Beyond the Self-expressive Creative Worker: An Industry Perspective on Entertainment Media

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Abstract
Evidence from industry reports, labor union data, and interviews with producers and union officials indicates that while the demand for media products and the number of productions continues to rise, much of the increase in demand is in low-budget features and extremely low-budget production for cable networks. In this production environment, the conglomerates are pressuring producers to reduce labor costs and produce a larger number of low-cost products. Producers are using various strategies to reduce costs, including requiring more flexibility from the production workforce with respect to the length of workdays and working conditions. This article examines how production trends, influenced by conglomerate domination of production and distribution, are affecting the media workforce. In particular I look at three tendencies. The first is a widening split between core workers and peripheral workers employed in industry projects. The second is a change in professional and craft identities as a result of technological specialization by freelancers and the loss of union control over production projects, especially at the low end of the budget spectrum. Finally, there is the persistence of 'hard-wired' social and economic networks to reduce worker and employer risk. These networks foster and reinforce labor segmentation among women and men, and among ethnic groups, restricting access to job opportunities and careers.

Key words
creative ■ economy ■ risk ■ work

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ALTHOUGH STUDIES of the creative economy and creative work have exploded since the mid-1990s, the analysis of creative work has been disconnected from changes affecting the production environments within which creative workers enter the workforce, access jobs and build careers. This disconnection is related to the inherent nature of much creative work, which places a premium on self-expression, but is also attributable to a conception of creative work as individual enterprise. Because of an overwhelming focus on the individual visual artist, dancer or independent film director, little attention has been paid to the industry context in which creative workers build their careers.

The most common depiction of a career in an industry that produces creative products emphasizes self-organization, intense competition mediated by ‘gate-keepers’, and the central role of project-based work. Almost all depictions of creative work emphasize that it is risky, offering little in the way of conventional security as defined by a regular paycheck or a pension. The individual is at the heart of the creative career – as self-expressive entrepreneur – and the model posits a dualism between work that engages self-expression and creative skills, and humdrum work, which is driven by economic motives. While adaptability and flexibility in response to change are considered key attributes of creative workers, the sources of change and their effects on opportunity structures are rarely examined. They are assumed to lie in unpredictable, changing consumer tastes rather than in the regulations and financial markets that shape the environments within which creative work takes place.

From an industry perspective, however, both economic and creative motivations shape individual and organizational strategies. The fine artist has different motivations than the gallery owner or publicist, though all are engaged in creative careers that require a sensibility open to creativity and innovation. The artist develops a range of economic activities to sustain her career that also enable creative self-expression (Markusen et al., 2006; Menger, 1999).

In some creative industries, including entertainment media, advertising, fashion and music, motivations for self-expression and economic success (or at least sustainability) are present in equal measure. And, because workers in these industries direct their self-enterprise to the needs of the firm buying their services rather than directly to their audience or market, firm strategies drive access to jobs and opportunities to build sustainable careers. In this subset of the creative economy, the competitive strategies of the firm are more likely to drive the strategies of the workforce (Ursell, 2000, 2003).¹

Freelance, entrepreneurial creative workers are thus in an interdependent relationship with firms in the industries in which they work, whether fashion houses, advertising agencies, galleries or motion picture distributors (Christopherson, 2002; McRobbie, 2002; Neff et al., 2005; Rantisi, 2004). It is difficult to understand either the nature of a creative worker’s ‘flexibility’ or the degree to which self-expression or economic motives are
important in their work lives without some understanding of the strategies undertaken by the firms to whom they sell their products or services.

Research on media entertainment and new media is somewhat exceptional because so much of it reaches beyond the concept of the individual creative worker. The social and psychological dimensions of creative work are likely to be brought into the picture (Bielby and Bielby, 2003; du Gay, 1996; McRobbie, 2002; Perrons, 2003; Ursell, 2000, 2003), as well as the technological and political–economic context (Deuze, 2007; Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Wasko, 2008).

I draw on this work and recent evidence on media entertainment employment to explore the potential for looking at creative work and workers in the context of the changing industries in which they make their careers. I focus on the entertainment media (television and film production) in the US, which, because of its private ownership and commercial orientation, has an industrial history very different from that of media in other advanced economies. The US media entertainment industry has, in addition, undergone dramatic restructuring since the 1980s in conjunction with an altered regulatory environment, an expanding labor supply, and technological innovations.2

To provide the grounds for assessing how industry structure creates a context for creative work, I look briefly at how the entertainment media industry has been altered by deregulation and technological change, leading to concentration in distribution of profit-making products and fragmentation in production. I focus on those segments of the entertainment media in which it is possible to profit from investment in content production (for example, feature film, episodic television). I then examine how the changing market positioning of the conglomerate firms that control access to mass audiences affects the strategies of producers – the central executives in temporary media project firms and employers of a creative workforce.

Finally, I describe three features of creative work as it has evolved in response to increasing media production skills in the population, changing industry structure and firm strategies. The first is a widening split between core workers and peripheral workers employed in industry projects. Available evidence indicates that the labor force has expanded but also suggests that a smaller proportion of the workforce is employed in the type and number of projects to provide a full-time yearly income. The second important feature is a change in professional and craft identities as a result of technological specialization by freelancers and the loss of union control over production projects, especially at the low end of the budget spectrum. Finally, there is the persistence of ‘hard-wired’ social and economic networks to reduce worker and employer risk. These networks have always existed in the project-oriented media entertainment industry but arguably they have become stronger and more important given the uncertainties of industry production and job access. These networks foster and reinforce labor segmentation among women and men, and among ethnic groups, restricting access to job opportunities and careers.
A Note on the Evidence

Production and work in media entertainment is project-oriented. As a result, publicly available data (which typically is collected on firms) is a highly imperfect source of information on industry and workforce trends. Firm data provides a picture of stable employment and provides little information on self-employment in an industry context. To get a more complete (though still partial) picture of trends, I use multiple sources to piece together the relationships among changing industry structure, risk and workforce adaptation. Evidence is derived from a study of industry patterns that included 40 interviews with directors, producers, leaders in both unions and guilds, and studio owners as well as analysis of proprietary data and publicly available data on industry production trends and employment (Christopherson et al., 2006). Additional interviews were conducted in 2007, along with an analysis of change in key occupations and self-employment from publicly available secondary data.

Sources of Change and Adaptation in the US Media Entertainment Industry

The organizational structure of the entertainment media industry in the US is difficult to depict in a simple straightforward way. The industry is highly concentrated – at the point of product distribution and in particular product markets, including film and television. Just a few firms control the gateways to consumer markets. At the same time, production of entertainment media is carried out in a vertically disintegrated system, organized around projects. This vertically disintegrated production organization is an inheritance of the industry production organization that emerged from the 1950s through the early 1980s, following the break-up of the ‘studio system’ (Schatz, 2008; Scott, 2005). Since the 1990s, new types of media entertainment products have developed, such as videos shown on YouTube and other consumer-created content. While these products are innovative, they lie outside the mainstream profit-oriented media production and distribution system. These new ‘products’ and production processes, however, give the appearance of flux and uncertainty in media entertainment, as well as suggesting that new entrepreneurial opportunities are emerging (Deuze, 2007). At this historical moment, however, and despite the excitement and noise generated by the potential for market disruption, six conglomerates remain at the heart of production organization and creative work in US media entertainment (Schatz, 2008). By driving the strategies of producers and directors who need capital to finance their film and television projects and access to ‘eyeballs’, the conglomerates directly and indirectly influence the organization of work and workforce strategies.

The major US-based media conglomerates include (in 2007) Disney, General Electric, National Amusements, News Corporation, Sony and Time Warner. (Within General Electric and Sony, the media entertainment divisions are only small contributors to corporate profits.) The deregulation
of media industries that has occurred in the US since the mid-1980s has enabled the conglomeration of formerly separate film and television industries and the subsequent acquisition of media entertainment corporations by non-media transnational firms, such as General Electric, which owns NBC television, Telemundo networks, numerous other cable networks and Universal Studios. All the conglomerates set up internal markets in which they use the products they produce in all their multiple markets (Meehan, 2008; Schatz, 2008). This concentration, and decreasing competition among media distributors, has had significant effects on the bargaining power of independent producer/directors and of the workforce, as demonstrated later in this article.

Change, then, is evident, manifested in the concentration and conglomeration of media industry firms, and in the introduction of a corporate mentality focused on cost-cutting and production strategies that reduce corporate risk. At the same time, an important feature of the US media entertainment industry has persisted over the period of conglomeration – the ability of the major media distributors to act as a cartel in international markets. Even when (from the 1950s to the early 1980s) anti-trust regulation forced US film distributors to compete in national markets and US television networks to purchase products from independent producers, US film distributors were allowed to act together, as a cartel, in dealing with international markets. The ability to collude over prices and release dates, sustained by their powerful lobbying organization, the Motion Picture Association of America, has fostered conglomerate entrance into global film markets and joint strategies to reduce the risks of entering those markets (Pendakur, 2008).

Together, conglomeration and control of multiple distribution markets in the US and continued ability to collude to reduce risks in global markets have altered conglomerate investment strategies. For example, in theatrical film, they have moved from direct investment in a diverse portfolio of films for national and global markets to a more exclusive focus on global ‘blockbusters’ aimed at a young male market.3

Despite the level of capital investment necessary to finance these mega-projects, the conglomerates minimize their financial risks by co-financing products that have global appeal and can be repurposed for a sequence of ancillary markets. Batman, the Dark Knight, for example, produced for an astounding US $185 million, represents such a strategy. The film was co-financed by Legendary Pictures, a private equity investment company run by producers who develop video games (also appealing to a young male audience) as part of the film ‘package’. While extraordinarily expensive to make, these films appeal to that global audience which is most likely to go to a theater to see an action film and offer the potential for product spin-offs, particularly high-profit computer games, aimed at the same audience.

To fill out their distribution portfolios, media distributors rely on independently produced films, aimed at more limited (US) markets (adults,
women, etc.) (Wasko, 2008). The studios have enough investment in these films (largely capital for marketing) to enable them to reap the benefits if the film turns into a hit. These investments also enable the conglomerate distributors to use the film products in their multiple distribution venues (network television, cable, pay per view, DVD sales, etc.) so as to recoup their investment. At the bottom, in terms of risk and revenue, are half of the approximately 500 films released in the US every year. These films are made ‘on the cheap’, with budgets between $5 million and $10 million, and have little if any money invested in their marketing. The difference in profit potential among these product types is dramatic. ‘In 2005, the top five major studio releases alone earned more domestically than all of the 345 independent releases combined’ (Schatz, 2008: 31).

Media producers who want to get their product in front of an audience face significant obstacles. As the entertainment media industries have concentrated, the cost of producing and distributing a feature film has increased dramatically (Jones, 2002; Wasko, 2008). Among the reasons for this increase are accounting rules for the industry, which were changed in 1981 as new distribution venues for entertainment products emerged (Fabricant, 1992). These rules permit the (now) conglomerate owners of multiple distribution venues to distribute the costs of marketing among theatrical release, network television and cable, and to rapidly write off the cost of a product while at the same time increasing their bottom line (in current profits) by longer-term estimates of future revenues from these multiple outlets. This accounting strategy encourages the conglomerates to extract high advertising and marketing costs from their distribution outlets and raises the overall cost of marketing and advertising the product. This strategy, not coincidentally, raises barriers to entry from non-conglomerate controlled producers.

Conglomerate ownership of television broadcast and cable networks has also had effects on production organization and market strategies in these industry segments. Historically, television has been the more stable of the film and television media entertainment industries, with large corporate organizations and long-running episodic programming. With mergers and acquisitions, the large corporate operations have been reduced and production out-sourced to production companies affiliated with the parent firm. While production risks fall substantially on the independent producer, the conglomerate distributor retains control through investment and by controlling access to the market. The producer has very little bargaining power.

By contrast, before deregulation, broadcast networks were required to purchase primetime programming on the market rather than produce that programming themselves. That regulatory requirement meant that independent production houses would compete with each other to produce network programming, but also could retain intellectual property rights on the product in order to recoup their investment and market their products to other distribution venues. These opportunities for building and
sustaining independent production houses no longer exist, with consequences for independent producers and for the workforce.

A Directors Guild representative, testifying before a US Federal Communications Commission hearing in Los Angeles in October 2006, described the impact of concentration on television production. In his testimony he noted that, in 1993, about 66 percent of network television programs came from independent producers while the networks produced 44 percent. In 2006, independent producers produced only 22 percent of network television while 76 percent was produced by the networks themselves (Reardon, 2006).

In the new television production environment, cost reduction in the large corporate broadcast organizations and controlled subcontracting of programming has been accompanied by dramatic expansion of low-end production, particularly in ‘non-fiction’ programming, especially, but not exclusively, for cable television. Given the overall profile of television production, it is at the low-end that labor demand increased since the late 1990s.

Applications of new technologies have influenced both distribution and production, for example, multiplying the formats in which content can be displayed. Most notably, with the proliferation of cable networks, broadcast television audiences have declined while those viewing cable networks have increased. This fragmentation has contributed to the demand for inexpensively produced programming to fill cable channels. The capacity for multiple channels rarely results in the introduction of high-quality or innovative programming because the parent companies are unwilling to invest in content and do not want competition for the programming from which they draw the bulk of their advertising revenue. This is the reason for the common complaint among US audiences that there are 400 channels with nothing worth watching.

New technologies have also affected content production, making it less expensive and adapted to the demand for inexpensive programming. In particular, light-weight video, lighting and audio equipment have made it possible to reduce the number of people necessary for a ‘shoot’. In cable media, one-person production ‘crews’ are now common. In general, technological changes have followed demand for the production of lower-cost content. Overall, then, technological change is less important as a force for change in these industries than the processes associated with deregulation (Meehan, 2008).

To draw the causal links between competitive conditions, producer strategies, and labor force adaptation I look at some examples of strategies undertaken by a key intermediary – the project producer – in response to changing incentive structures. These strategies are not the only ones which producers use to get their projects financed, produced and into distribution but they exemplify the changing bargaining power in the industry among conglomerates, independent producer/directors, and the workforce as it has emerged since the 1980s. They include: (1) tapping unconventional
sources of financing, particularly place-based incentives; (2) using low-cost production methods made possible by new technologies and an expanded pool of multi-skilled industry labor pool entrants; and (3) increasing the reputation value of the product with product financiers and potential distributors by going with the ‘tried and true’ among the industry workforce.

**Producers Strategies in Television and Independent Film: Location and Labor**

At the center of the changing production process is the producer, who frequently initiates the production process and is primarily responsible for project financing as well as for coordination and completion. Broadly speaking, the producer faces a set of pressures that emanate from the character of demand in the media entertainment industry and as a result of the economic power exercised by distributors and their associated gatekeepers.

The role of producer may be combined with other production roles, such as writer or director, but it is the intermediary role of producer, between investors and distributors, on the one hand, and the production project company, on the other, that makes it critical to interpreting how incentives move from conglomerate distributor to the workforce.

As one producer/director who has worked for public broadcasting in Canada and the US described:

> The [broadcasting] networks are more unstable. The economics are just not there. They are empty. They are shells. They used to be full of people on contract. [Now] they want to work with people who are reliable and produce at the lowest price. (personal interview, 9 September 2007)

And from another producer/director who has worked in supplying programming in both commercial and public television: ‘I don’t see the (economic) model. Budgets are lower and production values are lower. Schedules are crazy and you are expected to just churn out the stuff’ (personal interview, 5 September 2007).

Just as Wal-Mart squeezes its suppliers, the media conglomerates squeeze the producers. Overall, the costs of getting a program distributed have increased because of expanded marketing on the various platforms (including network and cable television) in which the product will be distributed. Because of this cost structure, production and distribution of a film requires multiple financial partners. The media conglomerates (who control the distribution gateways) frequently assume only a minor position in the investment. Producers must engage in complex co-financing deals, looking for finance capital wherever they can find it.

The bargaining position runs only one way, however. US television networks, for example, have adopted the strategy of demanding a financial
stake in any pilots that are picked up for the primetime schedule. Even
advertisers have noted the implications of this shift, warning that ‘broadcast
networks are more interested in financial deals than putting the best shows
they can find on the air’ (Advertising Age, 1999, cited in Bielby and Bielby,
2003). This strategy reflects both the increased power over distribution
access held by the conglomerates and their ability to shift risk for project
development. According to Bielby and Bielby (2003: 590): ‘to reach the
prime-time schedule, the supplier has to agree to forgo a share of the future
revenues’.

In the world of documentary production (as has historically been the
case in the music industry), producers may pay to have their product distrib-
uted, including on major television networks. ‘They paid us $3500 for the
program and the E and O (Errors and Omissions) insurance was $3400. We
ended up paying to have the product shown on a major public television
channel’ (personal interview, 9 September 2007).

Because of the increased individualization of the production process
and the difficulty of breaking through into the key distribution venues,
would-be talent may have to pay to compete for the attention of gatekeepers.
One variant of the ‘pay to play’ scenario is ‘The . . . Idol model’ in which
all the risks and costs of developing an entertainment product are assumed
by the talent (or, as they are now known, ‘participants’), who are used as a
revenue source for popular reality programs.

This model is also increasingly prevalent behind the scenes in the
media-financing world. Film festivals, for example, are an entry point for
film-makers but also have become a money-maker for entrepreneurs who
organize them, inviting all comers to submit entries (for a fee, that is). There
are now 122 festivals in North America. A website that coordinates all
entries (www.withoutabox.com) enables the festival promoters to make
money from the submissions and to reduce their processing costs.

And, in another example, in the highly competitive documentary
world, competitions such as the Toronto ‘Hot Docs’ documentary forum
charge entrants who compete in a competitive arena to make a pitch for
their project in front of a board of potential financiers. They have 12
minutes. ‘If you can’t get their attention in the first two minutes, you’re dead’
(personal interview, 9 September 2007). The substantial number of docu-
mentaries entered in the competition is winnowed to a selection of entrants
with a reasonable chance of success. Observers of the competition (in the
arena) are also charged high fees to watch the presentations.

The competition for financing has driven producers and their corpor-
ate sponsors to look for national, regional or state subsidies to provide them
with production cost advantages (primarily in labor costs) or direct financ-
ing for the film or television product. In many cases these production
location choices are forced on the director by the conglomerate distributor
for which he is supplying the program or film. Locations are now determined
on the basis of economic criteria rather than on aesthetic grounds or in
relation to the story. According to one film office director:
The power has shifted from the ‘Creatives’ to the ‘Suits’. In other words, if you don’t have a large incentive, you are not considered. Many projects are now budgeted with specific incentives in mind before a director is hired. (personal interview, 9 September 2007)

A recent example captures the workings of the new financing-oriented public subsidies programs:

Earlier this year, ABC was set to film a pilot episode of a show. The production was all ready to shoot, but then something happened.

‘The company calculated their gain from state of Georgia’s tax incentive would be about $300,000 on a $4.5 million project,’ says City of Savannah Tourism and Film Services Director Jay Self. ‘But the state of South Carolina could offer them a check for $680,000.’

So the entire shoot decamped the Coastal Empire and headed for the Holy City, $380,000 richer than when they started. The catch: the script had to be changed to reflect the location.

And they mean that literally. Whereas the state of Georgia offers production companies a base tax incentive of nine percent (twelve if you shoot in an economically depressed area like Fulton County), that’s in the form of a credit that can be taken off the company’s bottom line later.

But South Carolina’s much more generous new 20–30 percent incentives are made all the more valuable because they’re rebates, not credits. In other words, the production company gets a big fat check soon after it wraps. (Morekis, 2007: 1)

Although simplifying what is a complex process, contemporary production location decisions are more than ever driven by economic motives (rather than by creative impulses.) This is visible in changing location patterns among productions at various budget levels (as evidenced by shooting days for types of productions in different cities). Low-budget productions have increased as a proportion of the total and concentrated in the major production centers (Los Angeles and New York) because of the large, inexpensive, non-union labor supply and because the productions are too small (in terms of budget) to take advantage of financing incentives offered in alternative locations. Mid-budget productions in film and television have decreased as a proportion of total productions. They are more likely to take place outside major production centers in order to tap public subsidies and to use (at least partially) non-unionized crews. Talent retains employment in these projects but has decreased creative control. High-budget blockbuster productions are likely to be co-produced by major companies so as to reduce competition and depend on major financing and subsidy packages. They are more likely to be filmed in international locations. They utilize unionized A-list craft and talent in order to reduce their substantial financial risk profile (Christopherson et al., 2006).

In addition to project financing, the size and skills of the workforce available to the producer are central to what is produced, where it is
produced and how it is produced. It is illuminating that while the industry has been concentrating and consolidating, the number of people who identify themselves as creative professionals associated with media production has been expanding, particularly in the industry ‘headquarters’, Los Angeles. While it is financially possible to transport unionized skilled grips, best boys, script supervisors and cinematographers as well as talent to a foreign location for a blockbuster, the majority of media entertainment productions now depend on access to a large pool of low-cost labor.

In a trend that appears consonant with a consolidating industry in which the most stable employers, firms in network television, are losing market share and down-sizing, data provided by the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) indicates that national employment in the Motion Picture and Video Industry firms (including production and post-production) increased 0.31 percent between 2002 and 2006 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2002, 2006).

At the same time, data from the Occupational Employment Statistics (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, OES, 2002, 2006) show dramatic increases in the numbers of people who identify themselves in key entertainment industry occupations. Between 2002 and 2006, there was a 14 percent increase in the number of individuals identified as producers and directors, a 7 percent increase in individuals identified as actors, and a 9 percent increase in camera operators for television and motion pictures.

One clue to this conundrum is that individuals reporting themselves as self-employed in the Motion Picture and Video Industries (as reported by US federal income tax filings) grew by 28.4 percent between 2002 and 2006 (US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2002, 2006).

As in many other industries in the US, large media firms are paring down their production workforces to an essential core and using temporary workers and self-employed workers on an as-needed basis. However, increased use of a flexible labor supply is only part of the story; a change in the absolute size of the labor supply is another important dimension. The expansion of the labor supply has been stimulated, in part, by the success of higher education media training programs. In these programs, which have proliferated in Los Angeles and New York as well as in other cities, students learn a wide variety of production skills and are introduced to new technologies that cross conventional union professional and craft jurisdictions. They learn how to produce on ‘shoestring’ budgets and to work very rapidly and under severe time constraints. They learn to work in efficient multi-functional production teams. When they graduate, they are ‘hybrids’, writer-directors, director-camera-operator-editors, who make up a flexible, independent contractor workforce perfectly suited to the high growth segment of the media industry – production for cable television. In some respects, this workforce has more in common with their young colleagues in New Media than they do with their elders who work in broadcast television and medium to high budget film (Batt et al., 2001).
Working style, expectations and a cultivated amateurism separate this ‘free agent’, entrepreneurial workforce from the establishment professionals that populate the traditional entertainment media guilds and unions. Although there is still considerable intersection (and even some merging) between the professional worker with a defined role and the multi-functional media production team member, the contemporary workforce appears more segmented and differentiated than it did in the 1980s when the major divide in the US workforce was defined by union or non-union status. (Christopherson and Storper, 1989).

There is also some evidence that this highly flexible, low-cost, entrepreneurial workforce is concentrated in the industry capital, Los Angeles. Using ES202 or social security payment reporting data, the Entertainment Economy Institute (EEI and the PMR Group, 2004) found that a very broadly defined entertainment industry workforce grew at a rate of 35 percent in California between 1991 and 2002, more than twice as fast as the overall California workforce. And the core workforce, those whose incomes were continuously made from entertainment industry employment at least 75 percent of the time, grew 17 percent between 1991 and 2002. What is more significant than this growth rate, however, is that core workers declined as a share of the total workforce, from 38 percent in 1991 to 33 percent in 2002. So, while the workforce was expanding in Los Angeles, a smaller portion of the total workforce was able to derive a full-time income from work in the entertainment industries.

With concentration in the film and television industries, employment in firms in film and television production has also concentrated in Los Angeles with 63 percent of total employment in 2004 (Christopherson et al., 2006: 14). Employment in firms in the second largest center of production, New York, has stagnated and there are indications that the proportion of the New York workforce that is made up of self-employed independent contractors has increased (Center for an Urban Future, 2005).

The presence of large numbers of entrepreneurial self-employed workers with at least some level of skill provides media entertainment firms with a strong incentive to subcontract low-end production, particularly if they are providing product for the cable market where production values are of less importance. Second, given the concentration of this workforce in major production centers, particularly Los Angeles, there are good reasons to maintain and even expand production in the industry center.6

While these figures are only suggestive, they possibly explain why what, on the surface, looks like a healthy global industry with increasing profits and increasing production numbers has evolved in ways that raise risks for the majority of the workforce. The recent period of industry restructuring has combined expansion at the low end of the product market, high-end retrenchment and relocation of production for middle-budget projects. These changes in what is produced and how it is produced have heightened anxiety over income expectations, and anger over a loss of creativity and pressure to produce too much too fast. Even in this historically high-risk
industry, the recent period has been one in which the rewards of working in media entertainment are more elusive than ever.

Together, the bifurcation of the film market and cost-cutting by network television has limited the number of mid-range productions that have traditionally composed the ‘bread and butter’ jobs in film and television. The combination of these trends in historically unionized major employment venues, along with the expansion of the labor supply and the emergence of cable television, has created a new bargaining climate for the media industry workforce. In the next section, I lay out three ways in which the entertainment industry workforce has been affected by the restructuring of the industry: a deepening of the core–periphery divide; deprofessionalization; and exclusionary networks. These are not new industry characteristics. They have always existed in this high-risk industry. Arguably, however, their importance has been magnified in the kind of entertainment industry that has emerged post-deregulation.

Deepening of the Core–Periphery Divide and a Shrinking Middle-class Workforce

Changes in entertainment media production have been interpreted differently by the so-called talent or ‘above the line’ workforce and the skilled craft workers who compose the ‘below-the-line’ workforce. At the top end of the creative entertainment media workforce, producers, writers and directors complain about the loss of creative control and tighter production deadlines and budgets, as well as loss of residual payments that sustain them financially during the dry periods when they are not employed on a project. They attribute these changes directly to industry conglomeration and the decrease in competition. Older established ‘talent’, particularly men, are, however, more likely than new entrants to be able to maintain their connection with higher-budget film and broadcast television productions (Hunt, 2007). Thus, the new environment is associated with patterns and processes of labor segmentation that separate craft and talent workers and also separate the traditional white male workforce that has dominated industry employment from a growing, younger, more ethnically diverse and female workforce that is more entrepreneurial and antagonistic to union representation.

As has already been described, the most important change from the mid-1990s onward is increasing demand for low-budget productions to fill endless cable networks. Many programs for cable networks are produced within small ‘turn key’ budgets by producers whose profit margin depends on saving on labor costs by, for example, using crews not on standard union contracts. At the same time there is a larger supply of labor vying for a pool of less remunerative or reliable jobs. And the opportunities for employment in higher-budget, unionized productions have been eroded by slow growth in mid-budget feature film production, the tendency of film-makers to shoot outside the US in order to obtain financing through co-productions, and a decrease in the proportion of the more expensive and labor-intensive
scripted productions (such as dramatic series) for television (Epstein, 2005). So, while the number of marginal productions for television is increasing, producers of medium- to high-budget feature films have also been under pressure to cut costs. One way in which costs are being cut is by reducing shooting days. The Casting Data Report from the Screen Actors Guild, reports on roles (jobs) and days worked by production type. Between 2004 and 2006, the total number of roles (jobs) was up 10 percent but the average number of days worked per role was down 7 percent. In non-episodic television, average days worked declined by 19 percent. In addition, the largest increase in roles (jobs) was in the low-budget theatrical category (20.2%) (Screen Actor, 2007). While these figures are only available for actors, they describe a broader tendency to reduce project production time.

Hourly wages in the media industries remain high, but reports from the unions indicate the work has become more arduous and less predictable than it was in the early 1990s. One common complaint is that producers attempting to cut costs will reduce shooting days by requiring overtime work from the production crew. While long working hours are legendary in the media entertainment industry, the boundaries that circumscribed abuse appear to have broken down as unions have lost power over industry practices and with an increase in the proportion of productions made on 'shoestring' budgets.

When we look at information on entertainment media employment in New York state, the second most important media entertainment industry location in the US (Christopherson et al., 2006), and changes in employment by occupation, those occupations connected with television production have seen increased work hours, presumably because of demand from cable channels. Within the talent workforce, the earnings of New York-based Screen Actors Guild members have stagnated. By contrast, members of the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists, who work primarily in television, experienced a 33 percent increase in workdays over the period 2000–3. Work has also been higher in television for background actors (formerly called ‘Extras’) with 80 percent growth in workdays between 1995 and 2003 in television productions shot in New York. Work for members of The Directors Guild has also increased in television with increased workdays in television production in the 2000–5 period. Since cable production work is more frequently done in studios than on location, not surprisingly, there has been a significant increase in working hours by studio mechanics. Their work hours in television production increased 40 percent between 2000 and 2003.

Another ‘craft’ group benefiting from increased cable television production are editors, whose work hours in New York doubled between 2002 and 2003 and increased 25 percent between 2003 and 2004 (Christopherson et al., 2006). Editors are extremely important in growing production types such as reality television, which use editing to produce a story from hours of shooting with only a minimal script. The number of editors employed actually declined during this period, indicating that those
editors employed are working more, but that the risk of unemployment may have increased. Because of the increased demand for editors across production types, it is not surprising that the only occupation in which the percentage of women increased on major film productions was editing (1%) (Hunt, 2007).

Although below-the-line or entertainment industry craft workers are most affected by the restructuring of the industry and the ability of entertainment conglomerates to squeeze producers in order to extract higher profits, the changes wrought by industry concentration affect even the most creative segments of the industry. According to one veteran filmmaker:

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\ldots\text{in cable, residuals [payments for each showing of the product] for writers, actors, and directors are a percent of the producer's gross. But if that producer is a network who self-deals the rights to their cable company \ldots there is no compensation for that. Suddenly you discover that the eleven or twelve per cent gross residual among the three guilds that has been fought over for so many decades is virtually meaningless, as rights are simply self-dealt among related entities. (Hill, 2004: 20)}
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Anne-Marie Johnson of the Screen Actors Guild described the impact of these changes in her testimony at the Federal Communications Commission hearings:

\[
\text{As actors, we find the continued consolidation of media companies has drastically limited our ability to individually bargain our personal services agreements. \ldots [T]he networks decide what the top-of-the show rates are, in a parallel practice. Some networks will even tell you they only pay 50 per cent of the going rate. Take it or leave it. This salary compression cripples the middle class actor's ability to make a living. (www.sag.org, 2006)}
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Rising employment in low-budget theatricals and cable television is connected with two other patterns: (1) increasing bifurcation in the incomes of above-the-line or talent, indicated by data on Screen Actors Guild members in both LA and New York; and (2) a narrowing of the income gap between people employed in the entertainment media and the median income of all people employed in California (EEI and PMR, 2004). Although these trends are only suggestive and require more definitive research, they point to changes in the relative position of media entertainment workers and to a relative diminution of their income advantage relative to other occupations. This tendency is related to a growing 'de-professionalization' of entertainment industry work, as described in the next section.

The expansion of low-budget production for cable, the growing labor pool, and slow growth in the more lucrative (for labor) production segments, such as feature film and broadcast network television series,
partially explain why increased employment and production numbers in Los Angeles, and more recently in New York City, are combined with high levels of worker dissatisfaction and a sense of increased risk. Altogether, while work is available, good, livelihood-sustaining work is much more elusive.

The Decline of Professional and Craft Identities and the Rise of the Hybrid, Crossover Workforce

The sight of the TV journalist who comes alone to a reporting scene, conducts interviews, and then sets up a camera and records herself is now a common one. It reflects a broader trend made possible both by technological change and multi-skill training that allows media companies to reduce the number of people engaged in producing a media product. In some cases, such as media reporting or documentary production, a single individual frequently carries out the entire project: writing, directing, camera work, editing and promotion for distribution.

The demand for low-cost (meaning low labor cost) productions to fill time on conglomerate-owned cable networks has fostered the use of non-unionized labor in an industry in which union density has been very high, especially by US standards. In addition, production formats (most notably reality television) have emerged in which skilled labor inputs are minimized or provided free of charge (for advertising purposes). The use of terminology such as ‘program planner’ to replace ‘writer’, or ‘participant’ to replace ‘actor’, obscures roles in the production process and avoids union jurisdiction. These changes in what production roles are named enables avoidance of employment contracts and shifts accountability from the program distributor and producer to the individual who willingly participates in a program ‘event’.

With these changes the still powerful media unions have faced powerful challenges. An already complex union and guild terrain has become more difficult to interpret because of shifts of power among collective bargaining units. Unions representing the workforce for television have experienced growth and increasing work hours for their membership. In unions whose members work in both television and film, such as the Directors Guild, it is television employment that is contributing more to total income. This shift has caused old rivalries between film- and television-based unions such as the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and American Film, Television and Radio Actors (AFTRA) to re-emerge, as well as talk of mergers.

Basically, however, talent and some prestigious craft guilds (such as the Cinematographers Guild) have focused their attention on retaining the shrinking number of good jobs for their members. They have generally chosen to ignore the entrepreneurial, multi-skilled, hybrid workforce that is growing at the periphery of the industry. According to one officer for the Directors Guild: ‘These are bad jobs. We don’t want to have anything to do with them’ (personal interview, April 2005).
Reflecting the myopic and exclusionary character of responses to increasing risk, attempts to unionize the fast-developing low-end workforce are absent or failing. The Writers Guild reports, for example, that the proportion of its younger membership (under 30) dropped 42 percent between 2000 and 2005 (Hunt, 2007).

The Continued Significance of Exclusionary Networks

One central feature of work and career development in creative industries is the role of personal, industry-based networks. Networks enable workers in creative industries to decrease risks, uncertainties and the costs of individual competition as well as market their skills and style. Personal networks are recognized as the central mechanism both for individual career advancement and risk reduction (Grabher, 2002; Grabher and Ibert, 2006; Lorenzen and Frederiksen, 2005; Sydow and Staber, 2002). In many cases, these networks are localized, benefiting both employers and workers via specialized knowledge of clients and available workforce skills (Batt et al., 2001; Scott, 2005). Politically connected social networks (including firms and the workforce) are also critical to garnering public subsidies to support industry development (Indergaard, 2004).

The production process in both film and television continues to be organized around high-risk, project-based work and around industry networks. As middle-budget project opportunities have declined, pre-existing networks show a tendency to pull in and go with the reliable and familiar, despite the expansion of a large and diverse labor supply and its creative resources. So, one manifestation of workforce adaptation to new conditions is the persistence and strengthening of defensive exclusionary networks to dominate access to the least risky and most lucrative and prestigious end of the industry production spectrum. These networks are composed almost exclusively of white men (Bielby and Bielby, 1992; Deuze, 2007).

The media entertainment industries have been described euphemistically as ‘gendered’ (Deuze, 2007) and there have been continuous campaigns on the part of the industry guilds and unions to open work and career opportunities to women and ethnic minorities. A 2007 report by the Writers Guild of America came to the following conclusion regarding these opportunities:

Our world is one in which gender, race, and age have played profound roles in the choices people make. These categories tend to define the risks we are willing to take to pursue our dreams; they also motivate our tendency to feel more comfortable working with those who seem similar to ourselves. These realities are particularly salient in the Hollywood industry. It is a highly competitive industry dependent upon creative talent, freedom of expression, and more than a fair amount of good luck. It is also an insular industry that white males have traditionally dominated, where employment opportunities rest squarely on personal networks steeped in gender, race and age. (Hunt, 2007: 14)
This kind of statement may seem hyperbolic but figures kept by unions and non-profit groups over time attest to significant labor segmentation in the film and television industry along gender and ethnic lines. Data on women's representation on the crews of major feature films is indicative. A continuous time series on the representation of women in the top 250 domestic (US) grossing films between 1998 and 2007 indicates that women's representation in major film-making roles (always very low) is deteriorating (Lauzen, 2007). In 2007, Lauzen analyzed the employment of 2883 individuals employed in these 250 film projects. Women comprised only 15 percent of all directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers and editors working on the top grossing films. This is a decline of 2 percent from the 1998 figure. Of the major films released in 2007, 21 percent employed no women in these key roles. By contrast, men accounted for 94 percent of directors; 90 percent of writers; 98 percent of all cinematographers; 83 percent of editors; and 78 percent of producers on what constitute the majority of films made for theatrical release in the US (Hunt, 2007: 14).

Women do better in television, comprising about 27 percent of writers, for example, but given the trends affecting television described above, the number of women employed in relatively stable, livelihood-sustaining jobs writing for television is unlikely to increase and may, in fact, decline. Even for women with established credentials, breaking through the barrier of established male networks is difficult. The incomes of women employed in creative positions in the media entertainment industries are, for example, not keeping pace with those of their male colleagues. This is not surprising given the restructuring of the industry described above. The income gap between male and female writers belonging to the Writers Guild of America increased from $24,000 in 1999 to $40,000 in 2005 (Hunt, 2007). This pattern extends to minority writers for whom the earnings gap with white male writers reached a 15-year high in 2005 (Hunt, 2007).

What are we to make of these numbers? What, in particular, can they tell us about the role of networks in these industries? While social networks built around trust and a feeling of camaraderie (‘no jerks’) are an integral aspect of working in a creative career, another layer of networks is also critical to a sustainable career in a creative industry. What might be termed ‘hard-wired’ networks shape many creative careers, particularly in those industries such as advertising, fashion, media entertainment and new media, where the economic calculation of success is as strong as the creative.

How do we explain the fact that white-male-dominated networks appear to be able to maintain their hold over livelihood-sustaining jobs in these high-risk creative industries? Of course, a single explanation is not sufficient. Many of the causal explanations resemble those associated with labor segmentation and exclusion in other industries, such as construction or finance (McDowell, 1997). For example, women and minorities are typically ghettoized in media entertainment – women in product types such as
‘the family network’ and minorities in production companies oriented toward production for minority communities.

Evidence from recent studies of the media entertainment industry workforce indicates that while educational programs in media are training men and women from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, the most stable and career-oriented jobs in media entertainment continue to be held disproportionately by white males. While the overall labor supply has become more diversified, that diversification has had little effect on employment in the most lucrative parts of the industry or in jobs that build careers over the long term (Holgate and McKay, 2007).

To the contrary, there is evidence that, in the media industries, defined by their avowed creativity, openness to innovation and emphasis on self-expression, high risk favors members of the ‘old boys’ network’. And this pattern does not appear to be explained by an aging and intransigent elite who will soon be replaced by a younger, more egalitarian work force. A survey of new media professionals indicates that similar patterns have emerged in this newer and younger industry (Batt et al., 2001).

What one takes away from the available evidence is that creative industries are not so different from other industries and are shaped by many of the same institutions that determine access to career-building opportunities. In many ways, the entertainment media resembles the US construction industry prior to the imposition of affirmative action law. Because of the project nature of employment and the absence of leverage to alter hiring practices, however, the composition and character of these networks is likely to continue as a defining feature of the media entertainment industry.

In the words of one producer:

To me, beneath all the changes that have occurred, it seems more like, ‘women are different,’ and who would you rather work with – someone who’s like you or someone who’s different? It’s well known that most of us prefer working with people we know. I realized, as a young producer [on The Terminator] that I had to be stronger, better prepared, and less emotional so that I wouldn’t be judged or dismissed as a female. I observed the way men interacted – tough, forceful and firm. If they got emotional, they didn’t cry or apologize. A lot of men weren’t prepared but because they were men, because they knew the lingo, because they were part of the boys’ club, they could get away with it. As a woman, I could not. (Gregory, 2007)

What Can an Approach that is Sensitive to Time and Industrial Context Add to our Understanding of Creative Work?

Creative work is not a static phenomenon. Worker identity and the work process itself changes in conjunction with the strategies of firms and organizations in creative industries, and as the workforce adapts to new forms and levels of risk. While the idea that work is constructed in conjunction with changes in technology and industrial structure is well established, for example, in studies of the advent of ‘Taylorism’, the analysis of temporal
change and industrial context has been neglected in creative work. This neglect can be explained, in part, by a disconnect between creative work and the broader economic institutions that govern labor, capital and product markets. Because creative workers are perceived as exceptional, their work process has been treated as idiosyncratic. Creative workers’ goals and strategies are depicted as driven by personal, internal motives rather than influenced by the political and economic context within which they work. To fully understand creative work, however, we have to integrate the analysis of enduring features, particularly high levels of risk and uncertainty, with the political and economic context that constructs the level and distribution of risk. That context differs in time and space, affecting chances for (and definitions of) success, workforce strategies and the work process.

This preliminary analysis of employment patterns in the film and television industries suggests that it would be useful to take another look at how common economic features, such as those constructing discrimination on the basis of race and gender, influence both the capacity to take on risk and the resources one brings to high-risk creative enterprises. The story of the media industries demonstrates that while all creative industries may be high risk, they are not risky in the same way. The degree and nature of risk changes over time and can be affected by firm strategies that emerge in response to new market incentives, and by the responses of the workforce to how firms position themselves.

Notes

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1. The analysis of creative work by Caves (2000) and other researchers has tended to emphasize differences among industries, comparing work in the advertising or fashion design industry with that in the theater, for example. So academic debates have been about whether project work in an industry is accurately described and interpreted or about individual strategies in a high-risk creative work environment. Much less attention has been paid to questions of change and adaptation in production organization and the work process over time. In part, the static and horizontal character of the analysis of creative industries and creative work is attributable to their fairly recent claim to attention. Possibly more significant, however, is the tendency to consider creative industries as sui generis and set apart from the context of the economic institutions that construct incentives in market economies.

2. The US transformation has been distinctive because, unlike in most advanced economies, the media industries were composed of private and publicly traded firms, which were only minimally regulated. For a discussion of the differences between the US media industry and that in the UK and Western Europe, see Hesmondhalgh (2002).

3. In many countries, women are culturally prohibited from seeing films in public theaters. Young men face no such prohibitions and are a target audience for films heavy in action and animated violence.
4. This is based on a yearly average. Because of the project nature of the industry, employment can show significant swings, year to year.
5. These figures are based on averages over the 2002–6 period.
6. A similar pattern undoubtedly appears in London because of its training programs and the gradual privatization of the media industry over time.

References


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