

Individualisation, Collectivism and the Management of Risk in a Freelance Labour Market: The Case of the UK Television Industry

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ABSTRACT

Successive legislation throughout the 1980s and 90s, designed to reduce regulation and introduce competition to the UK television industry, has resulted in casualisation of the employment relationship and a largely 'freelance', project-based labour market for television production workers. Research suggests that a web of informal networks, word-of-mouth recruitment and repeated contracting among groups of individuals underpins freelance employment in television. A complex relationship exists therefore between individualised competition, collaboration and co-operation. Thus while individualisation is pervasive in the television industry, there is also evidence of workers acting collectively to defend their interests and to manage the risks associated with freelance employment. The paper draws on qualitative data from an ESRC funded project to investigate the role of networks in the representation of workers interests. Data from a series of interviews with trade union officials, industry representatives and television production workers are used to explore the range of mechanisms that freelance workers employ to defend and pursue their interests. A picture emerges of individuals and organisations reacting to counterbalance the individualising effects of casualisation. This is evident in the response of existing institutions such as trade unions and the emergence of new forms of collective organisation. Individual workers pick and choose between these collective resources, constructing a network of associations that best represent their personal interests. From this perspective distinctions between individualism and collectivism become less important and attention is focused on the interplay between the two in individual risk management strategies.

INTRODUCTION

The central concern of this paper is the structure and operation of networks in the United Kingdom (UK) television industry. Of particular interest is the potential for networks to act collectively in representing and defending the interests of workers in a freelance labour market. New forms of non-standard employment such as short-term contracts, freelance working and self-employment are argued to have undermined traditional labour market institutions leading to a '*withering of trade union representation*' (Millward and Bryson 2000) and the spread of individualised contracts and payment systems (Brown et al 2000). In the face of these changes the workforce is portrayed as largely acquiescent, conditioned by an '*individualistic and self-centred culture of contentment that sees no virtue in forms of collective association and solidarity*' (Taylor 2001). Audio-visual labour markets are cited by a number of commentators as an exemplar of this alleged paradigm shift towards individualised employment relationships (Christopherson and Storper 1989; Leadbetter and Oakley 1999; Castells 2000; Gill 2002).

Regulatory and technological change has resulted in rapid and widespread restructuring in the UK television industry. Prior to the introduction of Channel Four in 1982 television programmes were made and broadcast by two large, vertically integrated organisations, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Independent Television (ITV). From the early 1980s onwards legislation designed to introduce competition by separating production from broadcasting resulted in a proliferation of small independent production companies, and facilities companies offering technical and post-production services. At the same time technological advances in cable and satellite technology led to 'channel proliferation' opening the way for new broadcasters such as Sky to enter the market place. Further legislation in the 1990s reinforced these industrial structures by imposing quotas on broadcasters requiring them to purchase 25% of their programming from independent producers. From 1991 onwards the 'producer choice' initiative at the BBC allowed individual producers to buy in services such as editing and freelance labour from outside the corporation. Reduced in-house production together with competition from outside suppliers led to downward pressure on costs and resulted in large-scale redundancies at the BBC and ITV. These permanent jobs have been replaced to a large extent by short-term employment, with workers typically hired on a fixed-term basis for the duration of a project. Skillset, the Skills Sector Training Council organisation for the audio visual industries estimate that in 2003 around a third of the workforce were working on a freelance basis. However, the percentage was considerably higher in some occupational groups, notably hair and make-up where 90% were estimated to be freelancers, producing 49% and runners (an entry level occupation) 64% (Skillset 2004).

Alongside the shift to a casualised labour market, media unions, traditionally strong in the television sector, have been marginalised by deregulation and the fragmentation of employment. Union recognition and membership density have been substantially eroded while workers have been subjected to insecurity and downward pressure on

terms and conditions (Sparks 1989; Tunstall 1993; Sparks 1994; Ursell 1998; McKinaly and Quinn 1999). Within this context networks based on contacts and reputation have assumed increased importance in the allocation of work as individuals have sought to attenuate the insecurity of fragmented, project-based employment (Dex, Willis et al. 2000; Starkey, Barnatt et al. 2000; Ursell 2000; Paterson 2001). Despite tentative suggestions that these informal networks may provide a basis for the renewal or reconstitution of collective organisation and representation (Saundry and Nolan 1998; Heery, Conley et al. 2001), research focusing on the television industry has tended to portray individual participation in networks as functional and self-seeking.

A recent concern with the geography of media production has switched attention from the individual to the firm. Inter-firm networks within an ‘industrial cluster’, where a number of companies supplying services to the audio-visual industry are established in close proximity, are seen to enhance the flow of information between firms and individuals, encourage collective learning and create a sense of community (Nachum and Keeble 1999; Scott 2004). Thus while firms are fundamentally in competition with each other, the collaborative nature of television production means that a degree of trust and co-operation between firms and individuals is essential. Indeed relationships based on trust and reciprocity provide the mechanism by which sub-contracting of freelance labour works within a locality (Cook, Pandit et al. 2001). From this perspective freelance employment is seen as a mixture of individualised competition, collaboration and co-operation with networks playing a complex role in balancing these contradictory elements.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Despite a growing body of literature on the rise of the ‘network society’ (Castells 2000) links between the growth of networks, changing organisational structures and the employment relationship have been under-theorised (Rubery, Earnshaw et al. 2002). As Kallinikos (2003) points out networks tend to be conceptualised within a managerialist framework thus underplaying their wider significance. From this perspective the decline of measurable indicies of collective organisation, such as trade union membership, is regularly produced as evidence of a shift towards the individualisation of labour. Hyman (1997) argues, however, that the interplay between individual aspirations and collective action is a central feature of the employment relationship. Individualised work practices can reinforce the collective identity of workers experiencing work intensification and pay inequality (Deery and Walsh 1997; Saundry 2001), while there is a need to recognise the interdependence and mutuality between individual interest, identity, collective interests, action and organisation (Glucksmann 2000).

Thus it can be argued that rather than acting as a conduit to further individualisation of the employment relationship, informal networks may represent a mechanism for the collective representation of worker’s interests and aspirations. A theoretical framework is needed to conceptualise the complex and often contradictory role of networks in the UK television industry. We begin by setting out our framework to conceptualise the structure, function and effects of networks in the sector.

The concept of a social network to describe a set of relationships important to the understanding of individual behaviour can be traced back to the work of Barnes (1954) and his study of parishioners in Bremnes, Norway. For Barnes the importance of the network was that it explained social action beyond that governed by structural concepts such as geographic location or occupation (Clyde-Mitchell 1969). Barnes later developed the concept to distinguish between types of network according to their form and structure. This notion of form and structure was built on by Bott (1955) in her seminal study of conjugal roles in London families. Bott drew a distinction between membership of a 'closed' or 'open' network to explain differing behaviour among couples in her study. Members of a tight-knit or closed network were likely to behave according to the wishes and expectations of the group while members of an open network, that is a network in which one's acquaintances do not know each other, could risk nonconformist behaviour from time to time.

From its roots in social anthropology the concept of networks and the ideas suggested by Barnes and Bott have been developed and applied across numerous disciplines within the social sciences. The ideas were applied to labour markets in the 1970s by the American sociologist Granovetter. In his work on the 'strength of weak ties' Granovetter (1973) suggests that a large, open network of 'weak ties' that is ties between the individual and others who do not know each other, especially ties that form 'bridges' between an individual and other networks, are '*indispensable to individual's opportunities and to their integration into communities*' (1973:1378). Dense networks of individuals who are strongly tied to each other, on the other hand, will result in the formation of cliques and lead to fragmentation. Although the influence of Barnes and Bott is apparent, the strength of weak ties was groundbreaking because it suggested for the first time that informal connections outside of one's immediate family could be more useful in gaining employment and advancing one's career than a tight-knit family circle (Portes 1998). Building on Granovetter's work Burt (1992) reiterates the strength of weak ties argument, expanding the concept to include 'structural holes' or gaps in one's network of ties that may be exploited in terms of brokering information that flows between otherwise unconnected networks. Thus a large, open network may allow an individual to control the flow of information and gain competitive advantage in the labour market.

On the one hand then networks and the accumulation of 'weak ties' can be seen as important for individuals in gaining access to employment and advancement opportunities. At one level this seems entirely consistent with the individualization thesis and from this perspective networks of contacts or 'ties' are simply tools that individuals use to improve their lot in the labour market. However, as Portes (1998) points out one explanation for the current popularity of 'network research' is that it calls attention to ways in which non-monetary forms of capital can be important sources of power and influence. Membership of networks is generally associated with the accumulation of *social capital*, indeed social capital has been defined as the 'value of connections' (Borgatti and Foster 2003). However, social capital as an *individual* resource used purely to gain competitive advantage is a relatively modern conception. A second and older strand in the social capital debate is mutuality and trust. The idea of a social contract entered into by individuals to maintain order in civil society was popular among 18th century philosophers and such a contract entailing reciprocity and mutual obligation forms the basis of many modern conceptions of social capital (Woolcock 1998). Indeed Woolcock suggests that social

capital is simply *'norms and networks that facilitate collective action'* (1998:155). While the 'strength of weak ties' approach may provide a useful point of departure for examining the instrumental, self-seeking aspects of networks in the television industry, the social capital debate would appear to offer a better understanding of the collective nature of networks.

The role of mutuality and trust is evident in the work of Coleman (1988) who argues that social capital consists of trust but also obligations and expectations. Trust within a network is based on an expectation that members will honour obligations and behave according to the social norms of the group. The group has the ability to impose sanctions on deviant members. Coleman emphasises the need for dense networks of strong ties if obligations are to be honoured and social norms enforced. From this perspective networks are viewed as having a degree of mutuality and trust that suggests collective interests and interdependence are not entirely neglected. Political scientist Robert Putnam has made similar claims about the collective nature of social capital (Putnam 2000). Putnam accords the changing nature of work only a minor role in his analysis of the decline of social capital in America, concluding that a decline in trade union membership, stagnation in membership of professional associations and a rise in contingent employment have resulted in increased isolation among workers. However, in suggesting a causal relationship between associational membership and social capital, Putnam draws a distinction between 'bridging capital' that is links with people 'unlike me' and 'bonding capital' or links with people who are 'like me'. There are parallels here with Granovetter's work on the strength of weak ties. Key to Putnam's analysis is the different type of benefits accruing to each form of social capital. Bonding capital based on homogenous populations sharing, for example, common ethnic, religious or class ties can provide support and encourage niche economies. However, over time the factors that encourage the generation of bonding capital, such as trust and solidarity may restrict the entrepreneurial activities of individuals who must then seek associations within wider society, in other words they must form bridging capital (Leonard 2004). Putnam argues that while bonding capital is good for 'getting by' bridging capital is necessary for 'getting ahead' (Putnam, 2000 p 23). Inherent in Putnam's concept of bridging and bonding capital are notions of inclusion and exclusion. The dense networks that promote bonding capital are intrinsically exclusive, while the more open networks associated with bridging capital are essentially inclusive. The importance of mutuality and reciprocity in these definitions of social capital suggests that networks may give rise to a collectivist, even solidaristic, ethos. One might go even further and, like Woolcock (1998), argue that networks are inherently collective mechanisms. In a fairly standard explanation of networks, Powell (2000) points out that, "A basic assumption of network relationships is that one party is dependent on resources controlled by another, and that there are gains to be had by the pooling of resources. In essence, the parties to a network agree to forgo the right to pursue their own interests at the expense of others" (Powell, 2000:272).

While most analysis of networks and social capital concentrate on the advantages accruing to individuals and networks, social capital may also be negative with these same networks used to exclude outsiders and place restrictions on individual freedoms (Portes 1998). From an economic perspective, exchange within networks may not be based on economic rationality. Hence bonds between members of a network may lead, for example, to work being allocated to an individual who is a relative or

personal friend regardless of their competence to do the job. Another problem with dense networks is that the strong ties that lead to mutuality and trust *within* a network at the same time may inhibit exchange *between* networks. Tight-knit networks may thus be slow to adapt and unaware of new ideas (Fukuyama 1997). At the same time the importance of social norms and the reproduction of these norms through threat of sanction can stifle creativity and limit innovation (Coleman, 1988). Networks can be associated, therefore, with nepotism, favouritism, patronage, a lack of transparency and opposition to change (Fukuyama, 1997). In addition, Portes (1998) suggests that where the solidarity of a network is grounded in a common experience of adversity membership will have the effect of exerting downward pressure on group norms. Those individuals overcoming adversity will undermine group cohesion because they no longer share a common experience. The more ambitious will therefore escape from the norms that keep the downtrodden group in its place.

To date research into employment in post-industrial societies has tended to present an oversimplified view of networks as an assemblage of individual contacts through which social capital can be created. The discussion above suggests that networks have a variety of structures, functions and consequences both beneficial and detrimental to the individual or to the network as a whole. Indeed it seems that any discussion of networks and social capital can be cut many ways. Networks can provide access to scarce resources, encourage reciprocity and trust and moderate deviant behaviour. On the other hand they may be exclusive and restrict individual freedom. They can represent an expression of self-seeking individualism but while the competition inherent in networks cannot be denied this is overlaid by the recognition that individual action alone is insufficient – not only in terms of the need for collective action to achieve individual goals but also for a greater sense of belonging and community. Even if we accept the premise that we have seen the rise of a ‘network society’ (Castells, 2000) the suggestion that it is associated with the demise of collectivism and collective institutions appears over-simplistic.

What is clear from the discussion above is that ‘network’ is not a generic term. Three main strands can be identified in the literature. Firstly there is the structure of networks. The importance of structure is apparent in the early work of Barnes and Bott. Their dichotomy of ‘open’ and ‘closed’ to describe the structure of a network is a recurrent theme in studies of social capital and networks, referred to *inter alia* as ‘embedded and weak ties’ (Granovetter (1973) networks ‘with and without closure’ (Coleman, 1988) ‘embedded and autonomous’ networks (Woolcock (1998). A second strand is the association between structure and function or purpose. Studies suggest that the function of open networks most closely resembles the self-seeking individualism implicit in accounts of post-industrial employment. Building individual ties in an open network is useful for ‘getting ahead’ (Putnam (2000), maximising the effectiveness of information you receive (Burt 1997) and increasing mobility opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). Closed networks, on the other hand, are associated with collective functions such as mutuality, trust and regulating deviant behaviour. Belonging to a closed network can provide the individual with support necessary for ‘getting by’ (Putnam, 2000) and ensure that obligations are honoured (Coleman, 1988). A third strand to the literature is the consequence or effect of networks, both positive and negative. The consequences of networks has received less attention in the literature than their functions and structures, indeed it is often glossed over and portrayed as exclusively positive. Yet networks can represent a

means of stratification, exclusion and sanction as well as a mechanism promoting individual competition. Table 1 below sets out our framework for conceptualising networks in the UK television industry.

Table 1 Framework for Conceptualising Networks in the UK Television Industry

Structure	Function	Consequences
<p>Open – Members do not all know each other Inclusive -Heterogeneous membership</p>	<p>Getting ahead Raising individual profile Improving employment opportunities Enhancing individual reputation</p>	<p>Competition Individualism Flow of information Creativity – new ideas</p>
<p>Closed</p>		
<p>Members know each other Exclusive – homogeneous membership</p>	<p>Support Maintaining collective norms Reciprocity Defining Competence</p>	<p>Sense of belonging Collective ethos Trust Exclusion Stratification Formation of cliques Obligations Sanctions Stagnation Downward levelling of norms</p>

RESEARCH METHODS

Data for the project come from qualitative interviews with a sample of 7 key informants and around 35 freelancers. Key informants included trade union officials, representatives from interest groups such as Women in Film and Television and internet-based networks. The aim was to focus on the day-to-day experiences of freelancers. None of the sample were employers themselves and none owned their own production company. The sample was located through professional associations and published directories of freelancers using ‘purposive’ sampling principles (De Vaus 2002). Individuals were approached from occupational groups known to include a high proportion of freelancers. Attempts were made to recruit individuals from all age groups by targeting lower level occupations such as runner and researcher as well as producers, directors and technical occupations. While we make no claim that the sample accurately represents the freelance workforce, the sample is based on cases that we judge to be typical of the great majority of freelancers. Respondents continued to be added to the sample until it was felt that we had reached ‘theoretical saturation’ (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and no additional interviews were necessary to understand the nature of networks. With the exception of the key workers respondents were guaranteed anonymity. For many respondents this was important because the freelance community is small and individuals were keen that

stories of sometimes appalling conditions of employment should not be attributable to them.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out between June 2004 and December 2004. Initially it was hoped to carry out face-to-face interviews, but the unpredictable nature of freelance work made these difficult to arrange in advance and a number of respondents preferred to be interviewed by telephone as this could be rescheduled at short notice. Interviews were seen as the most useful tool to gather data on the complex relationships that are a regular feature of freelance employment. Interviews place an emphasis on the interviewees' own perspective and allow sufficient flexibility for adjustments to the schedule should new issues emerge in the course of the interview (Bryman 2001). This was important as the focus was on understanding individual experiences, perceptions and interpretations of the way in which networks operate. Interviews were transcribed and imported into Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software package for coding and analysis.

INITIAL FINDINGS

As the literature suggests networks are not generic mechanisms and within our sample respondents tapped into a variety of networks at different times to attain specific goals. The type of network mentioned most frequently was the 'address book' or contact details of individuals who may be useful in the search for employment. The address book represents an open network in the sense that the membership is heterogeneous and members do not necessarily know each other. Ties between an individual and members of their 'address book' represent a mixture of strong and weak ties in the sense that some members of the address book know each other and so information, for example about forthcoming projects, flows between them. Others will know only the holder of the address book but may provide a link to other networks. Respondents reported instances where previously unknown employers had contacted them with offers of work because of a recommendation from a member of their address book. The primary function of the address book therefore is to gain individual advantage in the labour market. The chairman of Women in Film and Television summed up the importance of the address book:

'Its all down to your address book ... your address book is really a more important focus than a networking organisation. Its knowing the right people and being in the right place and being part of the circle' Chairman, Women in Film and Television

Among respondents there was little sense that this type of network provided any stable form of social cohesion or solidarity. It was essentially functional, and building up one's 'address book' was seen by many respondents as crucial in building a career in a fragmented, insecure freelance labour market. In one sense then the 'address book' exemplifies the type of open network identified by Granovetter (1973) and Putnam (2000), where a heterogeneous membership seek to accumulate 'bridging' capital or weak ties that will benefit them individually. However, respondents also drew attention to ways in which the 'address book' was embedded in the wider context of the industry. The presence of some strong ties, or individuals who communicate with each other, among the 'address book' prevented a number of respondents from drawing attention to undesirable working practices for fear of

tarnishing their reputation and so jeopardising future employment prospects. Thus, while the address book is essentially an open network, there was evidence of certain individuals having sufficient power to implement the type of sanctions more generally associated with closed networks.

Secondly, among our sample there was evidence of occupational networks. Broadly speaking, these operate over two dimensions. There are horizontal networks based on common skills and jobs. These are formed in a number of ways: having trained together, for example at the BBC; having worked together on specific projects, for certain companies or on certain locations. Crucially, it would seem that these are often institutionally embedded. For example guilds and professional associations play an important role. They can provide a social focal point as well as a common sense of professional status and knowledge. Respondents in our sample referred to the role of occupational networks in promoting collective learning and maintaining professional standards. Close relationships with manufacturers meant that training in the use of new technology was readily available. Members were often involved in training themselves and several older respondents expressed a desire to pass on the professional practices and skills of their occupation to a new generation. This was seen as important because increased casualisation and cost-cutting had reduced training budgets in the sector and led to a lowering of the standards expected by broadcasters.

Members of occupational networks are tied together by common experiences and by a specific discourse rooted in the nature of the job they perform and their expertise. In essence these are closed networks based on a homogeneous membership. They provide members with a sense of identity and undeniably these networks do have a social and a collective component, which has the potential to mobilise action around collective concerns. The very process of exchanging information and stories about different jobs and different companies, rates of pay etc provides the focal point for such mobilization. A freelance vision mixer, and active member of the Guild of Vision Mixers summed up why she thought this was important:

‘we don’t want to make our members stick to an average rate but if we can offer them guidelines and say well this is what we consider the minimum daily rate and try and encourage our members to not except work below that rate it does help to keep rates standard ‘

Freelance member of the Guild of Vision Mixers

The opinion expressed by this freelance vision mixer is typical of those stated by members of the sample who belonged to professional guilds and associations. There is some evidence of these networks being instrumental in concerted collective action over terms and conditions of employment with members taking co-ordinated action to defend their interests, particularly concerning pay rates across the industry. There is an important proviso to this – it did appear that this type of network was more important and had a greater sense of collectivity within crafts and areas of work with a distinct identity.

Another second form of network with an occupational dimension, is the ‘project’ network. In most cases project networks are based on long-standing teams of workers drawn together for the duration of a project. Typically an individual is

recruited to deal with, for example, costumes or cameras on a production and he/she will then recruit his/her own team of workers. The reputation of the producer and the head of each occupational group involved in the project are dependent on the performance of his/her team. Other project networks operate on a smaller scale. Initial findings suggest that long-term relationships have developed between camera and sound technicians especially in the context of local and national news programmes where camera operators are typically required to supply their own sound technician. Hence closely-knit teams of workers develop who have strong social and professional relationships and are often based within a geographic locality.

Project networks have an essentially closed structure. Members know each other and groups evolve over time as workers progress their careers and new members are sought, but once again this process is largely conducted through complimentary and overlapping informal networks. Project networks are a unique mix of collectivity and hierarchy – by definition there is a chain of authority, however, there is also a strong sense of solidarity due to the degree of interdependence within the network. Respondents who belonged to this type of network pointed to examples of reciprocity. Often this involved recommending a worker for a project they were unable to be involved with themselves, or working at short notice to help out a friend. Those respondents who didn't have ties with project-based networks frequently viewed them as impenetrable and based on favouritism and patronage.

There is some evidence that project networks may be a mechanism for collective action. Importantly, on a large-scale project the reputation of a Department Head or producer can provide the bargaining power that many freelance workers lack. Moreover the dependence of the team on one another for future work provides a sense of cohesion crucial if collective action is to be mobilized. If a 'Head' decides to stop work in protest at conditions such as working hours, then there is little chance of the rest of his/her team continuing to work as their future employment is dependent on the 'Head' not the production company. These networks therefore exhibit an interesting mix of solidaristic and hierarchical imperatives. However, for most respondents employed on smaller-scale projects, the threat of sanctions loomed large. It was widely believed among our sample that a reputation for militancy and activism would jeopardise future employment prospects. Hence many respondents preferred to complete a project despite poor conditions and to refuse future offers of work from that employer. One producer, at the beginning of his freelance career explained how he was expected to continue working during a one hour stoppage organised by the union and felt that it would have been detrimental to his future employment to if he did not:

'....at Yorkshire there was going to be an hour stoppage and the production manager said what are we going to do about this stoppage, how are we going to get round it? There wasn't even a question of whether I was a member or not, or whether I was going to be walking out with everyone else. It was deemed to be detrimental to your job to be a union member' **Freelance Producer**

Our sample suggests that the networks described above are populated by workers with reputation, track record, and a clear professional or craft

identity. These are people already embedded within the social and reputational structures of the industry. In some respects the Darwinian nature of the freelance labour market in audio-visual industries means that workers who survive are those that are already embedded in networks. Just as forty years ago entrance into broadcasting was dependent on getting a job at the BBC, today, for a significant swathe of aspirant audio-visual workers a future career is dependent on participation in, and membership of, industry networks. Respondents within our sample claimed that for workers at the beginning of their careers, for those in jobs where occupational networks are weak, for example among researchers, or so strong as to be impenetrable, life as a freelance is one of isolation. In response to this a number of disparate and inclusive networks have emerged. These are primarily internet-based and through discussion forums members are able to share information, contacts, ideas and advice. Information about, for example, rates of pay and working conditions are compared and experiences of potential employers swapped. The structure of these networks is open, membership is heterogeneous, all occupational and demographic groups within the industry are represented and ties between members are weak, in the sense that members do not all know each other

Initial research suggests that these open, inclusive networks serve two functions. Firstly, many offer an employment matching service for freelance workers and employers. In this respect these networks are consistent with the functions of open networks proposed by Granovetter and Putnam. Members use them to enhance their employment prospects and to get ahead in the industry. A second function of these groups is less consistent with conventional distinctions between open and closed networks. Sharing information about employers and pay rates suggests a collective element. A number of respondents commented that although they were in competition with other freelance workers exchanging information about pay was desirable in order to maintain rates across the industry and prevent employers offering unacceptably low wages. Moreover, these networks were seen by some respondents as creating a sense of community and source of support among a fragmented workforce. Respondents made use of these networks to seek advice on technical issues, legal matters relating to freelance employment, pay rates and the past behaviour of potential employers. Younger workers seeking to raise their profile in the industry dominated membership of these forums. However, there was a sense that the function of these networks went beyond this, and to an extent replaced the support and camaraderie of the traditional workplace. This was summed up by a younger researcher talking about the most widely used internet forum 'productionbase'

'I think productionbase is really important because it not only is a form of finding work but the discussion forum on there is a very good place to ask questions and find things out ...it kind of gives you a sense that you are part of an industry' **30 year old researcher**

Although their structure is that of an open network, internet-based networks also fulfilled some of the positive functions of a closed network. However,

internet forums were perceived among our sample to be free of the negative aspects of closed networks referred to by commentators such as Coleman (1988). Using an electronic alias could mitigate the threat of sanctions. However, many respondents seemed happy to discuss poor employment practices in the context of this open network, despite their reluctance to do so within a closed project network. It would seem that there may be potential for these open networks to mobilize ideas and for members to co-ordinate activity, even if it is difficult to see members stepping beyond the virtual world. A sense of collectivity is evident in the desire to prevent pay rates falling across the industry. Mutuality and reciprocity exist in the exchange of information, yet individuals remain in competition for scarce jobs. This new style of network would appear to capture well the mixture of cooperation and competition inherent in a freelance labour market.

At a more substantive level we found some tentative evidence of workers using networks as a basis for collective action in order to resolve disputes with employers. Within our sample, this varied from small-scale action to express discontent over a particular issue, for example a team of workers refusing to continue working excessive hours, to a group of freelancers within the BBC using a network as a basis for winning recognition for collective bargaining. It is important not to overstate these phenomena. The majority of the freelancers interviewed for this project conducted bargaining/negotiation at an individual level, if any negotiation actually took place. Nonetheless, in several instances an informal network was used to handle a collective employee relations' issue. In one case, a dispute over rates paid to set construction freelancers on a series of UK-based major film projects was conducted through an informal network of freelance construction workers (while eventually mediated via the union). This involved workers co-ordinating demands, negotiating collectively through elected representatives and taking concerted strike action that halted production. Importantly, the dispute involved a mix of union and non-union members.

Evidence of networks being instrumental in negotiations with employers were found among radio journalists in the North West of England and wild life film cameramen and women in Bristol. In both cases these were tightly-knit occupational networks within a distinct geographic location. These dense, exclusive networks appear consistent with Putnam's notion of 'bonding capital' in that members support each other and the social capital, or value of the ties among the group is an important collective property in the negotiating process. It is perhaps too early to tell if these groups will suffer any of the less-desirable consequences of dense networks identified in the literature. There is the potential for cliques to form (Granovetter 1985), or for the solidarity and trust on which the network is based to restrict individual entrepreneurialism (Putnam, 2000). However our initial findings suggest that it is these dense, exclusive and highly specific networks that have been most successful in representing freelance worker's interests in the audio-visual industries to date.

DISCUSSION

Whether or not networks have a collective identity that may enhance the bargaining power of labour is a key concern for this research. Networks have become an increasingly important mechanism through which *individuals* can increase their

opportunity in the labour market and attenuate the risk inherent in freelance work. To date much of the literature has focused on this role of networks in the employment relationship. However, existing literature that deals with social capital and networks also talks in terms of key ingredients such as trust, interdependence and reciprocity. This suggests that the operation of networks is more complex than a confluence of individuals whose interests coincide at a particular moment in time. Trust is not a momentary and passing phenomenon – it has to be built upon over a period of time - pointing to endurance in the relations that underpin inter-personal networks. While network enthusiasts such as Castells (2000) welcome the ‘end of career’ and see networks as concomitant with the erosion of employment stability, there is a sense in which individual workers are seeking to reconstruct stable employment relations through their involvement in networks.

Undoubtedly there is a degree to which networks in the UK television industry are both utilitarian and individualistic. Individual networks of contacts are used to enhance reputation and status, but this is mediated by the conventions and norms of various sectors of the industry. Competence is defined in terms of skill and reputation, but also according to intricate sets of rules governing behaviour among different types of network. The freelance world is highly competitive and entry to some networks, especially project networks, is difficult and selective, indeed there is an element of exclusion and exclusivity. Other networks are open and inclusive but are arguably less effective in enhancing individual status or fostering a sense of collective identity. We found that tightly organized occupational networks such as the wildlife cameramen and women in Bristol or the radio journalists in the North West can achieve a density and exclusivity over labour supply that cedes very high levels of bargaining power. By forming a dense network within a distinct region and across a specific product type, these groups were able to enjoy an influence beyond that that could be attained by a trade union, guild or professional association. However, our initial findings suggest that, while some network activists had aspirations of developing more concrete organisations, it would seem that as soon as networks become unwieldy, or adopt a bureaucratic structure they lose both their effectiveness and attraction. It is the anarchic nature of network activity that is their essence. Indeed one of the attractions of networks for many respondents in our sample was the absence of bureaucracy, hierarchy and the political dimension associated with trade unions.

This lack of bureaucracy and hierarchy makes networks more responsive and focussed than existing unions, who clearly must have a broader agenda. Moreover, there is a geographical element whereby networks appear to have been most successful in representing workers where they develop to serve specific, localised interests. We would suggest that networks will wax and wane in response to specific issues and situations. Our initial findings suggest, therefore, that networks in the UK television industry play a complimentary role. Clearly networks are far more than a series of names in an address book. Some of the networks we identify, particularly professional associations have a strong sense of collective identity and a commitment to maintaining professional standards as well as terms and conditions of employment in their sector of the industry. Other networks, such as the radio journalists or wildlife cameramen have a loose identity that can become intensified in relation to a specific issue or problem. The network then becomes the organizational medium and conduit for mobilization. However by their very nature ‘networks’ are anarchic, free from

bureaucracy and formal structure (possibly why they are so effective in the early stages of mobilization). Therefore they find it difficult to fit within existing patterns of labour relations or 'talk' to hierarchical management structures. They also lack the specialization and expertise needed to be able to negotiate with employers. As a result, in certain situations, the network needs to refer to existing organizations, specifically trade unions. Consequently they offer an opportunity to trade unions to work alongside networks and demonstrate the benefits of collective organisation. Moreover, trade unions can offer networks the organisation and expertise they need once they encroach upon mainstream industrial relations issues.

Some twenty years after the introduction of Channel 4 heralded the beginning of fragmentation and a shift to freelance employment in the UK television industry, there is evidence that workers are reacting to individualisation of the employment relationship by acting collectively to defend their interests in the labour market. While networks of personal contacts are used to enhance individual opportunities, a variety of open and closed networks exist based on trust, mutuality, a shared identity and a concern for collective issues. A picture emerges of individuals who, far from being isolated, are embedded in a complex system of networks that offer the support, collective identity and social relationships previously found within the large broadcasters.

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