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# Cool, creative and egalitarian? Exploring gender in project-based new media work in Europe

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## **Abstract**

The new media industries are popularly regarded as cool, creative and egalitarian. This view is held by academics, policymakers and also by new media workers themselves, who cite the youth, dynamism and informality of new media as some of its main attractions.

This paper is concerned with what this mythologised version of new media work leaves out, glosses over and, indeed, makes difficult to articulate at all. Themes include pervasive insecurity, low pay, and long hours, but the particular focus of the paper is on gender inequalities in new media work. Despite its image as 'cool', non-hierarchical and egalitarian, the new media sector, this paper will argue, is characterised by a number of entrenched and all too old-fashioned patterns of gender inequality relating to education, access to work and pay. Moreover, a number of new forms of gender inequality are emerging, connected-paradoxically -to many of the features of the work that are valued -- informality, autonomy, flexibility and so on.

Drawing on a study of 125 freelance new media workers in six European countries, this paper explores these issues and argues that the new forms of sexism in new media represent a serious challenge to its image of itself as cool, diverse and egalitarian.

## Introduction

New media work has had a good press. It is popularly regarded as exciting and cutting edge work, and its practitioners are seen as artistic, young and 'cool' -- especially when compared with the previous generation of technologically literate IT workers (e.g. programmers and software designers) who had a distinctly more 'nerdy' or 'anoraky' image. The work itself is seen as creative and autonomous and working environments and relationships as relaxed and non-hierarchical. When new media businesses are shown on television the now standard tropes of representation include a trendy warehouse setting in the cultural quarter of a city, a group of young people coded as 'diverse' (male, female, black, white, gay, straight) and as 'creative' (untidy, chaotic, obsessive), who work long and unusual hours (e.g. getting up at lunchtime and then working through the night) and relate to each other in a casual and informal manner.

This view of new media work is not limited to television producers, but is widely shared among the general public, academics, policymakers and even new media workers themselves -- who cite the youth, dynamism and informality of new media work as some of the main reasons it was attractive to them (Gill & Dodd, 2000).

This paper is concerned with what this image leaves out, glosses over and, indeed, makes difficult to articulate at all. Themes include pervasive insecurity, low pay, and long hours, but the particular focus of the paper is on gender inequalities in new media work. Despite its image as 'cool', non-hierarchical and egalitarian, the new media sector, this paper will argue, is characterised by a number of entrenched and all too old-fashioned patterns of gender inequality relating to education, access to work and pay. Moreover, a number of new forms of gender inequality are emerging, connected- paradoxically -to many of the features of the work that are valued -- informality, autonomy, flexibility and so on.

This paper will explore these gender issues, drawing on a study of freelance ('portfolio') new media workers in six European countries, carried out by the author and a cross European team of colleagues (see Gill & Dodd, 2000 for the full report). The new media workers discussed here are all freelancers -- 'independents' combining projects to create a 'portfolio career'. They work at the aesthetic end of new media -- that is, they are content creators, rather than individuals who have set up online businesses to provide products or services. They are involved in work as diverse as digital animation, web design, multimedia authoring, web broadcasting and digital arts and design.

The paper is divided into five sections. In the first, the literature on the emergence of the 'portfolio career' characteristic of the new media workers in this study will be discussed. Next the aims, objectives and methodology of the research project will be explained. The third section will summarise some of the key findings of the research, relating to finding work, securing contracts and managing insecurity. In the fourth section the specifically gendered aspects of work in new media will be discussed in some detail. Finally there is a brief conclusion.

### **The end of the career and the rise of project based work**

New media work has been in existence for less than a decade. It was brought into being by a combination of technological, economic and social changes -- the development of the World Wide Web, the growing affordability of personal computers with high-speed microprocessing units and modems, and the rapid development of dot.coms which, as Saskia Sassen (1999) reminds us, did not exist until 1994. Over the past few years these changes have spawned entirely new fields of work and given birth to a whole range of new practitioners: web designers, digital animators, multimedia producers, electronic artists, webcasters, online games designers, and so on. Taken together, work in these different

fields is said to constitute the fastest-growing sector of the economy, although reliable estimates are hard to find because new media cuts across all other sectors rather than constituting a true sector in its own right.

As an emerging and distinctive group of workers in a new industry and a rapidly changing technological environment, new media workers merit considerable attention. Add to this the fact that this group of workers are said to be at the forefront of the 'new economy' or 'knowledge economy' and one has a compelling reason for sociological investigation. But there is a further reason for examining the lives, experiences and working practices of new media workers: they have come to have an iconic status in terms of representing the future of work. As the notion of the 'career', and even of stable, full-time employment, goes into decline, new media workers represent what Manuel Castells (1996; 2000) calls 'self-programmable labour', involved not in discrete jobs but in multiple projects. In the 'brave new world of work', Beck (2000) argues, insecure, informal and discontinuous employment will become the norm, with more and more individuals encouraged to construct themselves as 'me and company' selling their skills and services in the marketplace. As Bridges (1994) has put it in a much quoted aphorism: 'in 100 years time today's struggles over jobs will seem like a fight over the deckchairs on the Titanic'. The theme of much of this writing, then, is that new media workers' experiences today will become the norm for most workers tomorrow. In this sense, new media workers (and some other cultural industries workers) are regarded as prefiguring the future of work (Leadbeter & Oakley 1999).

Sociological analysis of the contemporary transformations of work comes from a variety of different perspectives. Ulrich Beck (2000) argues that Western societies are undergoing a period of 'reflexive modernisation' and a shift to a new (second) modernity characterised overwhelmingly by risk. This shift is being brought about by a combination of technological and economic innovations, and by globalisation, which Beck understands in terms of the 'deterritorialisation of

the social'. Its consequences include the need to create new guiding ideas and institutions because those from the first modernity no longer hold or seem convincing.

One example of such an institution is the career. Fernando Flores and John Gray (1999) argue that the career was a core social institution of 20th-century industrial civilisation. It allowed people to achieve personal autonomy by being the authors of their own lives. Its decline produces huge social anxieties, not limited to work but also affecting values, families and communities (cf Sennett, 2000), but it also offers new opportunities. Flores and Gray argue that in the wake of careers two different forms of working life are emerging in Western societies -- a wired form and an entrepreneurial form. Many lives are both wired and entrepreneurial, and new media workers represent perhaps the best example. Their working lives are organised around projects not careers, which are combined together in a portfolio.

'Instead of making a lifelong commitment to the profession, vocation or mode of working, wired people simply run with any of their several talents or inspirations. They may do so serially or all at once as portfolio workers. In this ideal, they may spend seven years of their adult lives as engineers, then go to business school and become consultants for another seven years, then by into a winery and turn their full-time attention to that, and so forth.' (Flores and Gray, 1999 page 22)

Flores and Gray caution against regarding this model as a succession of mini careers. It is based on the desire to express and use multiple talents, rather than offering a means of grounding the identity of an individual.

'Wired lives embody a radically new kind of personal autonomy. In the past, autonomous persons saw themselves as writing a coherent story

of their lives each day. Wired lives on the other hand, radicalise autonomy by freeing it from the weighty metaphor of authorship. In the traditional liberal conception of autonomy, each person has a duty to make the story of his or her life makes sense, to make one moment build from the last, thereby contriving a continuous narrative of a life in its entirety. In contrast, living a wired life involves discontinuities in values, goals and commitments. Readily casting away previous modes of life and work makes the wired life remarkably able to respond to the concern of the moment whether it is a product, customer, and health or spiritual concern. If it suddenly feels right to travel to India on a spiritual journey simply because one senses that one's spiritual interests have been neglected, then energies are turned in that direction. If a new marketing campaign feels right or is necessary because of competitive pressure, then energies are turned in that direction. This is, in effect, the life anticipated by Nietzsche, when he speculated that lifelong identities would give way to "brief habits". The lives of wired people are more like collections of short stories than the narrative of a bourgeois novel.' (Flores & Gray, 1999 page 23/4)

This view of the wired portfolio workers resonates strongly with the work of Charles Leadbeter and Kate Oakley on what they term 'the Independents' or 'new cultural entrepreneurs' -- young people working in micro businesses in the cultural industries in the UK. According to Leadbeter and Oakley, the emergence of this group of workers had several social and demographic determinants: they were the first generation who grew up with computers and consequently felt enabled by new technology; they entered the workforce in the 1980s during a moment of economic recession, industrial downsizing and diminishing public subsidy for arts/culture, thus were 'pushed' towards self-employment; and they reached adolescence and adulthood during Margaret Thatcher's prime-ministership, deriving some of their values from this political formation -- 'anti-



establishment, anti-traditionalist, and in respects highly individualistic: they prize freedom, autonomy and choice. These values predispose them to pursue self-employment and entrepreneurship in a spirit of self exploration and self-fulfilment' (Leadbeter & Oakley, 1999 page 15).

Three features of this literature on the emergence of project-based enterprises are striking. One is the very upbeat and celebratory tone of some of the writing. If the values of the 'new cultural entrepreneurs' were formed by Thatcherism, then so too -- it seems -- were those of leading commentators, whose concerns are freeing and fostering the spirit of enterprise, supporting micro-businesses and encouraging them to expand (Leadbeter & Oakley, 1999). In this model, enterprise culture is given a new twist: the cultural entrepreneurs not only fulfil their own creative and entrepreneurial impulses, but also -- in doing so -- impact positively on local regeneration, economic growth and social cohesion. In short, cultural entrepreneurialism is constructed as a panacea for all ills.

Elsewhere, I have subjected this position to detailed critique (Gill, forthcoming), looking both at its partial understanding of the experiences of portfolio workers, and its policy implications. Here it is sufficient to note the voluntarism and individualism of its focus, and its signal failure to address any of the problems of the project based working life, which include poverty, isolation and, above all, insecurity. As Ulrich Beck (2000) has put it in a slightly different context, insecurity may be 'discursively sweetened' by the rhetoric of independent entrepreneurial individualism, but it remains insecurity nonetheless.

A second issue concerns the position accorded to gender in these discussions. In many accounts (e.g. Castells,2000; Beck,2000; Flores & Gray) gender is simply ignored -- with dire consequences, I would suggest, for the arguments advanced. Flores & Gray, for example, discourse at length on the end of the career as an institution, without noting that few women's working lives ever approximated to the ideal career structure whose decline they report, and

ignoring also the classed and, to a less obvious extent, racialised nature of this institution.

The alternative 'take' on gender within these discussions is to argue that women are portfolio workers *par excellence* -- that their skills and experiences (e.g. multi-tasking) make them ideally suited to the project based enterprises of the future (cf Frank,1999). In addition, the entry of women into the workforce through small start-up companies in the cultural sector is regarded as both socially valuable and economically beneficial by contemporary policymakers. In the field of IT, in particular, British and European governments see women as the 'solution' to the skills shortage afflicting the industry (see Henwood, 1996). Here is Britain's Minister for Women:

'Women account for less than a quarter of the information and communication technology workforce and this proportion is on the decline. The key to addressing the skills shortage, now and in the future, is to encourage more women to enter the ICT sector.'

(Baroness Margaret Jay, MP, Minister for women, November 2000).

The British Government's Women's Unit expends considerable energy promoting this vision, with images of mothers expertly balancing a baby and a computer and personal testimonies of women who went into IT and have 'never looked back' (see Gill,2001)

The third -- related -- point to make about these debates is that they are rarely based upon empirical research. Indeed, despite the importance of new media workers for arguments about the transformation of the economy and the future of work, there have been very few studies which have actually examined new media workers' lives (but see Christopherson et al,1999 and Perrons,1999;2000). Considerable analysis has been devoted to the industry within management literatures (Grabher,1993;Ekstedt, Lundin & Wirdenius,1999;), but surprisingly

little attention has been devoted to examining new media work and workers. New media workers are invoked rhetorically all the time, but rarely studied, and, in place of analysis, two diametrically opposed stereotypes have emerged: one greeting new media work as the ultimate in freedom and control for workers; the other painting a picture of new media workers as downtrodden victims of the move to more flexible kinds of work (Christopherson et al,1999). Neither one is accurate or adequate.

Against this background, this study set out to examine how new media workers put together a career, manage insecurity and organise their working lives. Approaching an area which had received little study this research began by asking basic sociological questions about who new media workers are, what kinds of background they come from, what education and training they have received, how they find work, how they organise their work across time and space, whether they work alone or with others, and so on. The aim was to build a picture of the range of practices and experiences of work as a freelance new media worker.<sup>1</sup>

### **The research process**

The research was carried out in six European countries: Austria, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK. As with most European 'co-productions' the reasons for choosing these particular countries were a mixture of sound intellectual principles, bureaucratic requirements and serendipity. The guiding principle was a desire to have as diverse a sample as possible (within tight financial constraints). Rather than looking for some notion of 'ideal typical' experience among new media workers our concern was to learn about differences in experiences. Hence countries selected were ones that varied

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<sup>1</sup> The focus of the study was on project based new media workers, and did not include any information about employers in the new media field.

according to the degree to which they were 'wired'; their economic status and power; and their funding structures for arts and cultural industries.

The data for the project was collected in three main ways. First, a number of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (15) were conducted with new media workers and key informants (e.g. directors of media centres) in London, Manchester, Amsterdam and Barcelona. These interviews were designed to explore the experiences and biographies of the new media workers, and also to alert us to the key issues that should be probed in the questionnaire. Many of the participants provided detailed feedback on drafts of the survey instrument, and a significant number of changes were made in response to these comments (see Gill & Dodd, 2000).

The second means of data collection was the questionnaire which was sent electronically to 354 individuals identified as freelance new media workers in each of the six countries. The identification of these individuals posed a major challenge and this limited the numbers who could be contacted. As freelance workers they were not connected to any particular workplace or organisation; as virtual workers they could not be located in any specific place (most work from home or in shared rented studios). The means of 'finding' the participants thus came from networking organisations, media centres, directories (including Web based) and personal referrals.

The 354 requests elicited 112 full replies -- a very high response rate for Web based research, which is probably attributable to the familiarity of the participants with this medium; the high levels of personal contact established; and the relevance of the survey to the workers' lives and concerns. However, responses were not evenly distributed across the 6 countries and the UK and Netherlands are over-represented compared to the other 4 countries.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Given the small number of responses from some countries -- Ireland, in particular -- we are not able to make cross national comparisons from this data. It is hoped that a larger future study will

The data from the survey was analysed, and a preliminary report and summary of findings was sent to each individual who had participated in the survey. This was accompanied by a request for their comments -- if any -- and an invitation to attend a large two-day conference/workshop in London (with travel, accommodation and expenses paid by the Commission) to debate the issues and to present their concerns to policymakers at various levels (regional, National, European).

The third tool of data collection, then, was the conference discussions (in small group workshops) and feedback, most of which were tape recorded and noted, and which contributed considerably to our understanding of the lives of project based workers in new media. Interestingly the conference was a particularly useful forum for discussion of gender issues, enabling appreciation of concerns that did not emerge in either the questionnaire or the interviews.

### **Project based new media work**

The research generated a wealth of information about freelancing in new media sector. In this section we offer a broad summary of some of the central findings. The sheer diversity of types of occupation which gather under the heading 'new media' is worthy of comment. Participants in this study variously characterised their work as multimedia content creation, digital art, computer games design, animation, video art, Web broadcasting, Internet radio and web site design. This indicates the extent to which the new digital technologies are producing a whole variety of entirely new practitioners.

The respondents were generally aged between mid twenties and early forties, with most of falling between 25 and 35. Most had been involved in this work for

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facilitate such comparisons and enable assessments to be made of the factors which contribute to or hinder better working conditions and greater equality.

between two and six years, and, in this respect, women emerged as the newcomers to the field. Our sample was overwhelmingly white, and it is not clear whether this accurately reflects the whiteness of new media work or whether our survey methods simply did not reach people of colour working in these fields. Either way, given the 'hip, cool and equal' speak about new media work it suggests the need for further investigation of the racial practices and exclusions at work here.<sup>3</sup>

On the basis of the findings we can say that project based new media workers appear to be among the most highly educated workers in Western economies. 93% of our respondents had a university degree, and of these almost half also had a postgraduate qualification. Indeed, only five people had completed their formal education at school. Despite this, many of them were highly critical of their formal education, and had supplemented this, after leaving university, with training in specific software tools and packages e.g. programming languages, multimedia authoring or digital editing. The workers surveyed claimed to be familiar with between 6 and 10 packages, with men claiming greater expertise. (However, caution is needed in establishing whether men actually knew how to use more tools than women because of the clear gender distinction in patterns of reporting. Indeed, even when a man and a woman claimed parity in the number of packages with which they were familiar, the woman would often phrase this in terms like 'I only know HTML (etc etc)' while men would say 'I know a lot: HTML., etc etc..') Unlike the previous generation of programmers and software designers they were more likely to be arts graduates than to have studied computer science. They defined themselves as artists -- or, at least, located their projects within the aesthetic domain -- and in contradistinction to 'geeky' and 'nerdy' programmers. This was most clear among women.

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<sup>3</sup> In a separate study of new media centres, carried out at the same time with Andy Pratt, we found considerable resistance among white new media workers to address racism, with a liberal-sounding 'colour blind' (Frankenberg, 1993; Williams, 1997) discourse dominating.

One clear finding of the study concerned the irrelevance of traditional means of finding work for this group of highly skilled individuals. In place of job centres or job advertisements, informal networks emerged as the key source of information about work for this group. In addition, more than half the women surveyed and nearly three-quarters of the men said that they created their own work. This could cover a range of activities from approaching a local business organisation to offer to produce a web site for them, to producing a CD-ROM for sale, or even designing a piece of software to make improved 3-D animation.

Given this degree of autonomous working, it is not surprising that for much of the time respondents work on their own. In addition, they came together with other freelancers in 'project networks' (Jones, 1996) to work on particular outputs. In these situations they almost always got the opportunity to participate via a personal contact. These collaborations were described as team works without organisational hierarchy, in which tasks were more important than roles. The fluidity of roles was identified by many participants as a key attraction of this way of working with others.

Another striking finding of the research relates to the number of different projects with which these workers were involved. Hardly anyone was just working on one project or contract; most were combining several. We asked people to say how many separate projects they had worked on over the previous two years, and the responses showed an average of eight projects per worker. In some cases these were worked on serially, one after the other, but in most cases people were working on two or three project simultaneously -- perhaps working with a team of producing a CD ROM two days a week, working on web site design for a company one day a week, and spending some of the remaining time on their own digital arts project. The average figure of eight hides a significant gender disparity: when disaggregated by gender men had worked on an average of nine projects over the previous two years, while women had worked on an average of

6. Even within gender groups, however, there were substantial differences: the projects were unevenly distributed.

Despite the volume of new media work being done by these workers the earnings from this work were low and contrasted sharply with stereotypes of 'PC bedroom millionaires' and with general perceptions about the marketability of IT skills. Extrapolating from the information provided for us about their earnings over the previous six-month period, the average annual income for men from this work was EUR16,000, and for women it was EUR10,000. Again, of course, the average figures should be treated with caution. However, where they are skewed they tend to overestimate the amount being derived from this work, because of the success of one of two individuals.

The low incomes most were earning from new media work meant that all but a few of the workers surveyed were supplementing their income with other kinds of work. Interestingly, by far the most common supplementary occupation was teaching in further education or higher education settings, or offering courses in programming tools or software packages, similar to the way they themselves had acquired these skills.

In relation to this kind of work the gender picture was reversed: women were devoting more time to, and earning more money from, teaching and other occupations than were men, and this work also -- for most women -- generated the biggest proportion of their income. But in spite of the enormous amount of other work being done, both men and women regarded this as supplementary -- just something they do to earn money -- and they defined their work identities in relation to their new media projects. Rather like actors who work in catering industry for ten months of the year and on the stage for two, but have a powerful sense of themselves as actors, for this group of workers new media projects were central to their sense of self.



Finally, in this section, questions about work places and spaces will be considered. The workers were asked to describe where they carried out their new media work. Because each individual was often working on a number of different projects, and might be based in different places for each project, a system of percentages was used. One of the things that this revealed was the significant degree of teleworking going on: freelancers were working from home on an average one-third of the time. The other two major work spaces were the employers work place, and, more popularly, a rented studio or workshop.

There has been a lot of academic and journalistic speculation in recent years about the ways in which cyberspace or virtual space may be changing social relations. Commentators speak of 'the death of distance', of virtual networking leading to reduced travel, and of relationships formed or sustained virtually supplanting those based on physical proximity and contact ('face-to-face') (e.g. Caincross, 1998; Coyle, 1998). The research presented here echoes other recent empirical studies in suggesting that such claims should be treated with scepticism. Our interviewees and respondents -- who clearly represent the 'soft case' for such assertions, for if they cannot be sustained for this group of digital workers then they surely cannot be sustained anywhere -- maintained that physical places and proximity to others were immensely important to them. The vast majority of them said that the ideal location for their work would be in the cultural quarter or technology hub of the city, and the reason for this was -- overwhelmingly -- their desire for proximity with others doing similar kinds of work. As Andy Pratt (2000) has argued, contact with other new media workers is important not only to combat isolation, but it is also a vital source of information about new and changing technologies, problem solving, and future work opportunities. In this study, 95% of respondents reported that making contact with others doing similar work was a key part of their working lives.

### **Gender and new media work**

New media workers were unanimous about the attractions of working in their field. Its youth, dynamism, and creativity were mentioned repeatedly, as were the pleasures of working autonomously with no managerial control, flexible working hours, and the intrinsically challenging and fulfilling nature of the work. One other attraction for many people -- particularly men -- was the connection between this kind of work and various youth (music, street, graffiti) subcultures. In many respects, then, our sample seems to have endorsed the image of them that emerges from work like Leadbeter and Oakley's *The Independents*. Hard-working and committed, they derived enormous satisfaction from their work and valued their autonomy, creative freedom, and the youth and informality of their work 'scene'.

'Cultural entrepreneurs opt for independence because it allows them to work in the way they want, which they would find hard to justify within a larger organisation. This mode of working is central to the way they generate and apply their creativity to commercial ends. The *Independents* are generally highly motivated and have a strong work ethic, although they do not follow the traditional workday or week. They accept their work will be judged on performance, in competition with their peers. People are usually only as good as their last project. They work in a highly competitive environment, in which fashions and technologies can change very rapidly.' (Leadbeter & Oakley, 1999 page 24)

But this upbeat account only tells part of the story. What it misses is the more profound shift represented by project based careers towards an individualisation of risk. This operates at many levels. On the one hand, individuals must become entirely self governing and must bear the costs of all their training and professional development, of insurance, Social Security, sick pay, maternity leave, etc They must also take responsibility for finding future work and for managing gaps between projects. In Susan Christopherson's (1999) study of

new media workers in New York, her respondents were spending an average of 20 hours per week involved in updating their skills and knowledge or in looking for the next project. The workers surveyed here had the same experience -- requiring significant amounts of time and money simply to maintain a 'steady-state'-- ie to stay skilled in a rapidly changing technological environment and to keep apprised of developing work opportunities. Leadbeter and Oakley's glib statement that people are 'only as good as their last project' conceals the anxiety and insecurity that this can produce -- anxieties about finding (enough) work, getting it wrong, only been given one chance, not knowing where or when the next contract will come from, etc -- all of which have to be managed by the individual alone.

Elsewhere I have discussed these issues in some detail (Gill, forthcoming). In the remainder of this paper I want to turn specifically to the ways in which gender impacts on the experience of project based new media work.

There is a significant literature about gender and information technologies, and it is well established that women and men usually have very different 'techno biographies' (Grint & Gill, 1995; Webster, 1996; Wajcman, 1991; Stanworth, 2000; Henwood, Kenney & Miller, 2001). But in a field in which all workers are necessarily highly technically literate (as well as possessing a range of other skills in business, art, design, etc), it might be expected that the gender differences would be less stark. This research indicates that this is not the case. Women and men generally have very different experiences of work in new media -- experiences which challenge an understanding of new media as a refreshingly egalitarian industry.

The reported differences started at school, with women claiming much fewer opportunities to use computers, and describing situations in which boys 'took over' the I. T. facilities, often intimidating female teachers (these and other issues were discussed in detail at the conference). Inequalities persisted once women

entered the field of new media -- even when they had equivalent levels of I. T. skills to their male contemporaries. Women got significantly fewer of the work contracts, and those which they got were often for public sector or voluntary organisations rather than with commercial organisations (which went disproportionately to men). Women earned less money for their new media work than men -- although this seems likely to be due to working on fewer projects rather than having their work undervalued. The consequence was that many women became de facto part-time workers in their chosen field, as they were pushed into other occupations to earn a living. Women were also much more likely than men to work from home, despite having as strong a preference as their male peers for working from a rented studio or workspace.

Clearly, then, there are stark differences between most men's and most women's experiences of freelance new media work. How might these differences be understood, and what are the factors which contribute to the persistent inequalities? We will address this by discussing three problematic issues.

### *Informality*

The informality of work practices and relationships within project based new media was regarded as a major attraction of the work by the vast majority of the respondents. However it was also -- simultaneously -- seen as problematic by many of the same workers -- and particularly by women. Informality caused problems for some women across a range of experiences: working with men in male dominated teams e.g. inappropriate sexualised interaction, sexist assumptions, Laddish culture ( cf.Tierney, 1995;Devine, 1992); the absence of clear criteria for evaluating work; and, above all, in relation to finding and securing new contracts. Access to new contracts was controlled informally, and work was invariably allocated on the basis of interpersonal connections. Women and men told us that finding new projects was determined by 'who you know, not

what you know', but this was perceived by some women as a form of gendered exclusion -- the activities of an 'old boys network'.

New media workers' perceptions of this process are borne out by evidence from those who allocated project contracts. Even within the more mainstream, stable parts of high-tech industries contracts are increasingly offered to those who have informal connections to the company or who are recommended by an insider.

Here is the vice president of Sun Microsystems:

'Only 2% of the jobs we fill are from resumes. Most of the jobs in our company are filled by referrals from other employees' (quoted in Christopherson et al, 1999)

The increasing prevalence of this kind of practice for hiring staff or issuing contracts raises grave concerns for equal opportunities -- concerns that are extremely difficult to contest or even discuss, because of the lack of transparency in the process. It challenges new media's view of itself as both meritocratic and egalitarian because contracts are bestowed on the basis of informal connections or personal recommendation rather than on the result of open competition. This may disadvantage many men as well as women, but women are likely to be disproportionately affected because of what Suzanne Franks(1999) calls Hansard's law – namely, the clubbier the atmosphere the more it will discriminate against women. One woman summed this up graphically. Having been initially attracted by the informal and non-hierarchical nature of the field, she spoke wistfully and nostalgically to us about formal and rigidly hierarchical organisations in which the structures of status and authority are clear, and criteria for hiring and promotion are transparent and publicly available: 'Give me a formal hierarchy anyday over the fake democracy and pseudo-equality of this work!'

*Flexibility*

Just as the informality of the industry was experienced as both attractive and problematic, so too the flexibility of the new media career appeared to be, at best, double edged, and, at worst, illusory. The discourse of flexibility appeared not to capture well the experiences of most portfolio workers trying to build a career in new media- it is, as Diane Perrons (1999) has noted, a flexible discourse of flexibility. For example, the notion of 'flexible hours' suggests that the individual is able to exercise some control over when and how long she works; in fact the needs of the project were always paramount, and 'flexibility' was determined by these, rather than by the needs of the worker. Many projects had extremely tight deadlines (which workers had to agree to meet in order to get the contract) and these necessitated intense round-the-clock working for a short period, which might then be followed by several weeks with no (new media) work at all. This pattern was the norm for workers in this study and has been described elsewhere as the 'bulimic career' (Pratt, 2000)

The capacity to choose a workspace is also an indicator of flexible working practices, with working from home constructed as emblematic of freedom for professional workers -- particularly women. However, although a small number of respondents reported enjoying working from home, most preferred to work from another space -- particularly a rented studio or workshop in the cultural quarter of the city. Reasons for this included the desire to combat isolation by working close to other people doing similar things, and to mark a clear separation between home and work. This has particular resonances for women, for whom -- historically -- the home has not been a straightforward site of leisure and relaxation. But because they had fewer new media contracts and earned less, women were significantly less likely than men to be able to afford this option. Working from home, therefore, was rarely a choice for women; almost always a necessity. It impeded (though did not prevent) networking opportunities and also sent a signal about their relative lack of success in their chosen field.

The sample included only a small handful of people who said they had children -- none of them women. This may simply be a consequence of the mid-twenties to mid-thirties age range of most respondents, or it may be -- as Susan Christopherson et al found in New York -- that women in new media are choosing not to have children -- for reasons which still need to be explored. It is clear, however, that as it is presently experienced, it would be extremely difficult for a woman to combine child-rearing with the bulimic patterns of the portfolio new media career -- without an excellent support network of childcarers willing to mimic the intense stop-go work patterns and long hours, or a radical restructuring of heterosexual gender relations. Images of women feeding or playing with contented babies, while simultaneously working at their home computer terminal would be regarded with hilarity by the women in this study and bear no relationship to their experiences of the demands of work in new media.

### *The post-feminist problem*

The final set of issues concern what I have call the 'postfeminist problem'. I use this notion to capture the reluctance of new media workers -- men, but also most women -- to understand their experiences as having anything to do with gender. When asked about who -- if anyone -- faced disadvantages in entering new media work 88% of men and 75% of women said that women did not. Interestingly the field was perceived to be equally unproblematic for members of ethnic minorities and disabled people, suggesting that this is not just a gendered issue but one that concerns structural inequalities in general.

As we noted earlier, a striking feature of the field is the dominance of individualistic and meritocratic discourses. Even though in some situations both women and men 'know' that they are not operating in a meritocratic system -- contracts are not allocated on performance or experience but on connections, for example -- there is a profound reluctance to jettison or even question this discourse among most respondents. Women were 'caught' within a discourse

similar to that described by Flis Henwood as 'WISE discourse' which has 'the effect of individualising their experiences, making it difficult for them to use such experiences as a basis for collective action and change' (1996 p.208). When individualistic understandings dominate over sociological ones in this way disappointing (and even discriminatory) experiences are understood as personal failures or as random events (see also Gill, 1993 for a discussion of 'new sexism' in broadcasting).

This confronts the researcher with many dilemmas. How can we simultaneously take seriously and accord respect to the respondents' accounts, whilst also noting the clear sociological patterns? In the case of women it requires us to hold two pieces of -- very often contradictory -- evidence: on the one hand the very clear patterning of the data into gendered career trajectories which define experience, and on the other the equally clearly expressed view that women's experiences in new media have nothing to do with gender. It is the tension between the different types of evidence that requires exploration.

What is not fully clear -- and needs more study -- is why a discourse (like those of feminisms) which makes gender visible is not deployed by the majority of the women. It is simply not available to them? Perhaps they have access only to a media caricature of feminism? Or have they considered it and rejected it as an inadequate account of their experiences? Or, alternatively, do they judge that using such a discourse might be dangerous for their career? One woman told us during a conference workshop, 'you don't talk about gender if you want to get on', to which there were many nods of assent from other women. Is its rejection, then, a knowing strategy deployed astutely by women who understand that a language of individualism is the way to succeed in new media?

Tantalisingly and frustratingly, this research cannot provide clear answers to these questions. They need to be followed up in some depth. What is clear,



however, is that new media freelancers work in an industry in which there are clear divergences between men's and women's experiences, and they have no language to make sense of this, except in individualistic terms which inevitably construct women's relative lack of success in terms of individual failure (couldn't hack it, wasn't good enough, not committed enough, etc). Many women buy into this discourse, and individual women can and do succeed. But ultimately its individualism, combined with the 'hip, cool and equal'-speak in and about the industry, conceals (and renders difficult to speak of) the serious patterns of inequality that are emerging in this new field.

## **Conclusion**

This paper started with a look at the image of new media work -- on television, among academics and policymakers -- an image of an informal and egalitarian industry full of young, diverse types who are the epitome of 'cool'. This is the contemporary myth of new media, and this paper has shown that new media workers themselves are among its most ardent followers, wedded to a representation of themselves and their world as dynamic and meritocratic, where the best succeed through performance alone, and where blacks and whites, gays and straights, women and men all start out on an equal footing.

This paper has been concerned with what this myth conceals, obscures, or renders unsayable: chronic insecurity, low pay, long hours, and other problems associated with a shift to the individualisation of risk. It has also been concerned to use the evidence from the survey and interviews with new media workers to hold up to closer scrutiny the idea that new media is an egalitarian field, free of sexism.

The paper has pointed to a number of clear divergences between men's and women's careers in new media, in ways that cannot be explained purely in personal or individual terms. Looking at traditional indicators such as the number

of contracts obtained or the amount of money earned, women emerged as clear losers. However the paper has also aimed to draw attention to new areas of concern. In particular it has argued that some of the mythologised and highly valued features of project based new media -- informality and flexibility -- are the very mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced. Add to this the rejection by most new media workers of any discourse that makes gender visible, and you have a situation in which patterns of discrimination are naturalised and inequality and injustice wear an egalitarian mask.

This is a small survey and leaves many questions unanswered, but it points to grave concerns which must be addressed if indeed project based careers are to become the standard form of work for the future, and if new media is to come close to living up to its cool, creative and egalitarian image.

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