

**Technobohemians  
or the new  
Cybertariat?**

*New media work in Amsterdam  
a decade after the Web*

**ROSALIND GILL**

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Report prepared by Rosalind Gill  
for the Institute of Network Cultures



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Thanks also to Andy Pratt for stimulating discussions about new media work.

This report is dedicated to all the new media workers who took part in the research: Thank you for taking the time and trouble to share your experiences. I hope this report will make a positive difference to your working lives.

## Biographical note about the author

Rosalind Gill is a teacher and researcher based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is author of *The Gender-Technology Relation* (with Keith Grint) and her new book *Gender and the Media* was published by Polity press in November 2006. She conducted research on new media work for the European Commission in 2000, and published some of the results relating to new inequalities in this field in an influential article entitled 'Cool, creative and egalitarian?' She is currently preparing a book about women and the web, and completing analysis of 180 interviews with web designers in London, Brighton and Los Angeles.

# Executive summary

- This research aimed to explore people's experiences of working within the field of new media. It sought to go beyond the well-worn myths, which depict new media workers either as 'technobohemians' living in a new 'e-topia', or, conversely, as 'net slaves' or the new 'cybertariat', and instead it focused on individual's own accounts of their working lives.
- 34 semi-structured interviews were carried out with new media workers in and around Amsterdam. The sample comprised a mix of people on stable employment contracts, freelancers, or the directors of small new media companies. A range of different occupations within new media were included, for example programmer, designer, artist, project manager and content creator. The sheer range of 'occupations' covered by the new media is highlighted by the fact that there was hardly a single overlap in participants' self-descriptions of their role or job title.
- An important point to note is the extent to which people moved between different work statuses, both over time and at the same time. Most people had experience both of freelancing and of working for an employer. Many also had experience of establishing their own business. This research suggests that all contractual statuses should be regarded as fluid and subject to change.
- People working in new media have an extraordinary passion and enthusiasm for the field. This goes beyond individual projects, and frequently relates to the broader development of the Web and Web culture as a whole. Six broad features of new media work were highlighted to account for the love it engenders. These related to the opportunities it offered for autonomy and entrepreneurship, the playful and pleasurable nature of the work, the chances it offered to innovate, its potential as a medium for communication, its opportunities for community and political activism, and the 'coolness' of the industry.
- Money was not cited as a key attraction of new media. Looking at the sums earned by workers in the field, this seems entirely appropriate. More than one third of respondents were earning less than €20,000 per year. However, just over one third were earning above the national average (modal) income, with more than €30,000 per year. There was a marked disparity in earnings between different kinds of work in new media, with technical/programming skills and project management more highly rewarded than content creation or artistic/design work. Equally significant was the income disparity between people with different kind of contractual statuses: more than half of freelancers or company owners were earning less than €20,000 per year, and indeed half of these were earning less than €10,000 annually. In contrast, 9 out of 10 employees on a steady contract earned more than €30,000 per year.
- Alongside pay disadvantage, freelancers (and some small entrepreneurs) also dealt with conditions that were generally much poorer than those on stable contracts in relation to access to benefits, insurance and pension schemes.
- The starkest disparity between the working lives of employed new media workers and

their freelance counterparts relates to the number of hours worked. People employed tended to work between 35 and 40 hours per week, whilst freelancers and company owners worked between 55 and 80 hours per week, with the average length of the working week being 65 hours. Freelancers routinely had to work through the night, and for many this caused exhaustion and worry. For others, this was experienced as part of the 'buzz' of the field, and a certain macho culture prevailed in some places in which working long hours was a badge of commitment.

- New media workers are extremely highly educated, with the majority of participants in this research being qualified up to or above degree level. Approximately half had degrees in subjects such as art, design, media and communication studies or some aspect of IT which had led them (more or less) directly into the field. The remainder had education in a diverse range of subjects.
- Many, but not all, participants were highly critical of the education they had received at college or university – particularly those who had hoped their degree or Masters program would help prepare them for working in the field. Their criticisms centred on the dominance of theory over practice in education, the dated quality of much teaching, and the lack of training that would prepare people for 'freelance futures' – that is, for having to find and sustain one's own work biography. The vast majority of participants preferred informal learning or 'learning on the job' as a way of developing their skills.
- In a field in which knowledge changes at an extraordinarily rapid pace, and new packages and standards proliferate, most people experience significant pressure related to 'keeping up'. Individuals who were employed often had access to funded training courses, whilst others had to pay the costs in time and money for their own ongoing development.
- People in new media move rapidly between different kinds of employment – sometimes freelancing, sometimes working for a company, and at other times setting up their own business. Some people also combine these, dividing their weeks accordingly. The informal nature of the field is central to understanding individuals' work biographies. Only 2% of jobs/work opportunities discussed in these interviews were achieved via traditional means (e.g. responding to publicly placed advertisements). The remainder were obtained through personal contacts in the guise of teachers, students, clients, friends and networks. This led to a kind of 'compulsory sociality' in which networking was the norm, and people could lose out by dint of not having the right contacts.
- The informality of the field raises questions about fairness and equality, particularly in relation to gender, age, ethnicity and disability – given the documented tendencies for people to hire 'in their own image'. Questions also need to be raised about how successful informal networking is as a way of distributing work opportunities.
- Freelance workers faced particular problems in finding enough work, and regulating the flow of work. In order to earn enough money and to build a reputation there was a pressure to 'never say no to a job', which could lead to intense periods of working, followed by very little work for long periods. They also experienced challenges relating to

the isolation of working freelance, and the lack of affordable work spaces.

- People who were running a company experienced many of the same pressures as freelancers. Many felt unprepared for the diverse challenges of running a business – legal, financial, and people management – alongside the work itself. A particular anxiety related to the responsibility of hiring other people.
- Insecurity was a pervasive feature of many respondents' lives. Low pay meant that few had pensions or inability-to-work insurance, or other benefits, and this caused considerable concern – particularly among older participants. It was extremely difficult for some people to bridge the gap between projects. Many people working for themselves did not take holidays of any kind because of financial and time pressures. People employed by companies were not free of insecurity: many were on very short-term contracts and/or feared that their job was vulnerable due to company restructuring. There was often a notable disjuncture between their *potential* future earnings (including share options within the company) and their *actual* pay and security of tenure.
- Very few of our participants were parents, despite being an age cohort in which this is relatively common. Many people expressed the view that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to combine parenting with new media work. For those who wanted to have children, this caused some stress and some considered leaving the field in order to have children.
- A belief in the essentially egalitarian nature of the field of new media is strong, and many people believed that no one was underrepresented or disadvantaged. A small number of people talked about the under-representation of older people and women. The youth-domination of the field was explained in terms of its relative newness. To account for the relative lack of women, a social-technical divide was often invoked, in which men were presented as naturally technologically skilled and women as good communicators. The 'laddish' culture of some new media workplaces might also explain the unequal representation of women.
- The racial homogeneity of the field was not noted by many respondents. Two migrant workers discussed the particular challenges they face as non-Dutch, but these were not visible to the majority of white participants.
- New media workers highlighted a number of key characteristics one would need to survive in the field. These included stamina, ability to learn fast, flexibility, creativity, communication skills, and an eye for future trends.
- Respondents reflected on how new media was changing and evolving. Four key differences from the early days of the 1990s were noted: increasing professionalization, greater specialization, decreasing utopianism, and more commercialism.
- It was striking to note that many participants found it difficult to imagine their future in new media. The insecurity and precariousness of the work contributed to making the future unthinkable. Despite this, the enthusiasm for new media was palpable and undiminished.



# Introduction: beyond the myths

What are we to make of someone who says they love their work and cannot imagine doing anything they enjoy more, yet earns so little that they can never take a holiday, let alone afford insurance or a pension? How are we to think about a person who is passionate about the creative work they do for up to 80 hours each week yet feel fearful that they will not be able to have the children they long for because of the time and money pressures they face? How are we to reconcile the enormous enthusiasm for web-work alongside equally palpable anxieties about not keeping up, missing out on the next big innovation, or not finding the next project?

These are some of the questions that this research addresses. It looks in detail at new media workers' experiences, in all their ambivalence and contradictoriness, and it turns a sociologist's eye on a field that is supposed to represent the future of work, asking questions about how new media – well-known for constantly reinventing itself – might be reinvented to provide opportunities that still inspire love and passion, yet do so in ways that are sustainable, open, inclusive and egalitarian.

The experience of new media work is often summed up in one of two stereotypes. On the one hand is the image of 'net slaves', the 'precariat' or the 'cybertariat', which sees web-workers as the victims of the move to more flexible, deregulated forms of working. On the other is the representation of the 'technobohemians' or 'digerati', a new information elite, at work in a web-based 'e-topia' (Lessard & Baldwin, 2000; Huws, 2003).

This report turns a sociologist's eye on a field that is supposed to represent the future of work, asking questions about how new media - well-known for constantly reinventing itself - might be reinvented to provide opportunities that still inspire love and passion, yet do so in ways that are sustainable, open, inclusive and egalitarian.

These polarized stereotypes have taken hold because there is so little public knowledge about the actual experiences and working lives of new media workers.

New media workers are invoked all the time in a diverse range of contexts – yet they rarely appear in their own right or with their own agendas. In sociology, new media workers emerge as the poster boys and girls for the 'Brave New World of work' (Beck, 2000). They are the iconic exemplars of the move away from traditional notions of career (Flores & Gray, 1999; Leadbeter & Oakley, 1999; Sennett, 2000) to more informal, insecure and discontinuous employment (Beck, 2000). They surface again in debates about the 'knowledge society' – this time brought forth to wear the mantle of 'reprogrammable labor' (Castells, 1996; 2000), signifying a future in which the need to update skills and knowledge will be a constant requirement. And, more recently, they surface again in debates about 'immaterial labor' and 'cognitive capitalism' (Hardt & Negri, 2004) or 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2005) with precariousness or precarity the main focus here (Butler, 2004).

In contemporary policy discourses, too, new media workers take centre stage; this time as part of a 'creative class' (Florida, 2002), as 'creative clusters' (Harper, 1996) or as members of the 'cultural industries' which are charged with providing a panacea for all ills: regenerating urban areas, fostering community, improving quality of life . . . the list is endless.

What is missing from most of these invocations, however, is any interest in new media workers themselves. They have become standard bearers for any number of different positions or initiatives, yet little attention is paid to their own voices or

experiences (but see Batt et al., 1999; Kotamraju, 2002; Ross, 2003; Contu & Willmott, 2004; Gottscahl & Henninger, 2004; Indergaard, 2004; Mayer-Ahuja & Wolf, 2004; Perrons, 2004; Neff et al., 2005; Damarin, 2006; Mayerhofer & Mokre, 2006; von Osten, 2006; Gottchall & Kroos, 2007; Perrons, 2007; Pratt, 2007). In this project we set out to remedy this through a study of what web-workers themselves think and feel about their work experiences. In-depth interviews were carried out with 34 largely Amsterdam based new media workers. We asked participants about the nature of their work, the reasons for choosing this field, and the hours, pay, pressures and pleasures of a life in new media.

The results of that research are presented here. The report is divided into 10 sections. In the first section, the process of conducting the research is explained in detail, and some key characteristics of the sample are noted – for example, the breakdown between freelancers and people who are in stable employment. The remainder of the book reports on the findings. In the next section I consider the intense love and passion that people expressed for their work and the field of new media in general, and explore some of the accounts that were put forward to explain this. Next I turn the focus on working hours, pay and conditions in new media work. The fourth section explores education and learning within new media, examining the backgrounds of people in the field and reporting on their preferred ways of learning new skills. The fifth section takes up the issue of working hours in more detail, looking specifically at people's experiences of the pressure to 'keep up' and always be prepared for the next big thing. Here the report attempts to convey both the excitement and anxiety this produces.

Next, I turn to work biographies, highlighting their flexibility and fluidity, and exploring the centrality of informal networks to the operation of the field. Particular issues affecting freelancers and small entrepreneurs are considered carefully. The seventh major section of the report focuses on the precarious and insecure nature of work in the new media field, and looks at how workers manage and negotiate this, as well as illuminating some of its costs. Combining new media work with parenting posed a challenge to some of our participants, and their views are reported here. Section eight of the report interrogates the idea that new media is a field that is cool, creative and egalitarian. The relative under-representation of women, older people and ethnic minorities is considered here, alongside the accounts offered by new media workers for why this might be. The report casts a skeptical eye on the frequently expressed opinion that men are naturally more technically competent and women are naturally better communicators.

Everyone who took part in the research was invited to tell us what they thought of as the key qualities necessary to survive in the field, and the answers to this question are reported in section nine of this document. Finally, the tenth section examines some of the difficulties for new media workers of imagining the future, and explores the implications of this. The last section, of course, is a short conclusion.

## **A NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY**

Before moving on, a word of caution is needed about the terminology used here. The term 'new media' is very vague, and I have used it with hesitation, occasionally substituting 'Web-workers' to break up the monotony and repetitiveness. It seemed, however, 'the best of a bad bunch' of the available options (as the English phrase goes), and its one strength is that it captures something of the diversity of the new and emerging parts of this field. Most people saw themselves as working in new media,

as participating in a communicative revolution associated with the Web; only a tiny minority preferred to see themselves as working in something more traditionally conceptualised as IT. In all cases, individuals own self-definitions have been respected.

ALL NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT THE ANONYMITY OF PARTICIPANTS.

## Conducting the research: Methods and sample

This research was carried out by means of semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was deemed more appropriate than a questionnaire survey or other quantitative instrument, in order to allow respondents to ‘make their own meanings’ and characterise their experiences in their own terms, rather than in categories pre-selected by the research team.

Thirty-four interviews were carried out with individuals in a range of different Web-based professions. Random sampling was impossible because of the lack of a comprehensive list of Web workers to serve as the sampling frame. Therefore the sample was constructed with heterogeneity in mind – to capture the experiences of people who had worked in the field for varying lengths of time, doing a range of different things, with a variety of kinds of contracts or employment statuses. The sample was also designed to include people of different genders, ages and ethnicities, as well as a mix of people with experiences in commercial and non-profit organizations.

The resulting sample is extremely diverse, representing a mix of permanent employees, freelancers and entrepreneurs, and comprising 7 different groups of ‘occupations’ or clusters of activities (see table 1). As Amanda Damarin (2006) has argued Web work renders the notion of ‘occupation’ problematic, challenging established demarcations such as stable tasks or clear boundaries. The ideal and typical understanding of occupations ‘includes three things: a particular group of people, a particular type of work, and an organised body of structure, other than the workplace itself’ (Abbott, 1995: 873-4). In contrast, Web work often involves loosely or informally

connected networks of people, a blurring of tasks and a porosity of roles within different projects. While some self-identify in terms of a particular job e.g. interaction designer or programmer, many others reject such labels and move between different kinds of activities in order to see a project through to completion.

connected networks of people, a blurring of tasks and a porosity of roles within different projects. While some self-identify in terms of a particular job – e.g. interaction designer or programmer – many others reject such labels and move between different kinds of activities in order to see a project through to completion. This makes it all the more important to follow the spirit of Appadurai’s injunction to ‘follow the things themselves’ – in this case to follow Web workers as they construct their own accounts of what they do and as they build their own unique work biographies.

Participants were recruited to the study in a range of different ways, primarily through word-of-mouth. Some people were contacted after a conference marking ‘A Decade of Web design’ ([HTTP://WWW.DECADEOFWEBDESIGN.ORG/](http://www.decadeofwebdesign.org/)); others via a network associated with a major Amsterdam based web agency; and others

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of fields/activities**

Management (including project leader) .....	9
Content creation (concept, content, texts) .....	9
Technical (programming, testing) .....	7
Design (visual/graphic) .....	4
Interaction (information structure) .....	2
Artist .....	2
Research .....	1

still through ‘snowballing’ (that is, asking participants to suggest others who might like to take part).

Participants were invited to take part in an interview about ‘work in new media’ in which they were asked about a variety of experiences of working in the field. Interviews took place in a variety of settings – workplaces, cafes or restaurants, or a hired room. In all cases they were carried out by one of two white

female researchers in their late 30s (one Dutch, the other British) or, on some occasions, both researchers. Some interviews were conducted in English. Their duration was between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours, with the majority lasting between 1 and 1.5 hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the exception of one in which the respondent chose to send answers to questions over e-mail.

The interviews covered a range of different topics: the respondent’s current work, their work biography and reasons for moving into new media, their education and training, both formal and informal, and their reflections on new media work – its pleasures, challenges, and so on. The final part of the interview was devoted to future plans. The tone of the interviews was pleasant and informal, and the topic guide was not adhered to rigidly. Rather, individuals were encouraged to talk about their own experiences, dilemmas, problems and hopes, and to tell us what it is like to be engaged in this kind of work in Amsterdam at this particular time. Most interviewees were happy to do this, and, as in much research, we had the impression that the interviews were experienced as enjoyable opportunities to talk, by the majority of people who took part.

Interviewees were invited to tell us how they described their own work, and amongst the job titles we heard there was barely a single overlap. Self-described job titles included: programmer, interaction designer, editor, copywriter, business manager, artist, Flash illustrator, researcher, content manager, freelance concept maker, software document writer, consultant, project manager, website developer, and entrepreneur.

## THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

The research sample comprised 34 people in and around Amsterdam: 22 were male and 12 were female. Four were under 30 and three over 50; the remainder were in their 30s and 40s. Seven of our interviewees were not Dutch, but lived and worked in Amsterdam, and we considered it important to include the experiences of ethnic minorities – whilst noting the overall whiteness of the field (an issue that will be returned to later).

As noted above, the research aims to include the experiences of individuals occupying different work statuses. The sample is roughly divided between

people in relatively stable employment, people who owned or directed companies, and those who worked in new media on a freelance basis. However, lest these contractual statuses appear to be stable or unchanging a word of caution is needed. Far from being fixed designations the statuses changed on an extraordinarily rapid and regular basis. Most people had experience of freelancing and of working on a steady contract for an employer. Many also had experience of establishing their own business and working in this for varying amounts of time. Moreover, as well as changing statuses *over time*, some

people combined different statuses at the *same time* – working freelance in their own time, for example, but also in paid employment to ‘pay the bills’ or ‘learn more skills’.

In short, it is hard to overestimate the flexibility of working patterns and careers in this field. For this reason, we have resisted any attempt to quantify the numbers involved, and instead stress that all contractual statuses should be regarded as fluid and subject to change. These matters are so central to the experience of new media work that an entire section is devoted to work biographies later in this report. This gives space to considering the meanings different types of work status had for new media workers themselves, rather than assuming this from the outside.

In terms of ‘occupations’ we were struck by the extraordinary diversity. Interviewees were invited to tell us how they described their own work, and amongst the job titles we heard there was barely a single overlap. Self-described job titles included: programmer, interaction designer, editor, copywriter, business manager, artist, Flash illustrator, researcher, content manager, freelance concept maker, software document writer, consultant, project manager, website developer, and entrepreneur. Drawing on our understanding of the nature of the work each person was doing (which respondents fleshed out in the interviews), we grouped these diverse job titles under seven broad headings (see table 1) There are some dangers associated with doing this – namely inscribing singularity and order onto practices that are more fluid and contingent – thus the flexibility of some job descriptions needs to be borne in mind. The categorizations are useful general devices, but they do not capture the ways in which some (particularly freelance) workers moved between different activities and roles. The extent to which there is increasing specialization and differentiation of jobs within the field of ‘new media’ is something that is interrogated throughout this report.

## The love of new media

One of the most striking findings of this research is the extraordinary enthusiasm that web-workers have for their field. Expressions of love and ardor were the norm. Moreover, it was notable that our interviewees’ commitment went beyond individual projects but related to the broader development of the Web and Web culture as a whole. Sociologists of work would be hard-pressed to find another group of workers who expressed similar levels of passion both for the work itself and for the field more generally.

A whole range of different features of the field helps to engender this deep affection: the opportunities to work autonomously, to be involved in something cool and cutting edge, the chance to innovate or communicate. In total we identified five broad types of reasons that individuals gave us for wanting to work in new media. We call these ‘repertoires’. They related to autonomy and entrepreneurship, pleasure, innovation, communication, political activism and the ‘coolness’ of the industry. It is important to note that these were not mutually exclusive and many individuals drew on several repertoires to account for their desire to work in new media.

### ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND AUTONOMY

Easily the most dominant reason interviewees offered to explain their love of their work related to the opportunities it offered for autonomy and entrepreneurship. Our respondents talked about the pleasure of being able to ‘create something for yourself’,

to be able to control one's own hours and the kinds of projects one takes on, and more generally to 'be your own boss'.

'I wouldn't like to work in a big company. And the entrepreneurship is a lot of fun as well. You're constantly thinking about that' (Rickert, male, 20s).

'What I really like is the freedom of being an entrepreneur. There is nothing like it, I choose my own clients and I go when I want to go. I can set my own goals and work with whoever I like . . . there is no one between me and the client, no project or team leaders' (Danielle, female, 30s).

'It is so much fun, we couldn't work for a boss, I can tell you that. Neither of us is able to work for a boss, we are too single-minded . . . The work is fast and that is exciting. We profile ourselves as executives plus – we don't just execute, we also give advice and improve the original concept' (Joost, male, 30s).

'At the end of the day I don't like working for a boss. I don't. And I can imagine that I couldn't work from nine until six. Not because of the hours, because I make them anyway, but you are so locked in at an office' (Alfred, male, 30s).

'In companies if you want to smoke you have to go to the hallway. You're constantly surrounded by people and they pay you so you have to do what they tell you to do. I'm not creative on command. I might not do anything for days and then suddenly come up with a brilliant line of code' (Robert, male 40s)

Perhaps not surprisingly, it was freelance new media workers and 'entrepreneurs' who had set up their own companies who were most likely to draw on this repertoire. It poses the freedom and autonomy of working for oneself against the banality of office-based, hierarchically organized a traditional employment. However, even those new media workers who were not self-employed, but did work for larger companies, sometimes talked about the autonomy of their work compared with others. This related either to the intrinsic challenges of the work or to the ability to carry it out at times or in ways

most suitable to oneself. For example, a male in his 20s who was employed (on a zero hours contract!) made much of his appreciation of his autonomy:

'I determine what I do, whenever I do it. Sometimes in the middle of the night when there is a disturbance' (Ralf, male, 20s).

A further minority of respondents talked about autonomy in political terms. For these people, working on the Web offered a way of being involved in activism and influencing social change. It offered connections to a potentially global network of others, in a medium that was often regarded as inherently democratic, in the sense of being beyond the control of national legislatures.

'I like being part of a global community without a centralized government holding back information' (Bas, male, 30s).

## THE PLEASURE OF THE WORK

The sheer enjoyment of the work of new media was mentioned by several respondents. For some people, their entry into the field had come out of their enthusiasm, and several interviewees told us that they felt their job was 'like being paid for your hobby'.

'It's a hobby and work combined' (Yvette, female, 30s),

Others noted the enjoyment of being in a field where you could carry on learning:

'You really have to like learning' (Ralf, male, 20s).

## THE OPPORTUNITIES TO INNOVATE

Enjoyment of learning was mentioned by many of our interviewees. But some tied this to a belief in and enthusiasm for innovation – built on a sense that the ‘Internet revolution’ (as one respondent called it) is still unfinished. Some people stressed that his allowed huge possibilities for creativity: ‘the only limit is our imagination’, as one man put. ‘We are learning, making it up, creating it’.

‘It’s all about innovation, everything I do. It’s a constant learning process. I like that since I am a curious person . . . as long as one is in IT one is innovating’ (Stefan, male, 50s).

‘I wanted to be a pioneer’ (Robert, male, 40s).

‘It’s very important to me to be working on the cutting edge. It defines me. I lose interest in things that remain the same’ (Elisabeth, female, 40s).

‘New media does not have a tradition like other art forms have and that is why it is open to a lot of people to develop it. It’s still not finished’ (Hilda, female, 40s).

It’s interesting to note that some people highlighted precisely this feature as a negative aspect of the field:

‘I don’t like the idea that development never stops. It is never finished. I have a permanent disgruntled feeling because it’s never completely finished’ (Linda, female, 30s).

## THE CHANCE TO COMMUNICATE IN NEW WAYS

Besides innovation, the opportunity to communicate was also highly prized by many of our interviewees. The excitement associated with being involved in a new mass medium was palpable. Moreover, some people stressed the enjoyment of the challenge of finding new ways of communicating in this medium.

‘What attracted me, I think, was helping people communicate in a medium which is so much more mass than anything before. There has never been a medium which puts out so much . . . is so massive’ (Sebastiaan, male, 40s).

‘I developed a visual language . . . I really wanted to make things easier for users . . . you learn how to make communication, you learn how to directly speak to the target group, as stupid as that might sound. I would love to do more with that’ (Alfred, male, 30s).

## COOL AND HAPPENING WORK

The status of new media as ‘cool’, ‘hip’ and ‘happening’ was much discussed in the interviews. Some people asserted that there is nothing remotely ‘cool’ about new media.

‘It is not cool. Well it has a creative side, but if you say it’s cool, it’s no longer cool. It is still IT and that is not cool’ (Peter, male, 30s).

Others argued passionately that the coolness of the industry was part of what attracted them to it. Here the ‘hipness’ of the ‘product’ and the success of the field are seen as powerful attractions:

‘It was a growth market with a hipper product . . . better to work on a successful product in a growth market than to work on a failing product’ (Jaap, male, 30s).

‘The atmosphere at work is relaxed, jovial. There’s music in the office, people have lively conversations. No dull factory of humanoids’ (Bas, male 30s)

For others, still, it was the organization of work and in particular the informality of

workplaces that truly earned the label 'cool'.

'It's very free and informal – maybe a little too *cosy* (*gezellig*) sometimes. But people like working here a lot. There's an excellent atmosphere' (Liesbet, female, 30s).

'It's a friend's club that got out of hand. It's very unpretentious' (Wilhelm, male, 30s).

These, then, are the main reasons people offered for their desire to work in new media. It is worth pointing out that money and financial reward are not among them. Indeed, in contrast with the reported findings of studies in the US (Batt et al., 1999; Indergaard, 2004; Kotamraju, 2002; Ross, 2003) the possibility of earning large sums of money was not mentioned by a single participant. If anything the respondents in this study expressed an active *disinterest* in money, highlighting instead their genuine love and enthusiasm for the possibilities the work itself afforded them.

'It's not my ambition to make a lot of money. And the last thing I want is to advertise for myself and lie to people constantly' (Robert, male, 40s).

'If I wanted to make a lot of money I'd rather do something else. I can tell you that' (Hugo, male, 30s).

## Working in new media: pay, hours and conditions

Money may have been repudiated as a key attraction of this work, but how much were respondents earning from new media? Moreover, what kind of contracts and conditions did they experience? How long do they spend working each week and what kinds of opportunities are there for individuals in new media to achieve a balance between paid work and other activities?

Table 2

### Pay in new media

Low pay (under €10,000 per year) .....	4
Below-average 10 – €20,000 per year .....	6
Average(modal for the Netherlands) .....	6
Above average (30 to €40,000) .....	4
High (over €40,000) .....	8

Unknown .....

.....	6
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Generally speaking, then, as can be seen in table 2, those involved in highly technical or management roles earned more than those who created content, self-defined as artists, or worked as designers. But as significant – if not more so – was the rates of pay relative to contractual status. As already noted, a central concern for this research was to learn about the experiences of people with a range of different contractual statuses. Thus our sample contains a mix of people employed on (relatively) stable contracts, freelancers and entrepreneurs who owned and/or directed new media companies. There is a vast disparity between the pay, hours and conditions experienced in these different

groups. The content of the work might be quite similar but the time spent and rewards given for the work varied enormously, depending on whether one was an employee or a freelancer.

**Table 3**  
**Pay by contractual status**

	Freelance	Employed
Under €20,000	10	0
20 to €30,000	5	1
over €30,000	3	9

Table 4 shows that of the 15 freelancers or company owners who responded to a question about earnings, more than half were earning less than €20,000 per year. Indeed, a further half of these were earning less than €10,000 annually. In contrast, amongst employees, nine out of 10 were earning more than €30,000 – a significant proportion of them were earning over €50,000. Seven respondents chose not to tell us about their income.

In general, freelancers earned significantly less than similarly qualified/experienced counterparts who were employed on relatively stable contracts. Freelancers pay rates might appear superficially to be reasonably high, when quoted as hourly figures, yet such rates were not an accurate reflection of real pay – not least because of the pressures to ‘pitch low’ in order to get a piece of work, or because of the marked underestimation by freelancers of the time in which a project would take to complete. Respondents repeatedly told us that ‘it always takes me three times longer than I think it will’, with the effect that all the ‘excess’ hours are unpaid. Time budgeting and other ‘business’ or self-management skills were occasionally mentioned in interviews as desirable skills to learn, yet it is not clear that such training would actually help freelancers, given the competitive pressures on prices that most feel constrained by – that is, ‘to win the contract, you sometimes have to quote it for less than it will actually cost you’. Without an intervention such as fixed union rates for the job – as exist in the highly unionized film industry, for example – it might be expected that the freelancer who pitched at the appropriate level would simply not get the job. Interviewees were painfully aware of this.

Another factor was the desire to do good work for organizations to whom one was sympathetic:

‘I would try to negotiate about the price beforehand. But it depends, because usually I work for institutes that are sympathetic to me and I just think well, it’s good to make it. You already know that you can go as far as their budget and no further, and if you don’t have anything to do at that moment most of the time you take the job anyway. That’s how you get into that trap [of not being paid enough]’ (Liam, male, 40s).

As well as pay disadvantage, freelancers (and some small entrepreneurs) also dealt with degraded conditions that were generally far worse than those on stable contracts. Generally they were without access to benefits, insurance and pension schemes, and the absence of these ‘safety nets’ caused serious anxieties about becoming ill or having an accident, or having to work into old age. (The impact of this kind of insecurity alongside the precarious nature of finding work is discussed later in this report.) Moreover,

respondents working freelance told us that they did not or could not take holidays. This was either because of financial hardship or because they dared not to be away in case they missed an opportunity for work.

'One shouldn't underestimate the time things take in general. Everything takes longer than you think. I usually charge a little for project management to the customer. And I've noticed that the client loves to talk about the site, they come back time and time again and it seems more important to meet that I get the website working...' (Alfred, male 30s)

'Because of the money you have to stay on the job. You can choose between a weekend in Paris for €1000 or earning €1000 and you usually do the latter. And if you don't watch out you never take a holiday anymore' (Alfred, male, 30s).

'I haven't taken a holiday for two or three years'.  
Int: 'Why?'

'Partly because I didn't have time, but also, like a few times my partners did not have time, or something happened. Basically I don't have money. I do a lot of work and in the end you don't have enough money to do everything' (Liam, male 40s).

## WORKING HOURS

Perhaps the starkest disparity between the working lives of employed new media workers and their freelance counterparts, however, relates to the number of hours they worked. People employed on regular contracts almost uniformly worked between 35 and 40 hours per week. Indeed, if they worked longer, this was often classified as overtime for which they would be paid, or they would accrue 'time off in lieu'.

'I have a steady contract. I work 40 hours a week. I save up 4 hours each week and then I have a total of 10 weeks of holiday a year' (Hugo, male, 40s).

Freelancers and company owners or directors, by contrast, tended to work between 55 and 80 hours per week, with the average working 65 hours.

Int: 'How many hours a week do you work?'

'Like 60 or so. Sometimes up to 80 when a project needs to be finished. In the last months they made three games a week and that means working day and night. Banners always have to be finished the next day. Websites take much longer' (Joost, male, 30s).

'The last half-year I worked at six or seven days a week. After a while that gets nasty. Plus I worked 60 hours a week, there were just so many assignments and questions . . . only then I am jealous of people with a steady job, they have those steady holidays' (Karl, male, 50s).

'I am co-owner and the rest of them work 90% – 36 hours. I used to work 90% but when you work for yourself, you quit the four days a week, I can tell you that! Now I work at least 60 hours per week – well, it depends on pitches and administration' (Yvette, female, 30s).

'Well I think the hours that we make... It is sometimes really incredible. Working through the night happens regularly, and if you have kids as well... well I don't know. Plus you have to keep up and that takes time and energy as well' (Alfred, male 30s)

One respondent told us exactly how he settled upon the length of his working week: he learned from others about the maximum number of hours it was possible to work over a long and sustained period without burning out, and he tried to keep to this number: 65 hours each week.

**Int: 'How many hours do you work a week?'**

'Oh 60 or 65. I don't want to work more because then I become burned out and my concentration lessens. We also have programmers who work 70 hours for two weeks and then they are not worth anything the week after . . .' (Thomas, male, 30s).

Many people regularly had to work through the night in order to finish projects, but then found themselves in other periods without any work at all; such a pattern of working is described by Andy Pratt (2000) as 'bulimic'.

'Well I think the hours that we make . . . It is sometimes really incredible. Working through the night happens regularly, and if you have kids as well . . . well I don't know. Plus you have to keep up and that takes time and energy as well' (Alfred, male, 30s).

For some, like Alfred, such long hours and constant demands were experienced as exhausting and as potentially problematic when he projected himself into a future that might involve being a parent. But for others, working at night or through the night was part of the 'buzz' of the work.

'Sometimes I have to do research at night, but I'm always at home at night and at the weekends. I guess with my own company I'll put everything into it. But work can give you energy so that is no problem. That's when you are doing what you like' (Jaap, male, 30s).

And sometimes, even among female interviewees, working very long hours was almost a badge of commitment:

**Int: 'How does it fit in with the rest of your life?'**

'I don't do anything else. Well, some things. But it is creative and I put everything in there. And if you don't love what you do, you better stop'.

**Int: 'So you work at home as well?'**

'Yes, but mostly I stay here that long that I'd better go to sleep when I get home!' (Joke, female, 30s).

Even this interviewee, however, did acknowledge that she might want to work for fewer hours as she grew older and 'to have some time for myself'.

## Education and learning

An important aim of this research was to discover something about the educational backgrounds of people working in new media, to hear about their routes into the field, and to learn about their different educational experiences – both in formal courses of study and through more informal means (e.g. self-teaching, learning from others, learning via the Web).

The first thing to note here is the extremely high level of educational qualifications amongst people who took part in this study. All but three of the participants were university graduates and approximately half of these also had a further qualification (sometimes a Masters degree). Without sufficient overall data about employment in new media in general, it is impossible to know whether this is representative of the field or an artefact of the sample. Nevertheless it does concur with an earlier cross European study (Gill & Dodd, 2000; Gill, 2002), which concluded that European new media workers are

amongst the most highly educated groups of workers in the world.

The range of subjects studied at university by participants in this research included everything from anthropology to linguistics to physics. Approximately half did degrees in subjects with direct relevance to new media. The vast majority of these were graduates in art, design or media and communication studies, but one individual had studied IT, and another telecommunications, and some had done Masters degrees with a more specific focus – for example, interaction design.

In terms of educational experiences, there was a marked split amongst our interviewees. Some, particularly those who had specialized in a skill that was close to their current work, looked back upon their time at university as one of the few opportunities they had had to get to know and work on something in real depth. One graduate of an industrial design program had created an innovative visual language whilst at university, aided by a well-known professor. This interviewee, a Dutch man in his 30s, felt that he had been at the cutting edge whilst at university, but have never returned to it ever since leaving:

‘I feel I should go back to the University and do research in cooperation with the company’ (Alfred, male, 30s).

‘It is all learning on the job. There is no course you can send me to where I can learn something. By the time I have finished that job 13 other things will have changed. There is not even a school course for this kind of job.’ (Sebastiaan, male 40s)

By contrast, others who had also specialized in ‘relevant’ subjects were highly critical of their university education. Three kinds of criticism were widespread. First, there was a criticism about the dominance of theory over practice in university education. Secondly, respondents argued that university and college staff were out of date in what they taught. Thirdly, many people would have appreciated more preparation for working in business environments. This might include training in management skills, dealing with budgets, and also – fundamentally – being prepared for a freelance future

in which students would have to pitch for work and run every aspect of their working lives for themselves.

‘Vocational training is crap in the Netherlands. In IT for sure we have 10 interns but they can’t teach me a new thing of what they learned in school’.

**Int: ‘So what should be improved there?’**

‘Well, more work in practice. And have good teaching from people in practice and not someone with a teacher’s diploma and a small computer degree next to it . . . But the good people from practice, those are the ones you need’ (Joke, female, 30s).

‘You need more business knowledge when you have your own business. To learn how to network. To learn how to make presentations’ (Joost, male, 30s).  
For many people, it is the speed of change that offers a challenge to formal education.

‘It is all learning on the job. There is no course you can send me to where I can learn something. By the time I have finished that job 13 other things will have changed. There is not even a school course for this kind of job’ (Sebastiaan, male, 40s).

‘In a course they teach you the knowledge of three years ago. The teachers aren’t

good enough. The courses are for beginners' (Robert, male, 40s).

'The tragedy of schools is that the people who are up to their neck in the practice have no time to teach. The people who are not up to their neck quickly have a kind of small obsolete body of knowledge. The course should be integrated in the practice. That's the only way' (Sebastian, male, 40s).

## INFORMAL LEARNING

For the majority, then, learning is necessarily done informally alone or with others.

'I look around on the Internet. I don't have an official education in the field.

There are some people who have helped me in the past, who have looked over my shoulder, but I don't need that any more now. Sometimes I just have to make do. For a DVD I was looking for software and I learned it in a night' (Harrie, male, 30s).

'I read technical magazines. In the video field. I know about the new computers. I see all the new television and radio equipment. And through the Internet I read, like, specialized newsgroups. To work with the programs is for me natural. I'm not a programmer but I find out which possibilities are there and I use a lot of editing programs and I learn them in one or two days'.

Int: 'Do you teach yourself?'

'Yes I do. Anything with buttons or a keyboard I can find out myself. And I read the manual. Many people don't read the manual and then they don't know what to do. I learn 70% from the manual and I learned the other 30% from doing it. Or I ask my colleagues. But mostly people call me for advice. That's the consultancy part I do. I think 20 or 30% of my time is devoted to learning – on a continuous basis' (Liam, male, 30s).

'I'm learning on the job, constantly actually. But there's no HTML any more. I took a course in JavaScript and style sheets to learn some more details. I should do Flash I suppose. But I just let it all happen. It usually only entails a new interface and they remain design tools, that's it' (Hilda, female, 40s).

Moreover, some people argue that courses are no substitute for teaching oneself in a hands-on manner.

'I took Microsoft Certified Engineer, I took TCP/IP and things like that because the company told you to do that. But they are only papers . . .' (Joke, female, 30s).

Int: 'Do you prefer to learn it by yourself?'

'I think it's the only way' (Ralf, male, 40s).

Int: 'Do you often take courses?'

'No, I don't. I could dedicate myself to learning Java, but instead I just ask other team members and make the best of it. Learning by doing in other word.' (Merijn, male, 40s).

'I taught HTML myself. I learned it via newsgroups such as *deja* (now part of Google), then you have these enthusiastic people and you learn a lot from them . . .' (Thomas, male, 30s).

# Working and keeping up

**Int:** 'How much time approximately do you spend on keeping up with the knowledge in your field?'

'Sort of all the time' (Joost, male, 30s).

' I do find the speed of change intimidating at times, I admit that. I find it difficult to keep my work in check. I used to take work home with me, in order to be able to read. And that has become a habit.'

**Int:** and do you think that is a good thing or a bad thing?

Well it is a privilege to have a job which is also your hobby, but it shouldn't make you ill.'  
(Elisabeth, female, 40s)

In a field in which knowledge changes at an extraordinarily rapid pace, and new packages and standards proliferate, most people experience significant pressure to 'keep up' by staying abreast of current developments, and learning new skills. In this respect (as in others we have discussed already) people on relatively stable employment contracts usually occupied a position of advantage relative to freelancers or company directors. As noted already, such individuals were likely to be working significantly fewer hours each week, and also often received compensation for extra hours worked. In addition a number of

interviewees told us that their employers paid for them to keep up-to-date in the field by taking courses.

'I just finished a course and you can take as many courses as you want. You have to take the initiative, that is clear, but then everything is possible. For instance I just took a course at XXX to get some more inspiration. And soon I will start a course in management' (Liesbet, female, 30s).

'I take lots of courses: mainly marketing, project management. They do a lot about that here. They get offered to everybody. They are very generous with that here . . . oh yes and technical courses about mobile and Flash. I can program in Flash and in Java now' (Geert, male, 30s).

However, this access to courses was not always the case, and employment within even a supposedly 'progressive' company did not necessarily translate into opportunities to learn or develop ones skillset.

**Int:** 'How do you feel about further training courses?'

'Well it's funny you ask because XX where I work does not offer any official training courses. I think if I would go to the management team and claimed that it would be good for [the company] and for me I could take any training I wanted, but there is no official training programme. But I do think they won't want to miss me: three unproductive days, unthinkable! They'd rather replace people instead of investing in them. The average age at [company] is 32'  
(Alfred, male, 30s).

For freelancers, though, learning and keeping up were almost always done at the individual's own expense in terms of both money and time.

'I have established for myself that I have to do them in order to understand them. That's my way of learning. Then you develop a sense for it. Only then'.

**Int:** 'And how many hours do you spend on it, on average?'

'Not so much at the moment since I am so busy. And I have tight deadlines and I have to give them what they want . . . Say, 15 hours a week' (Danielle, female, 30s).

Given that such a large investments of time come on top of already very long working weeks, it is not surprising that some found this a source of anxiety.

'I do find the speed of change intimidating at times, I admit that. I find it difficult to keep my work in check. I used to take work home with me, in order to be able to read. And that has become a habit'.

**Int: 'And do you think that is a good thing or a bad thing?'**

'Well it is a privilege to have a job which is also your hobby, but it shouldn't make you ill' (Elisabeth, female, 40s).

'I do think I hope to get away from the computer. Plus I have this slight fear that I might not be able to keep up with all the technical developments. Also MP3 players and phones with video cameras are too much for me. I let that pass me by' (Hilda, female, 40s).

**Even the thought of having to keep up and constantly keep learning new skills could sometimes be experienced as oppressive:**

'A neighbor came by and he asked me whether I worked with Ajax yet. And I was like, oh my god I have to work with that and learn that now too. It's all a bit too much for me' (Danielle, female, 30s).

**Others, however, rejected as arbitrary the division of the day into work time and personal time, and appeared not to experience the need to constantly update one's skills as any kind of pressure.**

'It involves a lot of learning in my own time. But I regard this as my job because I disagree with the concept of "hobbies". I spent 24 hours a day, minus the time to sleep, eat, drink and do personal things. And not counting the time I do paid work. Roughly from 10 a.m. till 10 p.m. on average' (Richard, male, 30s).

'It doesn't go fast enough for me. Like video, that should have been beamed over the net a long time ago but only now is it starting . . .'

(Joke, female, 30s).

## Work biographies

As noted at the start of this report, work biographies in new media are extremely rich and complex. They bear little resemblance to traditional notions of the career with their expectations of linear development and progression up the hierarchy. New media workers in this study included freelancers, stable employees and company owners and directors. However, as highlighted in the methodological discussion earlier, these different designations change rapidly as people move between different types of employment status. The vast majority had experience of working freelance and being employed by a company. Many also had experience of setting up their own business.

Some very brief vignettes will help to capture the flexibility of new media work biographies:

XX is a woman in her 30s, who worked for 10 years at three different new media companies, employed on what she understood as stable and secure contracts. However, in the last company she lost her job due to a restructuring, and subsequently decided to set up her own web design studio, with a partner. She now runs this, but is worried about

Work biographies in new media are very flexible and change rapidly. Why, then, so much change and flexibility? What are the reasons that individuals move from freelancing to stable employment and back again or from stable employment to setting up a company? What do these different experiences of work mean to the people involved? Are there patterns in the shifts and movements or is it all down to individual idiosyncrasies?

its sustainability in the long term due to the extremely long hours she has to work.

XX, male and also in his early 30s, set up a company with two friends, immediately after graduating with a specific and highly marketable set of skills. He was then asked to join a very successful agency, and opted to take a two thirds contract with them, so that he could spend his remaining available time freelancing.

XX is a web worker in his early 50s. He has worked freelance on ICT projects for 15 years now, but believes that he has finally found a niche and intends to set up his own business in the next year, though he is concerned about all the financial and legal aspects of running a company – for which he has had no training and has no experience.

XX has been freelancing for 10 years, since her late 20s. She worries about keeping up with the field, and also worries about money. Ideally she would like to set up her own business, but is concerned about the responsibility of hiring other people.

XX, a man in his late 20s, works for a company that employs 20 people. He has recently been promoted to a management role, though is only on a six-month contract. Previously, he had his own web company, but wanted the security of employment, and also the opportunities to take on bigger, more complex projects.

XX describes himself as a person to whom ‘jobs usually just happen’. He doesn’t have a grand career narrative. He likes the immediacy of web work and enjoys the feeling of being part of a global community, but does not like freelancing. He finds working at home too isolating, and for that reason would rather be employed.

XX is co-owner of a web agency. Although he is only in his mid-20s, this is his second business. He started his first business with two friends he made at college, but they went their separate ways, and he subsequently worked for a year as an employee in a web agency, before deciding to set up on his own again.

As these vignettes show, work biographies in new media are very flexible and change rapidly. Why, then, so much change and flexibility? What are the reasons that individuals move from freelancing to stable employment and back again or from stable employment to setting up a company? What do these different experiences of work mean to the people involved? Are there patterns in the shifts and movements or is it all down to individual idiosyncrasies? To answer these questions, we need to look first at how people move into new media and find a place for themselves in this field.

## **INFORMALITY IS THE NEW BLACK**

We asked participants how they obtained their jobs:

‘Through a friend’ (Kristoff, male, 50s).

‘One of my former students now works there and told the management about me’ (Karl, male, 50s).

‘This assignment I got from somebody who worked in an advertising agency I worked for before . . . he remembered me from a job I had done’ (BJ, male, 40s).

‘Well, from our network’ (Joost, male, 30s).

‘Well, my current boss knew somebody from the past and I ran into him at my

brother's wedding and they wanted to have a talk with me. I was just starting another job so that didn't work out, but about a year and a half later I ran into him again at a reunion of my secondary school and I knew he had a multimedia agency and I liked the idea of it' (Wilhelm, male, 30s).

Informal connections are the lifeblood of new media work. Friends, teachers, students, colleagues, clients – these are the conduits for finding work, regardless of whether one is a company director, freelancer or lands a stable job somewhere. Amongst our 34 respondents, only two reported ever having found work in new media through traditional means of job searching – namely responding to an advertisement. Given that each participant told us about three or four of their work experiences, this amounts to less than 2% of the whole spectrum. In addition, company directors and freelancers were used to pitching for work, but in these cases informal connections could also play an important role, particularly through word-of-mouth recommendation.

'I usually know my clients and they know me. Then follows a briefing, sometimes there is a two week period to get to know the background, and then I dive into their product, the process and their documents and I start working with them' (Sonia, female, 30s).

'It never hurts to network. That is true. I am friends with a lot of companies who do the same and I have established that the more people I know who do the same as I do, the more work I have' (Danielle, female, 30s).

Finding work in new media - in whatever capacity or contractual status - is based on an amalgam between two commonplaces that circulated through our interviews. These were the phrases 'it's all down to who you know' and 'you are only as good as your last job'

Fundamentally, finding work in new media – in whatever capacity or contractual status – is based on an amalgam between two commonplaces that circulated through our interviews. These were the phrases 'it's all down to who you know' and 'you are only as good as your last job'. The two could sometimes be in tension, but often worked in concert – particularly in the absence of 'official accounts' of workers achievements, such as employer references or formal qualifications (in a context in which, as we have seen, much learning is done in formally or 'on the job'). As the quotes above indicate, the entire economy of work opportunities operates through contacts – people you meet at conferences, parties, drinks evenings, friends of friends, ex-colleagues, etc.

The informality of the field raises some questions about fairness and equality; questions about how finding work in new media relies on knowing the right people, rather than on talent or merit *per se*. (This is not to suggest that those who get work are not talented, but merely highlights the many others who may be excluded on the basis of not having the right contacts.) There is, as yet, relatively little research about the significance of informal networks, yet that which exists points to their essentially conservative implications: that is, people tend to hire or give work to other people who are like them (Franks, 1999). Amongst the questions this generates are some that relate to the ongoing preponderance of men and white people in this field – a pattern which will be returned to later in the report. In general, informal practices tend to reinforce, rather than challenge, existing inequalities, and do not serve equal opportunities practices well. It's worth highlighting the stark contrast between the unregulated practices of hiring and work allocation in new media, compared to fields like law, medicine or the academy which are highly regulated and which require (for

example) that all disabled applicants for a post should be interviewed, and that careful, transparent justifications should be given for choosing one candidate over another. (This is not to hold up these professions as exemplars, as they certainly have a long way to go before their workforces reflect the communities from which they are drawn, but merely to point to the attempts at transparency and equity.)

The requirement to network and to build contacts also brings other pressures, named by Melissa Gregg (2006) as the 'compulsory sociality' of the neoliberal workplace, in which one can never really switch off or relax, and one is never totally away from work

For the field as a whole, questions need to be asked about how successful informal networking is as a way of distributing work opportunities. This is a significant unknown factor since, by definition, we did not get to interview those people who did not find work, who had not successfully networked, or built up an excellent database of useful contacts. Even within our successful group, however, some people did report that they found it excruciatingly difficult to pitch for work, and that, for example, shyness held them back.

The requirement to network and to build contacts also brings other pressures, named by Melissa Gregg (2006) as the 'compulsory sociality' of the neoliberal workplace, in which one can never really switch off or relax, and one is never totally away from work. Indeed, in this sense, the entire self is a work project that must be presented in all the right ways at all the right occasions. The intense self-discipline required by the independent new media worker who must bear all responsibilities for finding and keeping work, staying abreast of changes, attending to necessary insurances, and remaining vigilant to every opportunity, is captured perfectly by one of our respondents:

'Life is a pitch' (Danielle, female, 30s).

Several others told us how networking drinks had become a kind of necessity or obligation:

'Monday night is the only night I don't have networking drinks' (Sonia, female, 30s).

'I belong to X and X networks. They organise a party every year. And seminars and conferences. There is a lot of informal stuff too. I like it, but sometimes when I walk around I think: do I belong to this? It's all very hyped. Maybe everybody thinks that' (Liesbet, female, 30s).

The pressures associated with this work are, of course, unevenly distributed and impacted most on those who are shy, those who do not drink, and those with other responsibilities (e.g. family responsibilities which made it difficult for them to attend evening drinks).

The informal practices of new media affect everyone who works in the field. But not all the challenges of new media work were this widely shared, and some impacted freelancers, directors and stable employees differently, helping to account for some of the movement and change, as people shift between different work statuses.

## FREELANCE LIVES

Three specific problems were raised repeatedly in the interviews concerning freelancing: finding enough work (and earning enough money), social isolation and lack of affordable work spaces. Work insecurity and precariousness are dealt with in detail in the next major section, so here it is sufficient to offer some examples of this, which also help to account for individuals' work biographies. One man who was freelancing and

**earning very little told us:**

'I think about taking a job. I don't know. The Internet is good because everybody needs a website and I keep on meeting them. Maybe I'll make money later on. That would be nice' (Harrie, male, 30s).

**Another woman spent half of her time doing a reasonable-paying job unrelated to new media, because she could not afford to live on her freelance new media earnings:**

'Yes it would be ideal to live from my freelance assignments, but I needed the steady part-time work. I didn't have enough continuity. My dream is to do my own projects, to have enough continuity with my freelance projects to carry out my own projects. Yes that is my dream. So I don't have to work for money but will be able to do things I like' (Linda, female, 20s).

**In contrast, another participant wanted steady employment at a company but could only find freelance work:**

'I also get some work through my boyfriend. When his company is too busy he gives me these things. So the only way to survive at the time was to work as a freelancer. They didn't want to employ anyone so I had to do it as a freelancer. It wasn't really my cup of tea'.

**Int: 'It wasn't your goal to work as a freelancer?'**

'Not really, I was just too young. It's better to work in a company for a few years making mistakes in other people's time. And then when you have a little experience you will work for yourself' (Geke, female, 20s).

**All freelancers, however, were concerned about their flow of work. The following statement is typical:**

'I worry whether I have enough work or not' (Yvette, female, 30s).

**Isolation was also a major issue for many. And, as we saw above, it is sometimes put forward as the reason why someone would choose not to freelance.**

'Well, to me freelancing is rather lonely. You spend a lot of time by yourself. And I had been on holiday and I was wondering, shit, where is the next assignment? Two or three months without assignments, gee! So now I've come back to XX [company] and they've given me work! No worries.' (Alfred, male 30s)

'The only thing I dislike is the loneliness one experiences when one is behind the computer all day' (Stefan, male, 50s).

'Financially it is good for me . . . what is not satisfying are the social circumstances because you find yourself socially isolated' (Merijn, male, 40s).

'Well, to me freelancing is rather lonely. You spend a lot of time by yourself. And I had been on holiday and I was wondering, shit, where is the next assignment? Two or three months without assignments, gee! So now I've come back to XX (company) and they've given me work! No worries' (Alfred, male, 30s).

**Here, loneliness combined with an insecure flow of work assignments, helped to push one of our interviewees (temporarily) back into an apparently more secure form of employment.**

**Others, however, sought to deal with the isolation of freelancing through renting a shared studio space.**

'We are seven freelancers. We don't necessarily work together, but we share this place. We share a printer and . . . the other possibility is to work at home and that makes you depressed. Much harder' (Geke, female, 20s).

'Since I became a freelancer it's become harder to keep up. It's an improvement that we are here together with three other web workers and we tell each other things . . . There is a friendly atmosphere as well' (Danielle, female, 30s).

**Many others saw this as a desirable solution that would enable them to work freelance, but combat isolation.**

'We need small office spaces. There is a lot of large office space but nothing for the smaller companies and organisations. And it should be in the city centre or in a lively neighbourhood. Not in an office park. I want to walk to the store and to the cafe and see people in the streets' (Joost, male, 30s).

'If they would create a nice space to meet one another . . . with a wireless network and a desk' (Ralf, male, 40s).

'We need work spaces for short times, per week or per month. People work increasingly in short-term projects and shifting teams. Also people who freelance really want that because we are all faced with the loneliness and the insecurity' (Alfred, male 30s)

'I would like to work in a space with other people, instead of at home. That way new ideas could come up. So I don't just want to share the space, but the people there should do more or less the same work. That would be ideal' (Kristoff, male, 50s).

**But for most this was beyond their financial capability:**

'I try to keep costs to a minimum. So I work from home with an Internet connection' (Harrie, male, 30s).

**Other people were less concerned with a shared workspace, but rather with a place to which they could bring clients:**

'It would be good to have a meeting point for different people. Random Friday is nice, but we need something a bit bigger and more official maybe. A place to give presentations or pitches to prospective clients would be nice. Or a way to meet freelancers. The existing networks are a bit too formal for me' (Joost, male, 30s).

**One freelancer also talked about the need for flexibility in spaces – so they could be hired for short-term periods, that fitted with projects:**

'We need work spaces for short times, per week or per month. People work increasingly in short-term projects and shifting teams. Also people who freelance really want that because we are all faced with the loneliness and the insecurity' (Alfred, male, 30s).

## **RUNNING A COMPANY**

'They needed someone to digitise their work, and I did that for them. That was the first time people started paying me by the hour. That way I could build up my own company. I also got an assignment from the agency XX and suddenly I had three clients which means I am an entrepreneur in the eyes of the tax office. I had my own company!' (Sonia, female, 30s).

As in the quote above, many of our participants who owned and directed their own companies were indistinguishable from freelancers in some key respects, particularly if the company was small and relatively new. In this sense they faced many similar challenges to freelancers, as well as some additional ones. Two issues are worth highlighting here: first, the perception amongst many company owners that they were unprepared for business – that is for its legal and financial aspects, as well as for the challenges of managing other people; secondly, the powerful anxiety about the responsibility of hiring someone.

As noted earlier, there was a widespread sense amongst our interviewees that education had not prepared them for 'freelance futures' or for the job of actually running a business. In that sense, the model of work they had inherited from their training was one which was largely out of date and irrelevant to them. People told us repeatedly how they wished they had received management training, guidance about how to run teams, greater help in developing presentation skills, education in putting together a pitch, help in maintaining relationships with clients, training in selling, budgeting, accounting and time management, and information about the legal framework in which small businesses operate in the Netherlands. There was, in short, a deep desire to have learned some of these essentially transferable skills – or to meet a fantasy business partner who could furnish them all, allowing the individual to get on with the creative new media work that they loved! The selection of extracts below illustrate some of these aspirations.

There was a widespread sense amongst our interviewees that education had not prepared them for 'freelance futures' or for the job of actually running a business.

'Students should figure out at an early stage whether they want to have their own business or not. You need more business knowledge when you have your own business. To learn how to network. To learn how to make presentations' (Joost, male, 30s).

'I think it's good for freelancers to learn about marketing . . . I would like to work with marketers . . . I would like to meet an

individualistic businessman. Business people who want to help you' (Ralf, male, 40s).

'When we set up the company we didn't know how to market that. Should we place advertisements, be published about in magazines, we didn't know . . . we tried it but a better strategy turned out to be networking. Go to meetings, dinners and ask existing clients whether they could do something for us' (Rickert, male, 20s).

'Managing people. That's what I want to learn to be good at' (Liesbet, female, 30s).

'There should be agencies who connect you with clients and colleagues. These agencies exist but they ask ridiculously high rates. There should be more of them. It's quite normal in the world of photography . . . It's just so hard for me to have to ring up people and ask them for work. The hardest is when they are not at their workspot I have to keep calling them back. Jeez – I have to really force myself to do that. When you feel you are really dependent on them for work. And it's not the other way round and they'll take someone else in your place immediately. I try to do some acquisitions by telephone every week. I rarely get a call back' (Kristoff, male, 50s).

'Clients always want something new and different than what was described in the proposal, and that is simply impossible. They only get what they have signed for. We have to define sharply what is offered and what is not. None of our customers have walked away though' (Rickert, male, 20s).

What is lacking is someone who could sell it for us' (Peter, male, 30s).

In addition, directors of small companies expressed grave concerns about hiring staff. Unpacked, these concerns related to a variety of different factors: some people baulked at becoming 'a manager' and feared that it would turn them into a different kind of person ('a slave driver', as one man graphically put it).

'We might have two or three people more. We don't want to become the new Lost Boys. I don't want to become a manager and we want to keep on making beautiful things' (Joost, male, 30s).

Others were specifically worried about the responsibilities that hiring someone would entail – vis-à-vis of the taking care of their insurance, training and so on.

**Int: 'And you hire freelancers on a project basis? Do you consider hiring people?'**

'No, it would be too expensive and too much hassle. You just don't want the care and responsibility for someone else like that. It's not attractive. I want to work on a project basis' (Robert, male, 40s).

'I would like to have an intern. I don't want to have someone as an employee, that is too scary. But I expect the most from working with other people. Doesn't matter whether they are freelancers or what have you. I just like the exchange' (Danielle, female, 30s).

A further concern related to having sufficient flow of work, and having to continue paying people who were employees even when turnover was low. Employing someone on anything other than a freelance basis or an internship might, many people suggested, prove too expensive since you couldn't just fire someone when the busy period was over. What companies needed, they said, was the ability to hire people on a flexible basis.

'We have a capacity problem. We need people who we don't have and we have overruns too. It differs per period. We can't hire too many people because we can't fire them. You need a flexible workforce of like 20 or 30%' (Thomas, male, 30s).

## Precarious work and insecurity

One of the challenges faced by many of our participants was the precarious and insecure nature of their work. For some this was an ongoing feature of their entire working lives.

Maybe there should be something for people who are temporarily out of work. If or when there comes a time I cannot work anymore I won't have anything, so that's daunting. I'll have to go on basic welfare, that is really nothing.

'It is insecure. Maybe I will look for jobs two days a week to pay the rent. But really I'm too busy for that' (Harrie, male, 30s).

**For others, it related to particular periods, for example Christmas or during summer.**

'It is important to have work in the summertime because that is traditionally a flat time. There is no social security for me. Not for unemployment or illness. I do have a pension. But I understand that is the nature of freelancing, you take care of yourself. Maybe there should be something for people who are temporarily out of work. If or when there comes a time I cannot work anymore I won't have anything, so that's daunting. I'll have to go on basic welfare, that is really nothing. But that's the way it is' (Kristoff, male, 50s).

As is clear in the above quote, this insecurity had far-reaching repercussions for many interviewees lives. Lack of pensions, inability-to-work insurance, and other benefits impacted significantly on many participants – particularly those who were older and thus

more able to imagine periods when they might not be able to work. In addition, as noted earlier in this report, an absence of paid holidays made it difficult for many freelancers to take any kind of a break.

Int: 'Can you bridge the time between projects? Can you go on holiday?'  
'No I am in serious financial trouble. And I haven't been on holiday. People who work for TV get unemployment benefits in the summertime. We don't have that. We are independent. I got extra money from the tax office last year because I made so little money' (Ralf, male, 40s).

A common feeling expressed by interviewees was the pressure of not being able to turn down work in case other opportunities failed to materialize.

'It's very intensive and I don't have enough time to rest. Because it's always going on. And if you don't plan something for yourself, someone will call and say you have to be there and there. You can't say no to a job. Because you don't know when the next job is going to be' (Liam, male, 40s).

Regulating the flow of work presented a challenge to many freelancers and small business directors, in a context in which there was a largely shared understanding that 'you can't say no to a job'.

'In an ideal situation I have two or three assignments at the same time. Lower than that is scary and higher than that is too busy. But two or three assignments is good' (Geke, female, 20s).

But besides the fear of not having enough work, Geke highlighted another more subtle danger – the danger of commodifying one's time, of turning every hour into a billable entity:

'When you are a freelancer you have to be really careful that you don't make or turn every hour into money. If I surf for two hours on the Internet, then I did not make my money for today. On the other hand you also have days or whole months where you don't have a lot of work, so . . .' (Geke, female, 20s).

## INSECURE EMPLOYMENT

Insecurity and precarious work, then, were major issues for freelancers and people who had their own small companies. However, such problems could also affect people employed in larger organizations. One man we spoke to was on a zero hours contract, so could lose his employment/income with no notice whatsoever. It was striking to note the combination of high aspirations and large *potential* earnings, alongside employment contracts that were *actually* extraordinarily short and lacking in benefits. This seems part of a wider shift in what sociologist Ulrich Beck has called 'the brave new world of work' in which workers are being forced to bear more and more of the risks associated with employment. This 'individualization of risk' could be heard, for example, on many occasions in which people told us that their 'steady' contract was actually for six months or less, yet in which they had a longer term expectation of owning shares in the company or participating in its profits.

'I have a half year contract. In my next contract I'll get part of the turnover, and in the long one and will probably get stocks in the company' (Thomas, male, 30s).  
'There's quite a bit of turnover in personnel. People have fixed term contracts. A few work for a European project. A few people just wanted to go, one was actually a musician, the woman wanted to have babies, and we had a system operator who came in at 13.00 hrs every day but didn't stay until one in the morning. Most went into freelance, a video production or something like that' (Thomas, male, 30s).

In addition, many people experienced the familiar insecurity associated with being in companies that seemed to restructure on a regular basis. If companies keep their workers' contracts short, then making them redundant through restructuring, means that they incur few of the traditional costs associated with redundancy. The insecure,

This seems part of a wider shift in what sociologist Ulrich Beck has called 'the brave new world of work' in which workers are being forced to bear more and more of the risks associated with employment

discontinuous, temporary and flexible style of future work discussed by sociologists appears already to be well established in the field of new media:

'I have a steady contract, but my company is being reorganised and that gives me a lot of insecurity. And with reorganisation as it turns out to be emphasising sales and losing certain departments such as mine' (Hugo, male, 40s).

## PARENTING IN NEW MEDIA?

A particular area of insecurity for some of our respondents (particularly freelancers and small businesses) concerned the possibility of combining having children with new media work. A very small number of our sample (less than 10%) already had children. It is not clear whether this is typical of the field, or whether it reflects the particular characteristics of the people we were able to interview. However, the relative absence of parents (and in particular mothers) amongst new media workers has been noted by larger studies: Rosemary Batt and her colleagues found very small numbers of mothers in their research on new media working in New York, and my own previous cross-European study (Gill & Dodd, 2000; Gill, 2002) also highlighted this.

Research by Karin Gottscahl and Annette Henninger (2004) in Germany noted that women in new media were less likely than their male counterparts to have children, which may point to ongoing inequalities in the division of labor associated with parenting. Moreover, research on equal opportunities within 'old' media organizations suggests that patterns of inequality are changing and becoming more complex. Whilst senior positions in radio and television used to be dominated by men, today women increasingly occupy such roles, yet when looked at more closely it appears that women with children face far greater challenges in these fields than men with children. Indeed, the relative success at redressing the gender imbalance has been largely achieved through the appointment of single women without children.

Is it the case that there is still an expectation that men can 'have it all' – i.e. successful career, relationship(s), parenthood, whilst women cannot? Or is new media a field in which women (and to a lesser extent men) are simply choosing not to have children? If so what factors influence that choice and why is it so different from that made by other occupational groups? Much more research is needed on these questions, as it is not clear the extent to which choice and self-selection play a role, alongside persistent stereotypes and discrimination, combined with long hours and insecurity that make it difficult, as our interviewees told us, to do anything else.

What this research shows us is that the experience of combining new media work with having a family is extremely challenging both financially and in terms of available time.

'An obstacle for me is that I lose myself in my activities. And then I forget my relationships altogether. My wife really has to call me then. And my kids too. And I have to keep an eye on my health when that happens too' (Kristoff, male, 50s).

Is it the case that there is still an expectation that men can 'have it all' - ie. successful career, relationship(s) parenthood, whilst women cannot? Or is new media a field in which women (and to a lesser extent men) are simply choosing not to have children? If so what factors influence that choice and why is it so different from that made by other occupational groups?

Most people we spoke to expressed little desire or intention to have children. But for those who were thinking about this as a possibility, it was often experienced as daunting or even terrifying.

'I have a relationship with somebody. She is also involved in this work. I don't know if we are going to have kids. It scares the living hell out of me, the whole idea. Because of overwork is just the reality of what I am doing like all the people in new media. Horrifying overwork is the reality. Like how many hours a week? Oh man, the amount of hours I have to put in in a week for this job - it amounts to two full-time jobs easily. And I mean I am working with a very good planner and I am having a hell of a time keeping the hours. That is what I'm most scared of in my

personal life. The impact of having no time for a kid or. That is what I'm most scared of. If I would have some kids, boy it would be a tough life' (Sebastiaan, male, 40s).

'We are trying to have a baby, so then we will see. I definitely want to keep on working and have my own income. I hope it won't get less. So I think I'll bring the baby to the crèche. But frankly I have no idea. I am a bit afraid and I think nothing is arranged for women like me who have their own companies' (Sonia, female, 30s).

But, again, even for people working in companies the matter was far from straightforward. For example, one woman speculated about what it would mean to work part-time, it in an organizational culture in which part-timers were not respected, and did not get to work on the most interesting jobs.

'There are a lot of part-timers here, mainly women who work three days a week, so it must be totally possible. But I do see the disadvantages of three days working, projects like XX (prestigious and interesting) and stuff you just don't participate in it when you work three days a week. And a lot of other projects as well. There's a XX (major event we are working on) and nobody wants to work with the part-timers since you can't plan anything that way' (Liesbet, female, 30s).

## Cool, creative and egalitarian?

At the start of this report we noted that one feature of the myth-making around new media points to its open and egalitarian nature. It is frequently presented as cool, cutting-edge, dynamic, and characterized by a diversity of different workers (male, female, black, white, gay, straight) united by their 'creativity' and their preference for nonhierarchical and informal work relationships. Elsewhere (Gill, 2002) I have elaborated some reasons to be skeptical of this account. In this report I have already pointed to the apparent domination of the field (outside its softer fringes) by men, and highlighted its overall whiteness as the sphere of employment. In this section, the aim

is to explore how people working with their new media experience and make sense of its patterns of under-representation.

It is striking to note that the notion of egalitarianism is still strong. When we asked the interviewees whether they perceived any particular groups to be under-represented or disadvantaged in the field, the vast majority did not think there was anyone in this category. Some responded with either blankness or annoyance to the question and said that the only people who are disadvantaged are those who choose not to become involved because of lack of interest in computers or lack of intelligence.

**Int: 'When you think about the field of new media, do you think that certain groups are absent or excluded from working in the sector?'**

'People who can't buy a computer! But apart from that no, not really. There are the technical people and the marketing people. They are young, that's for sure. You had to be 25 in 1995 in order to have been involved and successful.

Otherwise you are too old' (Jaap, male, 30s).

New media is frequently presented as cool, cutting-edge, dynamic, and characterised by a diversity of different workers [male, female, black, white, gay, straight] united by their 'creativity' and their preference for nonhierarchical and informal work relationships

'The only people who are disadvantaged are people who are not literate and not curious. This kind of work does not come to you, you only find it when you're curious' (Richard, male, 30s).

**Just under one third of participants were prepared to reflect upon the underrepresentation of particular groups in new media. Of these, seven talked about the relative lack of women, five noted the absence of ethnic minorities, for talks about the dominance by use, and one mentioned never having met a disabled person working in new media. In total only 10 people out of 34 mentioned any patterns of disadvantage, and often people who had noted one feature, also noted others – as in the extract below.**

'In general there are probably more men than women working in new media. The editorial jobs are often occupied by women, sometimes more than men. I don't see many older people, perhaps because they didn't grow up with the kind of technology we're used to. I see few ethnic minorities and I've never seen disabled persons' (Bas, male, 30s).

**Not all responses, though, were as sympathetically expressed as this one, and a number of the assertions about the lack of women or ethnic minorities were accompanied by statements that were crudely racist or sexist (and sometimes knowingly so).**

**Int: 'Are there any people that are underrepresented in this field do you think?'**

'Well I have to make some sexist and racist remarks now. My impression of women is that there aren't that many differences between them, compared with the differences between men. They don't stand out so obviously and they don't have the qualities that programmers have because programmers have to have extreme qualities – with all the negative aspects connected to that as well. And, well, black people usually aren't bright enough to be a computer programmer. Just think about the bell curve. In my career I haven't found any black programmers. People from India on the other hand are extremely bright. I regret the probability that anyone feels bad when they hear this, but it's how I feel. In 20 years we will be used to it' (Merijn, male, 40s).

Such expressions were in the minority, however. Generally accounts were more complex and subtly put together. In relation to gender, three broad responses or repertoires accompanied the acknowledgement that the field remains dominated by men. These were firstly the argument that women don't start work in new media or they drop out because they want to have children. We saw an example of this in the quote from Thomas on page 31. Secondly, there was an expression of mystification by some people about the relative lack of women: often people said 'I just don't know' or 'I have no idea' in response to questions about why thought it might be that women were in the minority.

'Unfortunately there are a lot more men here'.

Int: 'Why is that?'

'I don't know! Well, our interns are usually from XX and there are very few female Java programmers . . . I would like to have some Java girls. But they are hard to find. As a Java company we're just not that interesting to women. This is a specific company you should want to work for' (Thomas, male, 30s).

The most widely used repertoire, however, is captured in the next sub-heading, which explains and justifies the small number of women through a discourse about the technical nature of the work.

## **MEN ARE TECHNICAL, WOMEN COMMUNICATE WELL... GENDER AND THE SOCIAL-TECHNICAL DIVIDE**

'We don't have any women at our company. Maybe that is because we have a more technical side to our work or so...'

Int: 'Do women not apply?'

'Hardly, to my knowledge'.

Int: 'Have women worked there?'

'Yes they have. Then there was a reorganization and they had to leave. Because of circumstances'.

Int: 'What were they doing?'

'We had a bad time and they did not work full-time and had to leave. Not because they were women. There just wasn't enough work. But it is fast paced and cool, most people are around 30, not around 40' (Wilhelm, male, 30s).

In this account the technical nature of work is invoked to explain the relative absence of women. The interviewee does not feel the need to spell out men's greater technical abilities, but takes this for granted. The account relies on the listener to be already working with a static or naturalized notion of women as non-technical or less technical. Interestingly, this extract also contains elements of the other two main repertoires: on the one hand, the sense of vagueness and perplexity at women 'having to leave', 'because of circumstances', but 'not because they were women' (yet it appears that it was, in this reorganization, women who had to leave, women who were the first ones out when there wasn't enough work). Then, on the other hand, the invocation of part-time status, often code for being a mother, as the reason they 'had to leave'.

'In the hardcore it's a man's world. They program, but on the other hand we have two women on board who program as well. I see more women than men and that is good maybe. For relations on the job we need 50/50 but when you have a woman on the technical side there's a lot of prejudice. Women are always the helpdesk and men the technical department. First you get the woman, and it is a stereotype, she asks you a lot of things and then you get somebody who does know but can't communicate' (Peter, male, 30s).

The account above is complicated, in that the interviewee is trying to both account for the absence of women in general in the field, plus make the interviewer aware of the fact that he has female programmers in his company, as well as elaborating some of the prejudice that keeps women out. Perhaps the major obstacle highlighted is, again, the division between the technical and social/communicative labor. We came across

From a sociological perspective, it's interesting to interrogate this polarisation, rather than take it for granted, and to think about the work it is doing in people's accounts. Where is it written that technical and social skills must be mutually exclusive? Why are these qualities inscribed so insistently onto male and female bodies?

this division repeatedly in accounts: the apparently naturalized polarization between people who are technical but can't communicate and people who communicate well but don't really know what they are doing. From a sociological perspective, it's interesting to interrogate this polarization, rather than take it for granted, and to think about the work it is doing in people's accounts. Where is it written that technical and social skills must be mutually exclusive? Why are these qualities inscribed so insistently onto male and female bodies?

Interestingly, we came across it almost as frequently being used to derogate 'geeky', 'nerdy' technical men.

'Well, I have found that it is hard to find

women. They try, but many women who are programmers leave since they don't want to sit in between the men. These men do not have any social skills, you know. One can't have a normal conversation with them. The jokes – just terrible. They look bad because they don't care, they don't wash and they don't get haircuts. And then they group together . . . one develops what one is good at. Girls just don't have it. We don't know whether it is nature or nurture. Girls don't want to specialize in computers that much. I do believe men are quicker to learn how to program computers than women.

Is there a laddish culture in new media? Is this something that might alienate women? Current research in London indicates that new media companies have a largely male-dominated culture of drinking and gaming, with football often used as a currency to attract clients. Some agencies in our London research deliberately bought packages from Sky television and big-screen TVs, in order to be able to invite clients to 'social' occasions in the office.

Beavis and Butthead are the ones that remain. Women become the project manager instead' (EC, female, 40s).

'I see a lot of women in educational software. That's because there are a lot of women in education. But in IT it is 70% men. In IT it's all about being intelligent.

Being a programmer is like being a craftsman.

They think they are very

intelligent. Even at lunch they are bragging about the intricate games they've played on their computer . . .' (Linda, female, 20s).

Interestingly, alongside the implication that technically skilled men lack social skills, and even the basics of self-care, is the suggestion that such values also dominate working culture. In the first of these two extracts Elisabeth points out that 'they group together', and in the second Linda points to something problematic about the bragging and playing of games. This is not named as 'laddish' behavior, but it certainly resonates with other, often throwaway, comments made during the interviews – about, for example,

game-playing or racetracks on the floor, or boring conversations about the functions of one's new mobile phone. Is there a laddish culture in new media? Is this something that might alienate women?

Current research in London indicates that new media companies have a largely male-dominated culture of drinking and gaming, with football often used as a currency to attract clients. (Some agencies in our London research deliberately bought big-screen TVs and packages from Sky television in order to be able to invite clients to 'social' occasions in the office). In the computer games industry, women make up only 8% of people working – and largely concentrated in a narrow range of fairly predictable roles (Skillset Census, 2005). In new media more broadly, the situation is not so stark, but if women are seen primarily as social assets, rather than valued for their skills in the field, then the naturalization of a technical/social divide that maps neatly onto men and women, can only be harmful in the long-term.

## WHITE - OUT?

With the exception of Merijn, whose views have already been quoted, just three people amongst our 34 interviewees, mentioned the overall domination of new media work in Amsterdam by white people – in proportions that seem at odds with the population as a whole. One man, originally from Surinam, explained how potential clients could 'hear' his non-whiteness, and how he then had to expend a great deal of time elaborating on his background – only to frequently not get a call back:

'At XX [new media company] where I worked before, all the cleaners, waiters and security guards had brown skin and brown faces, and all the Web designers had blonde hair and blue eyes' (Michael, male 30s)

'Well I am Surinami and people who call me hear that I am Surinami. Then I usually have to explain that even though my name is Stefan, I am not Dutch. If need be I will tell them my life story. People try to put you in categories, but they can't put me in a category. It is simply impossible. I want to be able to work for everybody, Dutch and Surinamese. Not for one specific target group' (Stefan, male, 50s).

Another relatively recent arrival to Amsterdam commented:

'At XX (new media company) where I worked before, all the cleaners, waiters and security guards had brown skin and brown faces, and all the Web designers had blonde hair and blue eyes' (Michael, male, 30s).

It is striking that two of the three people who commented on this issue were themselves immigrants to the Netherlands; it simply did not seem to be visible or worthy of comment to others of our participants – a tendency which tells us a great deal about the normalization and power of whiteness.

The one white Dutch person who commented said:

Int: 'Do you think there are people who are underrepresented in the world of new media?'

'I think so but I can't put my finger on it. A few years ago at V2 there was a black guy who made some new media art and that became a big issue. And everybody was proud. He was the only one. Probably not the only one, but the only one in that circle. But I think more people are going into new media now and it will level out in the end . . . I don't know' (Liam, male, 40s).

This sympathetic and hopeful aspiration that things will 'level out in the end', however,

may be optimistic in a context in which the vast majority simply do not 'see' what Michael identified as a strongly patterned kind of representation/under-representation, in which people with brown faces predominantly appear in roles that exist to 'service' a predominantly white new media workforce. Is it enough to 'wait and see' whether the field becomes more diverse? Or should some action be taken to actively promote this? The myth of new media is that it is diverse – one woman described it as 'multi-culti'; her office, she said, was full of people from all over the world. But this was not our experience of interviewing in the field, and it does not appear to be the experience of some of the minorities we were able to interview.

## Surviving in new media

We asked everyone who took part in this research to tell us what they thought were the key qualities someone needed in order to work in the new media field. Often participants seemed practised and quick with their replies, as if they had thought a great deal about this. Occasionally, they framed their responses as 'advice' to a new generation. Perhaps not surprisingly, the qualities highlighted mirrored many of the central features of the work experience already discussed in this report. Thus people told us one needed stamina, ability to work very long hours, and a desire to learn all the time. Some of the other qualities that were mentioned again and again were energy, flexibility and an ability to live on very little money!

The extracts below flesh out some of these qualities in participants' own words:

'You have to be flexible and you have to learn how to learn' (Danielle, female, 30s).

'You have to be curious. And persistent. Some feeling for design, of course, and the possibilities of the medium' (Geke, female, 30s).

'Well, if you stay in your studio you won't get very far. You have to be open to learn new things and you should be flexible. They compared me to a virus once - I survive in different environments. And you have to hold on and not give up, talent is one but stamina is almost as important. And be happy with your small successes.'  
(Hilda, female 40s)

'My advice to new media students who graduate next year would be, be flexible and learn how to learn, and try not to be too prejudiced because the project is interesting in itself, regardless whether it is for the Postbank or for a cultural institute. We get a lot of interns who don't

want to work for commercial clients, but it's about the content of the project in the end. They forget that sometimes . . . ' (Yvette, female, 30s).

'You have to want to do new things and constantly keep up-to-date. And start developing new technologies. You need quality and stamina. Especially with programming, you should not give up when it's not working, you should fix it' (Karl, male, 50s).

'I think an eye for trends, to know what the developments are in society and in the field. To be trend sensitive. And to like playing games. You've got to like

games. Plus it helps to be untied. Not afraid to lose anything. That makes one innovative' (Linda, female, 20s).

'If you want to survive in new media you have to want to learn continuously. Quite hard. And to keep on innovating. Change is the only constant' (Hugo, male, 40s).

'Energy and skills and creativity. I mean you have to be able to produce something new all the time. Come up with new ideas. And you also have to survive without a lot of money, but be able to sustain your lifestyle' (Liam, male, 40s).

'You have to talk well. You have to be able to explain and defend your work. Everybody should have that trait' (Thomas, male, 30s).

'Well, if you stay in your studio you won't get very far. You have to be open to learn new things and you should be flexible. They compared me to a virus once – I survive in different environments. And you have to hold on and not give up, talent is one but stamina is almost as important. And be happy with your small successes' (Hilda, female, 40s).

## TRANSITIONS

Everyone we interviewed was very aware of how much new media is changing. In this sense, there was a keen awareness that the skills and qualities which were valuable yesterday might not be valuable tomorrow. We found it interesting to explore the ways in which new media workers felt their world was changing. Several common themes emerged from people's accounts.

First, there was a sense of the increasing professionalization of new media, compared with the early days.

'Well for the first two to three years working in new media (we're talking in 1994 – 1998) the field was so confused and overwhelmed with fantasy and fiction and lies that it was very difficult to determine any kind of position. I always knew there was a bedrock of very serious work in new media. It was going to be a serious profession but nobody knew how it was going to be crystallised' (Sebastiaan, male, 40s).

'One can see a consolidation in the sector. The companies are becoming normalized and professionalized. That is a different phase from starting and growing, and you need different people for that. But these companies will have normal jobs on offer. It's just not the old days any more' (Jaap, male, 30s).

Alongside what was perceived by many to be a consolidation or crystallization or professionalization was a sense of increasing specialization within the field. No longer were people taking responsibility for all aspects of a project, but a much clearer division of labor was emerging, with different specialist fields within new media.

'The whole field has changed, I have specialized so much' (Robert, male, 40s).

These changes – experienced by some as Internet culture 'growing up' – also signalled a move away from the utopianism of the early days.

'The nicest thing about the hype days was the enthusiasm and the idea that everything was possible. We could be creative and invent our own processes. Some things went wrong in the production. Our ideas were bigger than our production power. But now processes have become professionalized, there is a

division between exploring, conceiving, designing, production and execution.

That is very clear to everybody now' (Sonia, female, 30s).

'Well, in the 90s when I was in my 20s the Internet exploded upon us and I did what my generation did: I got involved. I built web sites, but who didn't? I am a manager and businessman now' (Michael, male, 30s).

**This quote from Michael captures perhaps the final feature that many people stressed: the growing commercialization of new media work. This can also be seen in the extracts**

**below.**

'But in general the euphoria was always a stupid and even sleazy argument. No intelligent person believed a word of it and there was nothing more or less democratic about this medium than any other medium, and there's absolutely nothing less commercial than any other medium, and no it won't help liberate people except to the extent that they can stay at home and that it gives people a direct voice.' (Sebastian, male 40s)

'[In the early days] everybody with a good idea received money, it didn't matter what your idea was. The parking lot was full of expensive cars while we came by bike. But it turned out to be baked air. Fortunately there is an infrastructure for the Internet now, physically and financially, and hopefully

there is now room for good content' (Peter, male, 30s).

'I believe it is no longer young, hip and fast. There is a need to make money with it and that is very important. It is not about how it looks, it is about how fast you can find information and you need to give a very diverse user group access' (Hugo, male, 40s).

## Imagining the future

It is common in traditional occupations to be asked a rather standard question at an interview: the question is about where you see yourself in five years or 10 years time. In occupations like law or teaching or sales the preferred response is clear: you must express ambition, a desire to move up the hierarchy, a wish to be successful. An almost cheeky response is smiled upon and favoured: you tell your prospective boss 'I would like to be doing your job!' We were interested in how people working in the field of new media might respond to this almost stereotypical and much caricatured interview question. The point was not to compare new media workers with some reified notion of a traditional career, but rather to probe a little into how people in this field imagine their future. Would they stay in the field? Would they set up their own business (if they had not already done so)? Did they have particular desires about what they wanted to achieve? In such a young and youth-dominated field, it also seemed vitally important to be asking about how – or even whether – they considered themselves growing old within the field.

What emerges from this questioning is, I think, profoundly important. Almost to a person our respondents were unable to tell us what they thought they would be doing (and even, in many cases, what they would like to be doing) in 5 years time.

Int: 'And in 5 years time . . . ?'

'Really, I have no clue . . . maybe more complex projects . . . or, or . . .' (Geke, female, 30s).

Int: 'Where would you like to be in five years from now?'

'You see, I have no idea about that. I can't see myself continuing as an interaction designer, but I'm also not an entrepreneur who would hire other people. I would not want to take that responsibility. And I'm too responsible for it, I can't delegate, I think' (Sonia, female, 30s).

'I might sell the business and start doing something else' (Ruud, male, 30s).

Why is this important? Well, for several reasons. Firstly, because it relates to the difficulties that many people experience working in this field. Whilst the vast majority have little interest in some kind of safe, stable, linear career – and are more likely to celebrate the fact that they've been spared from a life of servitude in a bank, for example – the inability to think about the future is precisely the outcome of how hard it is to survive in the field, even right now. It tells us something about the difficulty of sustaining these work patterns and low earnings over a long period, particularly as one grows older – and here the voices of our interviewees in their 50s were sobering.

Secondly, the absence of role models in this field was striking. Again, most people might reject such a concept and have no desire to be a disciple of any kind, but their absence meant that it was hard for many people to even imagine a longer term future in the field. There were not people to look to even to offer a sense of possibilities. This was particularly the case for women, and the only role model mentioned by female participants was a successful lingerie designer!

Thirdly, and most significantly, it is important because of the negative psychological consequences of being unable to project oneself into the future. It seems, in short, that the precariousness and insecurity experienced by many of our interviewees quite literally makes the future unthinkable for them. This biographical and psychological feature of precariousness has not been adequately explored in other research, and needs urgent attention.

What happened, then, for many of our participants was that in being unable to offer a grounded, realistic account of what the future held for them, they veered between two opposing ideas. On the one hand there was this kind of scenario:

Int: What are you going to do in the coming years?

Well I am working on another project but that is a secret. And sometimes I do nothing at all for months. It's hard sometimes. I plan to work by myself. I have to hurry because other people will come to the market.

Int: what would give you inspiration again? How would you make sure that the product gets to the user?

I need inspiration I think... that's part of my own depression. From a promising future to... especially with Director which is an application which is in small demand now... (Robert, male, 40s)

'Well we'll all move to Bora Bora. With our own helipad' (Joke, female, 30s).

**And on the other, this kind:**

'I might quit . . . It is just that it's so difficult. I might throw everything out and work in the social sector or something . . . two months ago I hardly had any work and I was like "what kind of life is this?" I worry a lot, even though worrying isn't going to help anything' (Geke, female, 20s).

It seems to me that these polarized accounts of the future are both based on an inability realistically to imagine the future. Instead, participants grasp onto available discourses to try their best to think ahead – on one hand, the fantasy of extreme success with all its trappings, and on the other, failure and having to quit.

Moreover, it is important to note that these discourses were not divided among participants, but that the same individuals could draw on both. Thus, Robert told us at the start of the interview:

'At some point I'll need a BV on the Cayman Islands. I have had my own company for 10 years now' (Robert, male, 40s).

**But later admitted:**

'I am in serious financial trouble . . . I got extra money from the tax office last year because I made so little. I received €4000' (Robert, male, 40s).

These diverging accounts might be said to draw on the very myths this report set out to challenge – but they do so only because articulating one's own story and projecting forward into the future is so difficult. One important part of supporting new media workers, then, would involve helping to facilitate ways of creatively imagining the future – which means better support in the present.

# Conclusions

'I am always looking for the balance between my steady job for security and inspiring colleagues and the individual freedom of my freelance work. Hopefully I will be able to do something with my scientific interests as well' (Alfred, male, 30s).

The research published in this report offers a portrait of work in new media, a decade after the web. It highlights the sheer variety of the jobs, skills and practices that are summed up by the general term 'new media' and points to the divisions within this field between artists and technical experts, designers and programmers, and, above all, between people who are freelance, on temporary contracts or self-employed, and those who work on steady contracts in traditional organisations. This fluid and ever-changing division emerges as one of the most significant because it structures workers experiences of pay, conditions, working hours and benefits, as well as their ability to plan beyond 'the next five minutes'. A key objective of the report has been to disentangle the tangled relationships between the nature of new media work, and the kinds of contractual statuses workers enjoy – for example, to determine which experiences are due to working in new media, and which are attributable to the dominance of freelancing or self-employment.

The report offers a vivid account of the backgrounds and motivations of people who work in new media, their different career trajectories, and their experiences of both formal education and 'learning on the job'. It highlights the extraordinary degree of creativity, passion and enthusiasm for this work, amongst the people involved in it. But it also tries to capture some of the difficulties and pressures associated with contemporary new media work – including long hours, requirements to 'keep up' and stay up-to-date in a field that is changing rapidly, and the financial and emotional pressures of managing job/workflow insecurity. The report asks questions about 'work-life balance' (a problematic notion, but still), and about the sustainability (in terms of health and relationships, for example) of intense – sometimes bulimic – working patterns. The key concern in the research has been to capture the diversity of different experiences within new media, and inequalities relating to gender, age and race/ethnicity have been taken seriously here.

I hope that the report will contribute to new thinking about Web-working, and will inspire policies and responses that support current and future generations of people working in new media. In the spirit of this, I will leave the last word to one of our interviewees:

'It's a quick business, people come and go. You go from project to project or from temporary job to temporary job. Of course cash flow and insecurity are a problem, but there's a lot of freedom to be had. You're not a civil servant or a bank employee stuck in the same job for many years. You're always surrounded by young, flexible, quick-witted people with whom you easily form a team. And you partake in building a global compendium of knowledge. To me, that is the upside of working in this field' (Bas, male, 30s).



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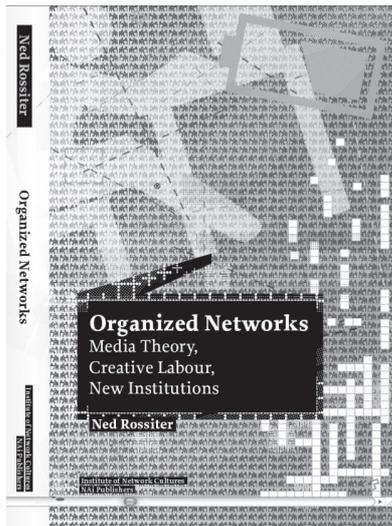
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# Organized Networks

## Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions

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***First publication in the series 'Studies in Network Cultures'***

The celebration of network cultures as open, decentralized, and horizontal all too easily forgets the political dimensions of labour and life in informational times. *Organized Networks* sets out to destroy these myths by tracking the antagonisms that lurk within Internet governance debates, the exploitation of labour in the creative industries, and the aesthetics of global finance capital. Cutting across the fields of media theory, political philosophy, and cultural critique, Ned Rossiter diagnoses some of the key problematics facing network cultures today. Why have radical social-technical networks so often collapsed after the party? What are the key resources common to critical network cultures? And how might these create conditions for the invention of new platforms of organization and sustainability? These questions are central to the survival of networks in a post-dotcom era. Derived from research and experiences participating in network cultures, Rossiter unleashes a range of strategic concepts in order to explain and facilitate the current transformation of networks into autonomous political and cultural 'networks of networks'.

**Australian media theorist Ned Rossiter works as a Senior Lecturer in Media Studies (Digital Media), Centre for Media Research, University of Ulster, Northern Ireland and an Adjunct Research Fellow, Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney, Australia.**

Accounts of new media working draw heavily on two polarised stereotypes, veering between technoutopianism on the one hand, and a vision of web-workers as the new 'precariat', victims of neoliberal economic policies and moves to flexibilisation and insecurity on the other. Heralded from both perspectives as representing the brave new world of work what is striking is the absence of research on new media workers own experiences, particularly in a European context. This report goes beyond the contemporary myths of new media work, to explore how people working in the field experience the pleasures, pressures and challenges of working on the web. Illustrated throughout with quotations from interviews, this research examines the different career biographies emerging for content-producers in web-based industries, questions the relevance of existing education and training, and highlights the different ways in which people manage and negotiate freelancing, job insecurity, and keeping up to date in a fast-moving field where software and expectations change rapidly.

The research is based on 35 interviews carried out in Amsterdam in 2005, and contextually draws upon a further 60 interviews with web designers in London and Brighton.

**Interviews were carried out by Danielle van Diemen and Rosalind Gill.**

Rosalind Gill is a teacher and researcher based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is author of *The Gender-Technology Relation* (with Keith Grint) and her new book *Gender and the Media* has just been published by Polity press. She carried out research on new media working for the European Commission in 2000 and published some of the results relating to new inequalities in this field in an influential article entitled 'Cool, creative and egalitarian?' She is currently preparing a book about women and the web, and completing analysis of 180 interviews with web designers in London, Brighton and L.A.

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