enabling project-based production (Grabher, 2002, p. 206).

We can begin to understand the implications of this more contextualized analysis by looking at what the comparative research tells us about how some key problems facing project-oriented new media workers and their employers are being resolved in different national settings.

Defining Occupations

The question of skill is central to the concept of occupation. The relationship between skill and occupation, and the power that skill confers on the worker are, however, variable and determined by social and political institutions. Looking across new media occupations as they have developed since the mid-1990s, we can see some common features, but different paths, as these skilled occupations have evolved in different national settings.

Virtually every analyst of this field has noted the tensions, vagueness, and flexibility in the early definitions of new media work. Some celebrated this indeterminacy while others noted the difficulty of working in a field in which the exact nature of the skills required to pursue a career or even land a job were unclear. In thinking about pursuing a new media project, clients (project organizers) may include skills in writing and editing, marketing, sales, database management, graphic design, and software development as well as code writing.

Because most new media workers are engaged in producing or marketing commodities, they face the same kinds of tensions as creative workers in other commodity design fields—the tension between creativity and utility or profitability. These tensions are common to new media work throughout the world and are likely to be the source of occupational conflicts and competition. In Germany, however, an “occupational culture” tends to encourage the development of occupational boundaries, even for new occupations. The concept of “beruf” in Germany goes far beyond occupational title to imply status, training, credentials, and professional autonomy. Professions are established and supported by the state and there are strong collective interests in delimiting occupational boundaries and necessary skills. New media work is affected by this professional–occupational orientation although as a new field credentials and boundaries are still evolving. To some extent, these boundaries and definitions are driven by clients who want to place new media workers in an occupational hierarchy with which they feel comfortable (Mayer-Ahuja & Wolf, 2004).

According to Kotamraju (2002), occupational conflicts and competing definitions of occupational skill were part of United States new media from the beginning and have continued as the field has developed. Kotamraju describes, for example, how “computer scientists portrayed web design as a natural extension of user interface

design” (p. 10). They defined design very broadly to include information, graphics, and navigation. By contrast, the graphic design community, which had established professional standards and credentials, tried to establish a distinction between design-art and code. They focused on the centrality of “abstract knowledge—in this case art—that can, in turn, be linked with specific skills” (p. 12).

In the United States, conflict and competition over the content of the occupation, exacerbated by the entrepreneurial orientation of the initial workforce, have kept new media work vaguely defined. For example, early new media professionals in the United States used unconventional names to describe their work—guru, technological evangelist, e-bassador, worker number 1—despite the fact that many of their tasks bore a strong resemblance to older occupations, such as account manager, writer, communications director, project director, and graphic artist. The new titles allowed them to portray themselves as eschewing hierarchy and to magnify the significance of working with new tools. They portrayed themselves as the epitome of the flexible worker. What was less obvious and is more so, now, is that the adoption of these vague new titles in the United States broadened the set of skills associated with new media occupations to include entrepreneurial skills in marketing and project design and management.

One could argue that the vagueness of skill definition is attributable to the field’s recent emergence. In the United States, however, there are other factors that enter into the definition of the new media worker’s job definition and required skills. First among these are the expectations of flexibility and that what is encompassed in the work is defined by the customer or client rather than by the person who defines himself or herself as a new media worker. A second major factor contributing to either an entrepreneurial or professional identity in the workforce is the source of skills and differences in support for skill development.

Sources Of Skills

United States new media workers are not exceptional in their need to invest in continuous learning. The difference between United States new media and that in Sweden and Germany, however, lies in the amount that those who use their skills also invest. For example, despite the fact that over 75% of New York City new media workers have at least a four-year degree, the majority has degrees in fields unrelated to new media work and formal education was not the most important source of new media skills. Only 15.4% of the respondents to the New York City survey indicated that their college or university degree was one of the most important sources for their skills, and only 16% said that additional ad hoc course work was important. By contrast, 87% listed self-teaching; 73% listed learning on-the-job; and 51% ranked friends, peers, and colleagues as the most important source of their new skills (Batt et al., 2001).

Significantly, employer-provided training ranked even lower than college course work, indicating that United States employers do not appear to be investing in training, or if they are, they are not investing in the kind of training that is useful for this population. This finding is particularly striking, given that two-thirds of the sample in this study is working full-time—those who would be most likely to receive employer-provided training.

Sweden has one of the most successful and innovative new media industries in the world, particularly prominent given the small size of the country. Swedish new media workers are similar to those in the United States in bridging technical and design skills but they tend to work in more stable situations for longer periods of time 85% of Swedish new media workers are full-time permanent employees; only 15% are employed on fixed term contracts (Sandberg, 1998, 2002).

Thus, a larger portion of their new media projects is composed in the firm rather than on the market. In the case of Swedish new media workers, most of whom are employed in Stockholm; longer-term relationships with employers and a firm-based rather than individual entrepreneur-based industry provide employers with strong incentives to provide training to their new media employees. As was already noted, 85% of Swedish new media workers are full-time permanent employees (Sandberg, 1998, 2001). Among these employees, nearly half (48%) have between one and three weeks per year specifically devoted to training in new skills and competence building (Sandberg, 1998, 2001).

It also appears that university training is more important to entry into this field in Sweden than it is in the United States. For example, a high proportion of Swedish employees in the field indicate degrees in computing, marketing, business, and design that are directly relevant to new media work. While United States workers focus specifically on technical skills, Swedish new media workers may have better conceptual training concerning the contexts in which new media skills are applied.⁴

This pattern of employer-provided skill acquisition is replicated in Germany where a recent study found that employers feel that they are responsible for insuring that they have a workforce with up-to-date skills (Mayer-Ahuja and Wolf, 2004).

Sustaining a Career in a Project-based Industry

As should already be clear, there are some important patterns common to new media careers across countries—for example, the tension between art and code, an urban orientation, and a need for constant reskilling. There are also some commonalities across countries in career paths. For example, comparative studies indicate a common pattern of gender segmentation. In all the national studies of new media work and workers (and a recent international study), there are strong differences between the abilities of women and men to pursue careers in new media (Batt et al., 2001; Betzelt & Gottschall, 2003; Gill, 2002).

Beyond these commonalities, however, career patterns appear to diverge between an employment-based professional model in Germany and Sweden and a free-agent, entrepreneurial model in the United States.

In the United States, building a career in a project-based industry such as new media is particularly challenging because the project worker must be constantly looking for a job while, at the same time, doing the work for which he or she is being paid. People who work on short-term contracts in a highly competitive market for their services need to always think one step ahead, setting up their next work contract at the same time they are completing work in the present.

In the New York new media industry, despite the rapid growth of online employment and job search, employers and workers still overwhelmingly depend on

personal networks to make employment matches. Online job search sites are used primarily to get information about job conditions and salaries (Batt et al., 2001).

United States new media workers rate friends, networks, colleagues, or coworkers as the most important source for jobs or freelance work. Job postings on the Internet rank second, with institutional sources of job information, such as placement offices, far less important. The significance of personal networks for job search is equally important across demographic and employment status groups. However, women, young people, and minorities appear to use a wider variety of job search strategies while men rely more on personal networks (Batt et al., 2001). This suggests that their personal networks are not as “well-connected” as those of men (Gill, 2003).

The social network basis for job search supports the regional character of new media labor markets, and it may be responsible for inequalities in pay and opportunity in the industry. It provides a measure of security and career advancement for a limited, but very important, segment of the industry. In New York new media, who you know matters almost as much as what you know, and that, in turn, determines what kind of work you get and how predictable it is.

In what is generally considered “a conventional career,” we would assume that a person would experience less job turnover over time, entering more stable, longer-term employment relationships. In the New York new media study, the number of employers per year increases, and the percentage of income derived from the primary job decreases, with experience in the industry. This suggests a tendency for more experienced workers to increase their income via independent contracting. A successful entrepreneurial career path follows a pattern of increased independence from long-term employment.

The process of building a career in new media appears to be more dependent on individual initiative in the United States than in Germany and Sweden. United States new media entrepreneurs must constantly be engaged in networking and self-promotion in order to ensure continuous employment in a series of projects (Batt et al., 2001).

In Sweden and Germany, new media workers follow a path closer to what would be considered a “conventional career.” They experience less job turnover over time, entering more stable, longer-term employment relationships. The studies of their work-related activities suggest that they, too, are dependent on social networks for information on technological advances and emerging markets. They are not, however, as dependent on these networks for sustaining employment and a career, as evidenced by their longer job tenure and attachment to firms.

These two different career paths also have implications for the way the workforce experiences downturns in demand for their services and for their strategies in response to downturns. Because new media workers in Germany have been more likely to be employed by firms, they show a high unemployment rate in the post-dot.com speculation era (Laepfle et al., 2002). Unemployment among United States new media workers has been disguised because they were and are employed as independent contractors. Recent reports indicate that Swedish new media workers facing a loss of individual bargaining power with the “dot.com bust” have turned to collective bargaining mechanisms, that is, unions, to provide them with more job security (Augusstson & Sandberg, 2004).

These variations in career trajectories, expectations, and strategies in the face of reduced employment opportunities suggest that, while they share a globalizing technology, new media workers continue to be influenced by national institutions governing competition, employment, and industrial relations.

The Roots of Variation in New Media

How do we explain the presence of different patterns of work and career development in this postindustrial, new age occupation? One route is through the “varieties of capitalism”—nationally constructed governance systems affecting investment time horizons, employment regulation, and other key attributes of market functioning (Christopherson, 2002b; Hall & Soskice, 2001). The literature on “varieties of capitalism” demonstrates how firms and individuals in Sweden, Germany, and the United States respond to different institutional incentives. Sweden and Germany have very different market governance systems but in both systems labor plays an important role, and capital is more “patient” than in the United States and investment returns horizons are longer. The result of these differences is that in both countries labor has greater voice and control over working conditions. In addition, in both Sweden and Germany, a greater portion of the burden of sustaining a skilled workforce is the responsibility of the firm rather than the individual worker. Policy is directly engaged in constructing these differences through legislation and regulation governing interfirm competition, employment, and collective bargaining (Christopherson, 2002b).

One important difference among these economies lies in how the presence of “taken for granted” bargaining and representation systems affects the workers’ sense of control over work—in the tools and procedures used, for example. A 1999 survey of firm-based new media workers by Freeman and Rodgers showed that 52% thought “it is very important to have a lot of influence on deciding how to work with new equipment or software” but only 28% said that they had “a lot of direct influence in that area (Urey, 2002).

Control over a body of abstract knowledge (jurisdiction) and of technical skills, including determination of which tools and techniques are appropriate, are hallmarks of professional expertise (Leicht & Fennell, 2001). In the absence of jurisdiction and control of tools and techniques, the occupation is degraded and the workforce has less bargaining power. This degradation is, however, useful to some types of employers. It provides them with the flexibility to define jobs and performance according to their own criteria. It places measures of ethical conduct and successful performance with the employer rather than with collective external arbiters such as professional associations.

The role of professional power, including control over a set of skills, can be examined historically as well as across national contexts. And, there are, in fact, interesting comparisons to be made in the United States between the ill-defined and entrepreneurial new media and the more “professional” occupations in related fields such as graphic design and “old” media (television and motion picture production). These occupational groups collectively defined the skills and the credentials to advance in the occupation. They defined themselves as professionals, that is, occupational groups that are self-governing. They developed professional

identities that were defined by particular training, hierarchies of skill, and widely recognized credentials. New media has arguably developed in the way it has in the United States because of the weakened ability to establish collective bargaining and the changing regulation of the labor force to encourage flexibility. This difference is most clearly displayed in the ambivalent relationship new media workers and their employers have with professional organizations

Again, according to Kotamraju (2002, p. 13)

Web design . . . had an ambivalent and largely ineffectual relationship with membership organizations and credentials. . . . Though a few organizations emerged in the mid-1990s, their membership numbers were low and, more important, employers did not take them seriously.

Although there were and are organizations serving the needs of United States new media workers, they serve the needs of entrepreneurs and independent contractors rather than those of a profession. They connect new media entrepreneurs with angels and venture capitalists and provide access to the continuous training and skill upgrading that is necessary to working successfully in new media (Van Jaarsveld, 2003). They are not concerned with defining necessary skills or with assigning credentials. They are not oriented toward serving the collective needs of a profession, as is the case with the Writers Guild, the Society of Graphic Artists, or the Screen Actors Guild, but rather act as membership associations. While some new media workers, particularly those in digital design, may belong to professional organizations, they are a small subgroup within the broader occupational group (Scott, 1998).

A study of New York media workers before the speculative bubble surrounding the market-making function of the Internet burst at the turn of the twenty-first century supports Kotamraju's findings (Batt et al., 2001). New media work in New York as well as in other United States cities is primarily carried out by entrepreneurs rather than by professionals or long-term employees. Since the end of "the bubble" their bargaining power has been drastically reduced. The basic entrepreneurial orientation of the new media workforce, however, has not changed. They are still primarily self-investors and their career goal is success as an independent contractor, not in full-time, long-term employment.

A general argument could also be made that, in the United States, the premium placed on central managerial control, flexibility, and cost cutting, along with the inhibition of professional associations with collective bargaining power has lessened the influence of workers over employment conditions.⁵ This degraded influence has extended to the professions, including medicine and accounting. It is not a surprise, then, that new media workers would have a preference for the entrepreneurial independent contractor role where, at least, one has control over the tools one uses.

In Sweden and Germany, while workers chafe at bureaucratic culture, there is more influence or "voice" concerning conditions of employment, tools, and working conditions. And, employment is not associated with the degradation of skills and expertise to the same degree as in the United States. In economies where workers still have "voice," the independent contractor route may be chosen but

because of the potential it affords for innovation, not primarily because of the loss of control over one's area of expertise in the workplace.

Divergence Via Deregulation

A second source of divergence also lies in the policy arena—in the political decisions taken in response to the challenges of globalization. Global market integration and deregulation have produced some convergence in national practices and institutions governing investment and labor markets but there are still marked differences among them and thus, different incentive structures and outcomes for both workers and employers (Katz & Darbishire, 2000). Differences extend to work across the spectrum of media production (Feigenbaum, 1998; Sydow & Staber, 2002; Windeler & Sydow, 2001).

Rather than reducing differences among market governance systems, deregulation of financial and employment markets and changes in national regulation of competition policy may have actually exacerbated differences among national systems. The impact of a changing regulatory framework is particularly notable in the United States because there have been historically significant differences in the governance of media product markets between the United States and other advanced industrialized countries (Feigenbaum, 1998). Cultural products produced by media firms in the United States have been considered commodities to a much greater extent than in other economies where their significance in terms of cultural expression and civic engagement has been recognized by state support. United States media firms, as commodity producers, define their corporate mission in very similar terms to that of other commodity producers—continually increasing stockholder value, and market control. Other valued attributes of media “products” such as reflection of diverse perspectives or informational accuracy were expressed and protected in regulations, such as those promulgated by the United States Federal Communications Commission. To the extent that those regulations have been negated, the commodity orientation of media products has been increased. This loosening of “civic” regulation and push toward further media commodification has been supported politically on the grounds that it positions United States firms to dominate the global media market.⁶

Analyses of the effects of changing regulatory frameworks have been very effective in describing the resulting concentration and its consequences for programmatic and informational diversity (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; McChesney, 1999). There is, however, almost no analysis of how the work lives of the people in cultural industries have been impacted by the restructuring of these industries, particularly by trends toward concentration.⁷

The little information available indicates that industry concentration decreases opportunities for innovation within the conglomerate. A study of the effects of concentration in the motion picture industry indicated that, with concentration, the formerly “arms-length” relationship between financier/distributors and producers has tightened via long-term or sequential contract provisions in order to control cost and product marketability. Innovation is limited because of its risks to ideas for sequels and the repurposing of products. When they do pop up, new ideas

belong to the company. Given that the company is unlikely to employ even the most skilled worker for a long period, that worker is unlikely to want to contribute his or her original ideas to the company “pot.”

The concentrated media industry firms are building a managerial production environment in which the specific occupational and professional identities of the workforce are gradually broken down. Management has achieved more control over skills and how they are exercised. At the same time, the workforce maintained a proprietary attachment to their skills and to the products they produce, emphasizing returns from “residual payments” rather than from wages (Christopherson, 1996). In other words, identity shifted from that of professional to that of entrepreneur. This transformation of work, expressed in a confrontation between the desire of managers for more control in the workplace and the desire of knowledge workers for ownership of their skills, has encouraged an entrepreneurial course for those who can pursue it.

The entry of new media into this mix arguably accelerated the transformation from professional to entrepreneurial identities because the new workforce had no institutions to create and sustain an occupational identity (through credentials and standards). There was no one to argue with management.

In addition to changes in the competitive environment, the United States has witnessed changes in the broader regulatory framework governing employment. These changes are seen in the increase in “nonstandard” employment (temporary work, independent contracting), which is the fastest growing area of employment in the United States. More significant, however, were changes in the expectations of employees in full-time employment. Americans have always had significantly higher rates of job turnover than their European counterparts. These rates increased by the 1990s along with increased managerial emphasis on personal responsibility for career advancement. Thus, there was a much broader change in how the workforce looked at their careers and the risks they faced in employment. Again, regulatory change underpinned many of these changes in expectations (Stone, 1998, 2001).

Because of regulatory reforms United States employment conditions began to look more and more like those in a project-based, entrepreneurial labor market with risks disproportionately assumed by employees. With the deregulation of the 1980s, United States employment, including that in large firms, became less predictable and secure and contracts more individualized (within an already highly individualized employment system). The boundary between the risks of entrepreneurship and the protections of employment narrowed and collective bargaining solutions, such as those that existed in the old media industries, were put further out of reach.

By comparison, while change was occurring in the less-“flexible” European labor markets, employers continued to assume responsibility for industry sustainability and employees continued to have a voice regarding the production process and the actions of employers that would affect them.

New media work is, thus, not outside the broader regime but a reaction to its increased risks by a group of workers whose skills were in high demand. For a short period in the late 1990s, new media became an outlet for a generation that recognized that so-called standard employment might be as insecure as entrepre-

neurship in the longer term. They gambled on their skills and control over their tools.

In the United States, new media workers expect their work lives and careers to be composed of a series of short-term jobs rather than a long-term stint with one or two employers. The study of New York City new media workers (Batt et al., 2001) indicated that the average length of employment for self-identified “full-time” workers is six months and respondents indicated that they had, on average, 3.2 clients or employers per year. Although they are not sanguine about the risks they face (as evidenced by concern about their ability to obtain jobs and provide health insurance in the future) they look at their prospects in the context of an economy in which all jobs involve a higher degree of risk and in which many pay very low wages. In the United States context, new media employment offers some notable attractions compared to many jobs: high hourly wages; autonomy and the ability to avoid many workplace “hassles”; and the respect that comes from exercising skills that are in high demand. The weight of the risks may increase with maturity and family responsibilities, but new media workers appear to be weighing the uncertainties they know against those that simply happen to people who thought they had security. For these, more autonomous, workers, free agency does not appear to be tied up with low morale or lack of enthusiasm for their work but expresses a clear-eyed vision of what they can expect from an employer.

Conclusion: What do These Trends Mean for Cultural Workers?

The conditions under which new media work emerged in the 1990s are not exceptional to this occupational group. They can, then, give us some clues as to what the broader workforce, who define their work in terms of innovation and creativity, face as they grow in numbers and significance.

Despite the, now quite readily acknowledged, tendency of new media workers to concentrate in urban centers, and some strong commonalities in the products and services they produce, there are important differences among new media workers in different societies. These differences can be traced to the degree and nature of risks they face under different market governance and industrial relations regimes and the role the city and city dwelling play in meeting those risks. A comparative perspective on new media indicates that work in the “creative economy” is influenced by broader policies governing employment and industrial relations.

The preferred mode through which new media work in the United States is carried out is by entrepreneurial independent contractors. Even though the free-agent identity is difficult to sustain in the post-dot.com speculation world, it remains an ideal because the alternatives, both with respect to creative expression and career sustainability, are not preferable.

In Sweden and Germany, by contrast, new media employees tend to be full-time employees and to work under longer-term employment contracts even when they are working on projects. While these more “rigid” employment regimes may be changing, they are still powerful enough to exercise an influence on norms and behaviors, even in an industry with low rates of unionization. New media work is, thus, not completely new but retains strong connections to the dominant national

employment system in which it develops. These differences have implications for how much control creative workers have over their choice of work methods and decisions regarding standards of performance. They also affect the risks faced by both workers and their employers in carrying out production and how the costs of sustaining a project-based industry are distributed.

In the United States, where an entrepreneurial model prevails, evidence indicates that the costs of sustaining a project-based industry are primarily absorbed by the workforce. They must invest in continuous skill upgrading and in the networking that constitutes the job-matching process. What is less recognized are the problems that employers confront. In the absence of institutions that provide the infrastructure for meeting the challenges of skill development and career sustainability, as the media unions and guilds did for motion pictures, employers face high costs and significant uncertainties (Amman, 2002). They must scramble to find the skilled workers they need for a project and then face the problem of establishing a short-term worker's credentials. They then face the consequences of employing a workforce whose members are always looking to the next assignment.

The lack of trust and commitment with which United States new media and other entrepreneurial creative workers approach the labor market contrasts sharply with the trust-based relationships that are held to be the key to production in flexible industries. Workers in an environment without either safeguards or a safety net, cannot, for example, be expected to exhibit loyalty. The dilemma of distrust becomes more widespread as a new generation of workers enters the "creative economy" and as more employers organize work around projects.

Finally, there are implications for the definition and scope of creativity. A skilled workforce without strong external collective institutions to define professional standards and evaluate performance leaves a vacuum into which managerial standards can move. And, in industries where customers make the sole determination of what constitutes quality or creativity, that standard almost always favors commodity value rather than innovation. In an economy made up of entrepreneurs, the creative worker may find that there is little scope for creative work.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Margaret Wyszomirski, Joachim Thiel, Danielle Van Jaarsveld, and Ned Rightor for generous comments and advice on earlier drafts of this paper.
- 2 Although they differ from one another methodologically and with respect to some of their central questions, these studies are comparable in many respects. They examine new media work and its workforce in major urban centers and recognize the centrality of project-based work to new media production. As a consequence, they help illuminate differences in how new media firms and workers confront the challenges of skill development, and career and industry sustainability.
- 3 Art enters into the concept of the project in some interesting and provocative ways. While art is inherently about the production of projects, those projects may question the concept of time inherent in projection and speculation by entertaining and manifesting ideas of the ephemeral and the present.
- 4 This understanding of the role of structuring institutions in creative work draws on Giddens (1984) as applied in Sydow and Staber (2002) and Staber and Sydow (2002).
- 5 This is possibly due to the enhanced ability of European youth to combine part-time work with formal education and training. State financing of higher education, support for offsite training provided for in collective bargaining agreements, and mandated limits on work hours would all contribute to opportunities to learn from others rather than to teach oneself. A European study of how youth (15–29 years of age) are responding to the challenges of work that is increasingly knowledge-based

indicates that in 1997, 68% of German youth chose to combine part-time work and education and training (European Commission, 1997).

- 6 The popularity of the “Dilbert” cartoon attests to the perception of United States workers that the conduct of work is increasingly out of the employee’s control.
- 7 United States trade policy is the most obvious manifestation of the drive to define all media products as pure commodities in order to bring them under conventional trade regulation.
- 8 But see Rantisi, 2002.

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