

# **Work organisation, labour & globalisation**

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# About this journal

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The globalisation of world trade in combination with the use of information and communications technologies is bringing into being a new international division of labour, not just in manufacturing industry, as in the past, but also in work involving the processing of information.

Organisational restructuring shatters the unity of the traditional workplace, both contractually and spatially, dispersing work across the globe in ever-more attenuated value chains.

A new 'cybertariat' is in the making, sharing common labour processes, but working in remote offices and call centres which may be continents apart and occupying very different cultural and economic places in local economies.

The implications of this are far-reaching, both for policy and for scholarship. The dynamics of this new global division of labour cannot be captured adequately within the framework of any single academic discipline. On the contrary they can only be understood in the light of a combination of insights from fields including political economy, the sociology of work, organisational theory, economic geography, development studies, industrial relations, comparative social policy, communications studies, technology policy and gender studies.

Work organisation, labour and globalisation aims to:

- bring together insights from all of these fields to create a single authoritative source of information on the new global division of labour, combining theoretical analysis with the results of empirical research in a way that is accessible both to the research community and to policy makers;
- provide a single home for articles which specifically address issues relating to the changing international division of labour and the restructuring of work in a global knowledge-based economy;
- bring together the results of empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative, with theoretical analyses in order to inform the development of new interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the restructuring of work, organisation and labour in a global context;
- be global in scope, with a particular emphasis on attracting contributions from developing countries as well as from Europe, North America and other developed regions;
- encourage a dialogue between university-based researchers and their counterparts in international and national government agencies, independent research institutes, trade unions and civil society as well as policy makers. Subject to the requirements of scholarly peer review, it is open to submissions from contributors working outside the academic sphere and encourages an accessible style of writing in order to facilitate this goal;
- complement, rather than compete with existing discipline-based journals;
- bring to the attention of English-speaking readers relevant articles originally published in other languages.

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# Collective action frames and the developing role of discursive practice in worker organisation: the case of OUR Walmart

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recent technological innovations have made possible a range of new communication practices among workers engaged in struggles to raise wages and improve working conditions. New forms of social organisation and association are changing how collective action is carried out and how collective action frames are generated. Looking at a year's worth of content from a secret Facebook group designed as a forum for current and former Walmart employees, this study considers how communication practices relate to the organisational forms of coping and resistance among workers. Analysis of the posts and comments transpiring within the group, which is loosely affiliated with the Organisation United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart), suggests a growing role for personalised forms of communication in the production and circulation of collective action frames. These forms blur the distinction between discursive and strategic communication processes, requiring us to reconsider the roles traditionally played by social movement organisations and rank-and-file participants. The primary contribution of this research is to demonstrate how emerging communication practices problematise distinctions between communities of coping and of resistance, between activities that are personally satisfying and those that prioritise group concerns, and between the self-organised activities of employees and the actions of labour unions. The article concludes with a consideration of the implications of these emerging communication practices for movement outcomes.

## **KEY WORDS**

framing, labour, organising, collective action frames, Walmart, collective action, connective action

## Introduction

Several years ago, a Walmart employee in California noticed that the paper towel dispenser in the break room had been stocked with toilet paper instead of paper towels. Later that day she conferred with ten other current and former Walmart employees from across the USA about their experiences with supply shortages at Walmart. A few months later, a manager at a Florida Walmart store told an employee that she was prohibited from accepting Christmas gifts from customers. Subsequently, the employee and five other current and former Walmart associates consulted the company's General Learning Management System to determine whether there was indeed such a policy. Another employee, this time in Missouri, was instructed by an assistant manager to remove a *forrespect.org* pin from her Walmart vest.<sup>1</sup> After some discussion, she and a group of current and former employees determined that she had not violated Walmart's dress code and that she should consider filing an unfair labour practice complaint with the National Labor Relations Board. In another conversation, a group of 36 current and former Walmart employees commended a young man for his bravery after he went out on strike alone at his Louisiana store. In still another discussion, a former Walmart employee from Georgia expressed a mixture of satisfaction and regret about his decision to leave Walmart. While he was happy to dispense with the unfair treatment by management, he missed the good friends he had made while working there. Interestingly, none of these interactions involved face-to-face encounters. Instead, they were made possible by a secret Facebook group loosely affiliated with the Organisation United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart). Much of this group's communication is discursive in that it is frequently conversational and informal, occasionally therapeutic, sometimes gossipy and often playful. Yet, this secret Facebook group (henceforth referred to by the pseudonym 'Kindred Spirits') also acts as a forum for class struggle. Consequently, Kindred Spirits offers a unique opportunity to analyse the relevance of discursive communication practices to workers' struggles.

The historically unique modes of communication facilitated by technologies like personal computers, mobile devices, the Internet and social media have allowed for new forms of organisation and association. Scholarship in this area is rich and varied. Some scholars have emphasised the concomitant social fragmentation, labour precarity and social divisions based on race and gender that workers face today (Cohen, 2016; Huws, 2014; McRobbie, 2016). Other scholars have considered how new technologies enable individuals to act collectively, without mediation from traditional organisations, creating new opportunities for political engagement (Caraway, 2015; Castells, 2012; Polletta, Chen, Gardner & Motes, 2013). This study continues in these efforts by taking seriously workers' own narratives and their capacity to inform our understanding of labour processes and class struggle. To that end, I look at how the discourse among Walmart workers in Kindred Spirits relates to the collective action framing of OUR Walmart. This research is informed by two questions: First, what types of frames do workers generate in their discussions and what role do these frames play in workers'

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1 <http://forrespect.org/> was the official website for OUR Walmart and was maintained by the UFCW. This site was discontinued in November of 2016 and now redirects to <http://changewalmart.org>



resistance? Second, how do these framing processes relate to the organisational forms and eventual outcomes of workers' struggles? The primary contribution of this article is to demonstrate how the blending of discursive and strategic communication practices problematises prior distinctions made between participants' attempts to cope and to resist, and between the self-organised activities of rank-and-file participants and the actions of social movement organisations (SMOs) like labour unions.

## Background

Founded in 2011, OUR Walmart was originally funded by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union as an independent non-union worker organisation (Moberg, 2015a). OUR Walmart was responsible for the Black Friday actions at Walmart stores in 2012, 2013 and 2014 in which workers and their supporters carried out a series of walk-outs, sit-ins and assorted protests to apply pressure on the retailer ahead of the holiday shopping season (Berfield, 2015). Prior to these Black Friday campaigns, OUR Walmart sent a delegation of 97 members to the annual Walmart shareholders meeting in Bentonville, Arkansas, to petition for liveable wages and benefits, predictable scheduling, more full-time work, better health care and the freedom to speak out without fear of retaliation (Berfield, 2015). Although unionisation was not an immediately plausible goal for the organisation, the UFCW wanted to pressure Walmart to raise wages and improve working conditions because the company sets labour standards for much of the retail sector (Jamieson, 2016). Accordingly, OUR Walmart was created with three goals in mind: 1) overcoming regional and shop floor isolation among workers; 2) providing workers with avenues for participation and genuine agency; and 3) facilitating collective action among workers in order to build a sense of efficacy and solidarity (Moberg, 2015b).

OUR Walmart was launched with the goal of organising 1% of Walmart's workforce in a year – a target that was never reached (Olney, 2015). The internal organisation of OUR Walmart includes a board of five workers and two directors, and a larger council of workers providing direction for the organisation's campaigns. This structure reflects the UFCW's loose approach to the coordination of collective action, using OUR Walmart to empower current and former Walmart workers who collaborate and carry out actions (Caraway, 2015). The organisation has been recognised for its impressive use of online tools and is considered by some to be an ideal model for workers in non-unionised sectors (Rolf, 2016). Although exact numbers are difficult to come by, the cost of the UFCW's Walmart campaign (of which OUR Walmart was a substantial part) was estimated at US\$7 to US\$8 million annually (Moberg, 2015b). However, in 2015 the UFCW withdrew financial support for OUR Walmart. Subsequently, the organisation has obtained funding from a variety of sources including donations, member contributions and foundation grants. The discontinuation of support from the UFCW is a crucial development that I will revisit in the conclusion of this article.

Facebook groups allow participants to post messages on a common wall accessible to group members. A subset of users acts as administrators to oversee membership, manage content and control the privacy settings of the group. The secret Facebook group Kindred Spirits is one means through which Walmart workers communicate and collaborate. Kindred Spirits functions as a space for members to engage in a variety of discussions about workplace, personal and movement issues. The group is open to

current and former Walmart employees and includes both members and non-members of OUR Walmart. In a 2017 interview with the author, an OUR Walmart member described how they founded Kindred Spirits in 2011:

*I was seeing all these people online and being able to identify with a lot of people, but mostly formers, the angry, very angry people ... My idea was to have this group for former associates, right? So, I had made a post about it ... And then I had a number of people saying 'well I'm not a former but I would like to join' so I was like 'hey, why not?' So, we just kind of said 'OK let's just open it up to current and former Walmart and Sam's Club associates across the country'.*

The group was established independently of OUR Walmart, though the founder (and administrator) of Kindred Spirits was a member of OUR Walmart. The founder alerted OUR Walmart to the group's existence early on (personal communication with the author, 2017):

*I [spoke] to the co-director of the organisation and I told her 'hey you're going to have to trust me on this, I can't let you in this group because I want it to be very secure, I want it to be all current and former associates, no organisers, no staff or anything like that unless you've worked at Walmart'. ... And I really feel that's why the group has had so much success. Just because there is one admin and I keep it pretty tight.*

Eventually, a small number of paid UFCW organisers were allowed to join Kindred Spirits, but their activity was largely limited to observation and the occasional solicitation for input from the group. The name of the group (not the pseudonym) was coined by an early member. For the first year, membership hovered around 50. At the time this research was conducted, there were just fewer than 600 members. Because of the unique relationship between Kindred Spirits, OUR Walmart and the UFCW, the group provides a useful window into the processes by which collective action frames are strategically and discursively generated within a networked social movement. As OUR Walmart organisers solicited participation from members and surveilled their interactions, elements of these discussions found their way into frames circulating outside of the group. The relationship between the UFCW and OUR Walmart constitutes an *organisationally enabled network* in which an established organisation facilitates deliberation and collective action among rank-and-file participants (Caraway, 2015; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Kindred Spirits's position between these two organisations muddies the distinction between self-organised communities of workers and more bureaucratic forms of labour organisation. Moreover, the coexistence of discursive and strategic communication practices within the group suggests that forms of accommodation and contestation are recursively ordered.

## **Communication in organisational contexts**

In the USA, membership in private sector unions has been in a state of precipitous decline since the 1970s. As organised labour was decimated in some sectors and shut out of others, workers sought out alternative forms of worker networks. Unsurprisingly,

there has been growing interest among scholars about the viability of the Internet and social networking sites (SNSs) for communities seeking to cope with or resist their conditions of exploitation. Communication scholars have occasionally argued that these technologies draw momentum away from more effective forms of activism (Harlow & Guo, 2014). Underlying the current investigation is a desire to understand how participation on websites relates to accommodation and resistance among workers. Richards (2008) used questionnaires to examine the practice of work blogging as a site of resistance. His work demonstrates the significance of new communication technologies for organising and mobilisation. Similarly, Schoneboom (2007) analysed work blogging as an expression of workers' critical and creative responses to their labour conditions. Schoneboom (2011) notes that commercial SNSs like Facebook and Twitter are increasingly central to worker blogging activities. Cohen & Richards (2015) consider how Facebook facilitates self-organised coping practices among groups of workers who are increasingly using SNSs as outlets for conflict expression. The authors assert that SNSs are important extensions of workplace-based coping both individually and collectively. Bancarzewski & Hardy (2017) analyse newspaper discussion boards and how they facilitated the development of an online community of resistance for Polish workers in a Japanese electronics and logistics investment cluster. The authors analyse workers' narratives of their everyday experiences for themes related to larger debates around whether or not Internet activities are chiefly forms of accommodation or resistance to managerial systems and workplace conditions. Similarly, Caraway (2010) analyses an online labour platform as a site for worker resistance. In his analysis of the global freelancing platform oDesk (now Upwork), he found that the platform functioned as a means both for the exploitation of workers and for their resistance to exploitation.

These accounts speak to the capacity of digital networks as facilitators of class struggle without specifying the unique operation of these technologies in relation to movement dynamics. To better understand what is exceptional about this operational logic, I find it useful to draw on concepts from social movement theory. In his seminal book *The Logic of Collective Action*, Olson (1971) famously suggested that it is incorrect to assume that members of a group will act collectively to achieve common interests. In large groups, where contributions can go unnoticed, there is little incentive for individuals to act collectively to achieve mutual interests. Instead, rational individuals have an incentive to capitalise on the efforts of others. Olson, therefore, suggested that large groups should make use of sanctions and selective incentives to overcome the dilemma of free riding. Today, networked digital media have lowered the marginal costs of production to such an extent that there is cause to reconsider Olson's assertion. Bennett & Segerberg (2013) offer their alternative concept of *connective action* to demonstrate how personalised content sharing across the Internet and social media makes possible large-scale, fluid social networks, without hierarchical and centralised structures of control. This approach regards technology as an organising element in its own right, enabling users to coordinate their activities independently of SMOs. Wright (2015) uses the concept of connective action to investigate whether greater levels of rank-and-file participation occur at the expense of established organisations. Wright analyses over 33,000 petitions submitted to the British government as part of the now

defunct *Downing Street e-petitions* website. He discovered that the most successful petitioning efforts (those that demonstrably impacted government policy) were initiated by individuals rather than organised groups. Caraway (2015) also uses the concept of connective action to show how the organisational form of OUR Walmart unfolds as an organisationally enabled network in which an established organisation (in this case the UFCW) takes responsibility for the loose coordination of action, empowering rank-and-file members to deliberate independently on objectives and coordinate collective actions. Likewise, Wood (2015) considers the relationship between OUR Walmart and the UFCW in his analysis of the role of Internet-facilitated networks during the 2012 mobilisation of California Walmart workers. Wood concludes that these networks can effectively complement traditional organising methods.

An important element of connective action is how it enables people to collaborate in the production and distribution of content without the mediation of bureaucratic organisation. Because individuals are motivated to share content that is personally meaningful to them, collective action framing may rapidly scale up via its own momentum. Collective action frames refer to sets of beliefs and meanings that motivate people to act while giving legitimacy to social movement activities (Gamson, 1992). Scholars often invoke framing when discussing collective processes of signification and meaning-making (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow & Benford, 1988). Collective action frames allow groups to focus attention and identify problems, attribute blame and articulate solutions (Hunt, Benford & Snow, 1994). Ordinarily, SMOs and their leadership are responsible for generating frames. However, Bennett & Segerberg (2013) note that one of the affordances of networked digital media is greater participation by rank-and-file members in the generation of frames. The authors point to the example of individuals combining text with images to create Internet memes, functioning as a type of *personalised action frame*. They argue that because personalised action frames are more reflective of the personal experiences of movement participants, they are widely shared and adopted as common frames for action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013, 6–7).

Notwithstanding this body of research, the notion that personalised communication could, or even should, play a more decisive role in contemporary social movements has been met with criticism. Critics have questioned whether personal interactions and fluid social networks are capable of producing the sustained political participation necessary to achieve genuine social change (Gladwell, 2010; Hess, 2009). For example, in their network analysis of nearly 2.4 million tweets related to the Turkish Gezi Park protests, and in their content analysis of 5,126 of those tweets, Ogan & Varol (2017) question whether the combination of loose organisational form and Internet messaging platforms is adequate to the task of producing lasting social change. The authors found that the Gezi protest could not effectively use Twitter as a replacement for the structure provided by more conventional organisations. Bennett & Segerberg (2013) comment on this variety of critique:

*Underlying this skepticism is the worry that organisational structure and capacity play against each other. The familiar concern is that the gains of connective action such as rapid scalability and adaptability may be paid for by a loss of capacity to*

*set agendas, achieve policy change, and continue to mobilise and coordinate action in the face of adversity over time. (149)*

Certainly, there are lingering questions about connective action and its relationship to commitment levels, mobilisation capacity and movement agendas. Suffice it to say, these critiques demand more research relating communication practices to movement outcomes.

This investigation examines how the interplay between the discursive and strategic communication practices of workers and labour organisers in an online forum shapes the framing processes of OUR Walmart. Because the Facebook group was designed as a forum for former and current Walmart employees, and because professional organisers were held at arm's length, a mix of framing practices transpired within Kindred Spirits. To understand these practices, I turn to Benford & Snow (2000) who explain the discursive and strategic dimensions of framing. Discursive processes include the everyday conversations and written communications among movement members. Strategic processes are more deliberative and goal-oriented. They are promulgated by SMOs for specific purposes. However, in Kindred Spirits, the distinction between discursive and strategic processes is often hard to discern as frames arise simultaneously from individual and organisational motivations.

Hunt, Benford & Snow (1994) suggest that SMOs must accomplish three core framing tasks. The first task, *diagnostic framing*, refers to the process by which SMOs identify some phenomenon or condition as problematic, and attribute blame or causation for the problem. The second task, *prognostic framing*, occurs when SMOs offer solutions to problems. Hunt et al. (1994) explain, 'Prognostic framing outlines a plan for redress, specifying what should be done by whom, including an elaboration of specific targets, strategies, and tactics' (191). The third task, *motivational framing*, occurs when SMOs seek to convince adherents that taking part in collective action is the best option. Benford & Snow (2000) explain that motivational framing '... fosters action, moving people from the balcony to the barricades' (615).

The utility of these categories is to establish the rationale behind the frames appearing in Kindred Spirits. Yet these categories do not tell us much about the relationship between rank-and-file participants and SMOs in the process of framing. To better understand how frames traverse the gap across individual and bureaucratic levels, I use the concept of *frame alignment*. Snow et al. (1986) use this concept to refer to the '... linkage of individual and SMO interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals and ideology are congruent and complementary' (464). The authors elaborate four types of frame alignment processes: amplification, bridging, extension and transformation. Although these categories are typically used to describe the strategic framing processes of SMOs, I extend these concepts to the analysis of the communication practices of rank-and-file members of Kindred Spirits.

*Frame amplification* occurs when greater significance is assigned to particular issues, events or values. It indicates how SMOs elaborate and rejuvenate the accepted meanings and values of a social movement. According to Snow et al. (1986), frame amplification entails '... the clarification and invigoration of an interpretive frame that

bears on a particular issue, problem or set of events' (469). *Frame bridging* involves the linking of two or more compatible frames with no previous structural connections. These linkages can connect organisations with unmobilised supporters, or with other SMOs (Benford & Snow, 2000). *Frame extension* refers to attempts to expand the horizon of shared beliefs and values to encompass issues and concerns that are relevant to potential allies. Frame extension describes how SMOs extend the boundaries of collective action frames to include interests and perspectives that are congruent with and salient to potential supporters (Snow et al., 1986). *Frame transformation* describes how social movements are occasionally forced to adjust accepted meanings and understandings in response to a change in circumstances or in light of new information (Snow et al., 1986). This may be necessary when a movement's values and beliefs are in conflict with dominant interpretive frames – perhaps due to a change in social, cultural or political circumstances.

## Methodology

This research investigates one setting in which the framing processes of OUR Walmart take place. I examine the types of interactions occurring within Kindred Spirits in order to describe how these interactions are situated with respect to the larger organisations. I conducted an analysis of a year's worth of communication in Kindred Spirits. The period of study ran from August 2014 through July 2015, encompassing 1,424 individual posts and 11,494 comments. During this period, there were 141 distinct users making posts (not including commenters), of whom 108 self-identified as female and accounted for 77% of the posts (1,093 posts). The other 33 individuals self-identified as male and accounted for 23% of the posts (331 posts).

I aggregated, anonymised and analysed the data scraped from Kindred Spirits. At the outset of the study, the group administrator made a public announcement about my presence within Kindred Spirits. I made a single post in which I detailed the aims of the study. Because the group is private and because the risk of employer retaliation is significant, I took ethical considerations very seriously. I removed names, images and tags from posts and comments, and I omitted store numbers, locations and any biographical or anecdotal information that might aid Walmart in identifying the current and former employees. Screenshots of posts and comments were converted into readable PDF files and then brought into NVivo for analysis. The coding was carried out via first cycle concept coding and second cycle elaborative coding (Saldaña, 2016). I began with concepts taken from social movement theory and then sought to corroborate and extend those categories in subsequent coding cycles. The initial codes were derived primarily from the framing work of Benford and Snow (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow, 2007; Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow et al., 1986; Snow, Vliegenthart & Corrigan-Brown, 2007). Reliability testing was conducted by a research assistant on a sample of 10% of the data.

One of the aims of this study is to consider how framing in contemporary movements blurs the distinction between discursive and strategic processes. In networked social movements, political content circulates not only through the goal-oriented actions of SMOs, but also through the aggregation of individual motivations in sharing personally meaningful content. Accordingly, I build on theoretical approaches to

**Table 1: Framing Categories**

Category	Posts ( <i>n</i> = 1,424)	Comments ( <i>n</i> = 11,494)
Diagnostic identification	1,189 (83.5%)	7,609 (66.2%)
Individually diagnostic Identification	664 (46.6%)	3,693 (32.1%)
Collectively diagnostic Identification	195 (13.7%)	52 (0.4%)
Diagnostic attribution	732 (51.4%)	2,691 (23.4%)
Individually prognostic	37 (2.6%)	790 (68.7%)
Collectively prognostic	278 (19.5%)	1,382 (12%)
Motivational framing	188 (13.2%)	684 (6%)
Frame amplification	199 (14%)	357 (3.1%)
Frame bridging	76 (5.3%)	46 (0.4%)
Frame extension	62 (4.4%)	92 (0.8%)
Frame transformation	10 (0.7%)	19 (0.2%)
Personal action frames	56 (3.9%)	78 (0.7%)

collective action and collective action framing to draw attention to how frames arise both discursively and strategically in contexts where rank-and-file participants and SMOs interact. The categories I used are presented in Table 1.

### Framing in Kindred Spirits

Diagnostic framing describes firstly how participants identify problems or shared grievances and secondly how they assign blame for those problems. I created separate categories for *identification* and *attribution*. I elaborated two additional categories to account for the distinctive ways in which individuals (as opposed to SMOs) generate diagnostic frames. *Individually diagnostic identification* occurs when participants draw on personal experience and feelings to identify problems in their own lives. *Collectively diagnostic identification* occurs when participants acknowledge the problems or grievances experienced by others. This was done to determine the extent to which discursive communication in Kindred Spirits was self-centred or group-oriented.

With regard to diagnostic identification, I found 1,189 posts (*n* = 1,424) and 7,609 comments (*n* = 11,494) in which some situation, event or condition was identified as problematic. These posts and comments were fairly evenly distributed throughout the year, though there was a marked increase when Walmart abruptly closed five stores in April for alleged plumbing problems. These closures precipitated an increase in activity as members shared information and opinions. Another surge in activity occurred at the



end of September, when Walmart announced changes to their employee dress code. The changes were widely unpopular among Kindred Spirits members. There was another uptick in activity in October as OUR Walmart began the initial stages of its Black Friday campaign in earnest.

Group members diagnosed a range of problems including unlawful terminations, management issues, workplace bullying, favouritism, exhaustion, scheduling issues, low wages, difficulties in collecting unemployment and workers' compensation, health and sickness leave, unsafe working conditions and a variety of other issues. There were 451 posts and 2,319 comments describing poor working conditions (health, safety, security and hours). There were 56 posts and 5 comments featuring workplace photos, most often documenting poor working conditions. There were also 26 posts and 196 comments documenting or expressing fear of retaliation. There were only 7 posts and 44 comments describing good working conditions.

Looking closer, I found 664 posts and 3,693 comments in the individually diagnostic identification category in which members shared personal experiences of problems affecting them. Members referenced a range of difficulties including finances, illness and injury, mental health, problems with co-workers and managers, scheduling issues, retaliation and bad customer interactions.

Numerous posts mentioned unfair treatment by management. For example,

*Unbelievable, got a level 2 coaching today for ridiculous reasons, for taking extra breaks to use the bathroom, really? I'm not allowed to do a normal human bodily function, and for spraying out the deli fry box and dumping to oil water mixture as I was trained to do? Really?*

Others described how difficult it was to make ends meet:

*I was in the breakroom during lunch and reading my book. I was sooo hungry, but didn't have lunch or money. My co-worker (and friend) had bought a rotisserie chicken, ate all the white meat and was about to throw away the rest of it. I tried to jokingly tell her I'd eat the rest, so she gave it to me. Another time I was sitting with a few of my co-workers, and again I had no lunch. Everyone I was with had their lunch with them. One of my co-workers (another friend) told me her husband made too much for her, and asked me if I would help her eat it. I said no, and she told me she was going to throw it away if I didn't help her. So, of course, I ate half her sandwich. I realised afterwards that she really just felt bad for me, and wanted me to eat.*

These individuals used Kindred Spirits as a way to vent their emotional and practical frustrations and to seek validation from peers. In addition, I found 195 posts and 52 comments in the collectively diagnostic identification category wherein individuals expressed concern for other people's problems. The greatest concentration of these communications occurred in November, coinciding with the build-up to the Black Friday protests. There was also a spike in April when members expressed concern at the loss of 2,220 jobs from the aforementioned store closures. These closures included a Pico Rivera store known for being an OUR Walmart stronghold. The closures were generally characterised as an act of retaliation. In August and September, there were



also numerous communications about the collective hardship imposed by the new dress code. For example,

*It seems like there are so many workers upset about new dress code. And many concerned about being able to buy new clothes for work because their checks aren't paying the bills as it is.*

It is worth noting that individually diagnostic identification constituted 46.6% of posts and 32.1% of comments while collectively diagnostic identification accounted for only 13.7% of posts and 0.4% of comments. This suggests that the identification of problems in Kindred Spirits is more individualistic than group-oriented.

Diagnostic attribution occurred when members identified the cause or source of grievances and problems. There were 732 posts and 2,691 comments in this category. Predictably, participants blamed Walmart for the lion's share of their problems – specifically corporate management (or 'home office' as it is commonly referred to), regional managers and store managers. For example,

*I've been coached three times over the last six months by the same assistant manager. He is an evil asshole. This past Thursday I observed him telling a vender to fetch him some free samples. Should I report him to the ethics hotline?*

Members occasionally identified co-workers as the source of their problems:

*Apparently I don't do enough at work according to a new associate. New associate point blank told my former ASM that I refuse to help out on the register. That was a boldface lie on her part.*

Unsurprisingly, the Walton family was frequently singled out:

*Collectively, the Waltons own over 50% of the company, and are worth a combined total of \$175 billion (as of January 2015). In 2010, six members of the Walton family had the same net worth as either the bottom 28% or 41% of American families combined (depending on how it is counted).*

Most of these messages could be characterised as attempts to cope with the frustrations of working at Walmart. However, discourse within Kindred Spirits often segued into conversations about potential solutions. Prognostic framing occurs when members articulate solutions to problems. As with diagnostic framing, I elaborated two additional categories – *individually prognostic* and *collectively prognostic* – to capture the distinctive orientation of these frames. I categorised 37 posts and 790 comments as *individually prognostic* when members proposed solutions or strategies to be pursued individually. In these instances, collective action was not seen as the appropriate course of action. Individually prognostic comments tended to outnumber posts because they often came in response to posted queries or solicitations for advice. Individually prognostic messages were fairly evenly distributed throughout the time period under study. They addressed a range of topics including dealing with co-workers and managers, understanding company policy and reporting issues to authorities. For example, one member proposed the following solution to high workplace temperatures:

*I have decided as it gets to feel more like hell at nite when it gets soooooo hot in the store, [especially] in Cosmetics, [Pharmacy] and HBA areas, I am going to buy a fan and use it. And when management says I can't, I will DEMAND they show me written policy against it and I will then proceed to inform them I am calling OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] and have a [picture] of the [temperature] reading in the store.*

I categorised messages as collectively prognostic when participants proposed solutions requiring some sort of collective action, often in collaboration with other Kindred Spirits members or OUR Walmart. There were 278 posts and 1,382 comments in this category. There was a noticeable uptick in collectively prognostic activity in October (31 posts and 262 comments) and in November (62 posts and 271 comments), most likely attributable to the Black Friday campaign. Numerous posts expressed support for the campaign:

*Associates from all over the country went on the 3 day ULP strike and was [sic] even able to spend this thanksgiving at home have all returned to work with no problems. Way to go strikers! They have all set the example for you so now let's see what we all can do together.*

Other collectively prognostic messages were designed to coordinate direct actions in support of workers at specific stores. The following is an example of the coordination of a call-in action:

*ITS CALL IN ACTION FRIDAY. TAKE A FEW MOMENTS OUT TODAY TO MAKE A CALL AND NOT ONLY SHOW WALMART WHO WE ARE BUT HAVE FUN DRIVING THEM CRAZY. Workers from Merrill Island Florida have been having their hours cut and its creating hardships for many of them. Please help us support these workers as they continue to stand up for \$15 and full time and consistent scheduling! Call the manager at [number redacted] and ask for these workers to have their cut hours reinstated so they can live better!*

It is worth noting that collectively prognostic posts outnumbered individually prognostic posts by more than 7 to 1 and there were almost twice as many collectively prognostic comments as individually prognostic comments. This suggests that prognostic discourse in Kindred Spirits is more group-oriented than the diagnostic discourse.

Motivational framing occurred when members expressed a call to arms or a persuasive rationale for engaging in collective action. I identified 188 posts and 684 comments in this category. Again, the greatest concentration of activity occurred during the month of November in the lead-up to the Black Friday campaign (42 posts and 136 comments). For example,

*Those of us that are standing up and striking on Thanksgiving and Black Friday are fighting for the way things used to be. Over the last three years Black Friday has become Black Thursday, giving retail workers less or no time to be thankful for what we do have. Our culture is losing the important things in life. If we don't make a stand now, we can possibly never get them back.*

In general, motivational framing tended to coincide with the various campaigns carried out by OUR Walmart. Next I turn to the frame alignment processes to highlight how individual and SMO orientations are negotiated within Kindred Spirits. With regard to frame amplification, I found 199 posts and 357 comments in Kindred Spirits in which participants accented, clarified, elaborated and/or galvanised existing values or beliefs. In doing so, members of the group amplified the messaging of OUR Walmart. Predictably, the greatest amount of activity occurred during October (31 posts and 77 comments) and November (66 posts and 81 comments). These communications often emphasised familiar refrains including workplace safety and low wages. For example,

*Yet another good reason to join the Wal-Mart Black Friday Strike. Not all Wal-Mart Stores follow OSHA Crowd Management Safety Guidelines recommendations after a Wal-Mart employee was trampled to death by shoppers on Black Friday 2008.*

With regard to frame bridging, I identified 76 posts and 46 comments in which participants linked two or more compatible frames with no previous structural connections. These included efforts to link the concerns of Walmart workers with cancer advocacy groups, animal rights groups and environmental activism. With regard to frame extension, I identified 62 posts and 92 comments wherein attempts were made to expand the horizon of shared beliefs and values to encompass those of potential allies. One noteworthy example was the *Walmart: Treat Military Families with Dignity* initiative which drew attention to the plight of employees struggling to support their families while loved ones were away on active duty. A typical post stated,

*Walmart needs to be more FAMILY ORIENTED and help our military spouses and moms to be able to care for their children so that the soldier can defend the freedom and rights that they enjoy today BECAUSE of them! Walmart: Treat Military Families with Dignity.*

*Frame transformation* captures the tension between collective action frames and external events impacting accepted meanings and discourse. There were 10 posts and 19 comments in this category. Most of these occurred in the month of February (4 posts and 11 comments) when Walmart announced that it would be raising wages. Kindred Spirits members engaged in several discussions in which they attempted to deal with the aftermath of Walmart having met one of their key demands, potentially taking the wind out of OUR Walmart's sails. One individual attempted to regain control of the narrative by posting the following:

*Congrats OUR Walmart members for putting everything on the line, particularly the strikers, for making higher wages for everyone happen! Great article here to share with coworkers. 'Walmart is giving raises to its workers for one simple reason: it has to. The company is smart enough to see that the ongoing protest campaign against it by its own poor employees demanding a living wage will not end. It will not end, just like the similar campaign by fast food workers will not end. Not only will the cries of low-paid workers not end; they will be heard.*

*Walmart knows that these demands must, eventually, be met. Because they are eminently reasonable. And more to the point, because America is a nation that is starting to realise in a very public way the economic inequality that has been choking us for three decades now is unsustainable'.*

Evidence that Kindred Spirits members were discursively engaged in frame amplification, bridging, extension and transformation suggests that the processes underlying meaning-making are no longer the exclusive purview of SMOs. A by-product of the migration of workers to SNSs – and perhaps organised labour's migration as well – is that workers are now actively participating in the encoding of frames through dynamic engagements with movement priorities, changing circumstances, shifting political opportunities and movement recruitment. Hence, it is increasingly difficult to parse the distinctions between self-organised communicative activities and more bureaucratic forms.

Bennett & Segerberg (2013) use the concept of personalised action frames to describe how individuals combine text with images to create Internet memes. The authors place the concept of personalised action frames at the centre of their theory of connective action. In doing so, they focus chiefly on the circulation of memes in their accounts of how SMOs and crowds produce the viral content that is ultimately embraced as common frames for action (6). Consistent with this, I found a substantial number of instances in which both Kindred Spirits members and OUR Walmart representatives created and distributed personalised action frames. There were 56 posts and 78 comments featuring some form of self-produced media, often combining images and text, typically serving some diagnostic framing purpose. On occasion, Kindred Spirits members would, unprompted, create their own memes and share them with the group. Commenters would then offer feedback and periodically appropriate the memes for use outside of the group, often using them as their own cover photo on their personal Facebook profiles. On other occasions, an OUR Walmart representative would offer a collection of memes to the group, and ask for input in deciding which memes to circulate in their campaigns. In still other occasions, members were asked to write responses or take selfies and add text explaining what a particular frame meant to them. For example,

**Post** *How would making \$15 an hour improve things for you? Or would it?*

**Commenter 1** *I could afford to pay my rent and bills and buy groceries and keep my kids in diapers and pull ups and wouldn't have to take my stuff to the pawn shop just to make ends meet.*

**Commenter 2** *to be able to get my diabetic medical supplies and buying groceries both and not having to choose between the two.*

In these cases, it is difficult to distinguish between discursive and strategic modes of communication. In practice, personalised action frames within Kindred Spirits seemed to have elements of both. The personalised action frames were produced and circulated in a dialogic manner, in conversation with other rank-and-file members, and in conversation with OUR Walmart. In the past, framing theory has been critiqued for not

adequately taking into account the role of movement leaders in driving these processes (Morris & Staggenborg, 2007). Thus, it is worth noting that in this study, ten individuals in Kindred Spirits were responsible for 50% of all the posts. However, only two of the ten were paid staff from OUR Walmart. And only one of the ten was a volunteer leader with OUR Walmart, responsible for representing the organisation, recruiting members and other relevant duties. Seven of the ten held no such leadership position within OUR Walmart. In fact, these seven were not even members of OUR Walmart. Taking the data as a whole, paid staff from OUR Walmart accounted for just under 13% of all the posts made in Kindred Spirits.

## Conclusion

This study shows that members of Kindred Spirits use discursive forms of communication to identify problems and attribute blame. These diagnostic frames tend to be more individualistic in orientation, though there are numerous expressions of concern for the problems of others. When it comes to proposing solutions and motivating people to act, the frames in Kindred Spirits are chiefly collectivist in orientation. With regard to the alignment of individual and institutional interpretive frames, the joint activities of rank-and-file participants and organisers points to a recursive relationship. Because Kindred Spirits members were actively engaged in frame amplification, bridging, extension and transformation, the underlying processes of meaning-making are shared across individual and institutional contexts.

The foregoing analysis of the diagnostic, prognostic, motivational and frame alignment processes in Kindred Spirits speaks to the increasing relevance of personalised communication for workers' struggles in the Information Age. As personalised communication takes on greater prominence in collective action framing and mobilisation efforts, the analytical distinction between strategic and discursive practices becomes untenable. Within Kindred Spirits, most of the communication is discursive. Members compose messages, click their approval, seek validation, perform identities and express empathy. Yet much of their communication is also strategic – they identify problems, share information, suggest solutions, mobilise resources and organise resistance. Personalised communication is gestation for emergent frames. While diagnostic frames appear in Kindred Spirits more often than not as individualistic expressions of conflict, prognostic and motivational frames demonstrate a decidedly collectivist orientation. This would seem to lend support to Wood's (2015) assertion that OUR Walmart can complement traditional organising techniques.

With respect to movement outcomes however, we must assess these forms of political articulation in terms of sustained commitment levels, mobilisation capacity and, most importantly, their ability to deliver successful outcomes. All of which takes on greater urgency in light of the extraordinary decline of organised labour across the globe. As mentioned at the outset of this article, the UFCW withdrew financial support for OUR Walmart in 2015, just after the period under consideration in this study. Subsequent to this, OUR Walmart organisers relaunched the organisation with foundation money and other donations, but gone were the Black Friday direct actions. Participation in Kindred Spirits likewise plummeted. The reasons for these declines are

varied, but these developments speak to the critical role played by the UFCW and other leaders. To be sure, OUR Walmart delivered some real successes, including changes to the scheduling system, protections for pregnant workers and a significant pay raise, by capitalising on Walmart's acute sensitivity to its brand reputation. Nevertheless, Walmart workers continue to labour under conditions of economic and social precarity. The reality is that retail workers at Walmart perform low-skill jobs, come from labour markets with depressed wages, are easily replaceable, and do not occupy pivotal positions with the potential to disrupt the firm's operations. In light of this, it is not difficult to understand why the UFCW might decide to withdraw its support for the organisation. The Achilles heel of a global behemoth like Walmart lies with its supply chain, with its warehouse and logistics workers – not with its retail workers.

Hence, we can begin to appreciate one of the potential limitations of movements built on self-organised networks. While personalised forms of communication may enable horizontal forms of organisation and collective action, their impact may be restricted to their capacity to influence public opinion. Today's collective actions often materialise as mass demonstrations in which people bear witness to a cause. OUR Walmart's success was premised on its ability to influence the perceptions of consumers and politicians by raising awareness of the issues important to Walmart workers. And, despite the firm's concessions, Walmart's power over workers has never been in doubt.

Future inquiries into the promise of technologically mediated forms of class struggle must go beyond merely documenting collective actions or the existence of communities of accommodation and resistance. We must give careful consideration to the types of communication practices facilitated by Internet and mobile technologies, the logics by which they engender solidarities and action and their capacity to deliver successful movement outcomes. Moreover, any successes attributed to these organisational forms must be measured by the opportunity costs of complying with movement demands. The activities occurring within Kindred Spirits are clear evidence that the communication practices enabled by recent technological advancements are changing the organisational dynamics of class struggle by mixing discursive and strategic forms of communication. Individualistic and group-oriented perspectives coincide, blurring the roles of both organisers and rank-and-file participants. But, as the case of OUR Walmart suggests, the promise of these organisational forms may be restricted in their capacity to challenge the fundamental roots of power in capitalist society.

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# Journalism in Croatia in the Southeast European context: deterioration of the 'professional project'

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this article, journalism is analysed within the theoretical framework of sociology of the professions. It focuses on four 'internal attributes' linked to the 'professional project' and the external relation to the profession of agents involved in the professionalisation process. Based on an analysis of the internal attributes and external agents and using the results of quantitative and qualitative studies on Croatian journalism, the article attempts to analyse these dimensions in a diachronic perspective, with the aim of understanding the current status of the journalist profession in Croatia, and the social, political and economic structures that shape it. It looks at the specificities of the region and the structural changes that occurred in the journalistic field with the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the introduction of a liberal market economy and draws on a survey and focus groups as well as an extensive review of the literature. The conclusion is that the 'professional project' of journalism is undergoing a process of gradual decay.

## **KEY WORDS**

journalism, sociology of profession, Yugoslavia, Croatia, socialism, liberal market economy

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## **Introduction**

The fast and far-reaching structural changes that took place in Southeast Europe in the past two-and-a-half decades created a peculiar setting where elements of former state socialism blended with newly established forms of liberal democracy. A specific feature common to post-socialist states is that they simultaneously experienced a belated democratisation process and the political and economic pressures of globalisation.

Democratisation processes affected the establishment of new institutions that emulated 'old' democracies (most notably those found in Western European countries) and their value priorities, namely: individualism, a free-market economy, a commitment to human rights, multiculturalism and freedom of speech. After the fall of state socialism, the market economy that emerged was (and still is) viewed as inextricably linked to liberal democracy as a political system, while faith in the 'invisible hand of the market' forms the dominant discourse.

These developments have had significant repercussions for the way that the media function and are shaped in Southeast Europe. While undergoing frequent change as a result of ongoing harmonisation with European laws, the media landscape still struggles with problems associated with institutional transformation from the socialist system to liberal democracy, and, simultaneously, with challenges that are not limited to regions but are global in nature (corporate rule, commodification, etc.). In the field of media, the normative standards of imported, 'civilising' liberal values were embraced, positioning the media both as a public good within democracy and as a commodity exchangeable in the market. Attuned to this, 'professional journalism' is usually related to the following signifiers: free press, media as Fourth Estate, objectivity-neutrality-detachment-balance, fairness and accuracy, social responsibility and the public interest, promotion of pluralism, codes of conduct and the need for training (Keeble, 2001: 126–32). The analysis of professional journalism usually includes three dimensions of professionalisation: autonomy, special professional norms (ethics: source protection, newsworthiness, etc.) and public service orientation (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

The level of professionalism in journalism is usually measured in accordance with these standards, which regularly results in a negative evaluation of journalism in Southeast and Central Europe, usually explicitly or implicitly explained by the former authoritarian political regimes (Sukosd & Bajomi-Lazar, 2003; Zgrabljic Rotar, 2003; Malović, 2004; Jakubowicz & Sukosd, 2008; Car, 2010; Majstorović, 2010; Vilović, 2011; Smilov & Avadani, 2012). The process of 'making the region institutionally recognisable to the West [...] and in relation to the Western discourse of power' (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, Boatcă & Costa, 2010:5) is a never-ending process, in which the Southeast is always 'catching up with the West' (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, Boatcă & Costa, 2010:4) but never seeming to accomplish the goals that have been set.

Media systems are theorised and evaluated within the narrow framework of liberal democracy as a system. In this article, in order to broaden the perspective, journalism is analysed within the theoretical framework of sociology of the professions. This enables a more inclusive approach, and makes it possible to analyse the status of the profession in different political regimes within which it exists as a social practice. In this respect, the article focuses on four 'internal attributes' linked to the 'professional project' (Macdonald, 1995) and the external relation to the profession of agents involved in the professionalisation process (Burrage, Jarausch & Siegrist, 1990) and attempts to analyse these dimensions in a diachronic perspective, with the aim of understanding the current status of the journalist profession in Croatia and in the broader Southern European context, and the social, political and economic structures that shape it.

Although this theoretical framework is of course useful, it does nonetheless have certain limitations, arising in particular from the specificities of journalism as a profession in contemporary market-driven capitalist democracies. It is indisputable that journalism, particularly news media production, has an important public role to play in democracies; regrettably, however, the established public service orientation has gradually become more of an idealistic model that has lost ground in practice. Technological developments coupled with capitalism's *modus operandi* have exacerbated this trend and it is clear that, although contemporary states regulate the media field, they do so in an ever-diminishing fashion; universities offer journalism programmes, but few, if any, core subjects have been agreed upon, and, more significantly, there is no consensus as to whether journalism is a profession at all; audiences are changing and fragmentation and participation are at the core of these changes; and finally, there are numerous factors that differentiate the journalists/practitioners (e.g. their hierarchical position within the organisation, type of technological platform, type of media ownership and organisational versus individual production), all of which make it impossible to homogenise to the extent that we can think of them as a professional community. For all those reasons, as will be shown, this theoretical framework and the diachronic perspective can only serve as a reminder of what journalism once was in a differently organised society, and shed some light on the structural changes that have affected it as a profession.

## The professionalisation process: a sociological perspective

The professionalisation process within the framework of sociology of the professions may be defined as *differentiation from other social practices and professions* (Macdonald, 1995). As early as the 1960s, Bernard Barber (1963) argued that, in order to identify these processes, sociologists had to point out the '*differentia specifica*' of professional behaviour. In this respect, it is not sufficient to analyse lifestyle, solidarity and socialisation, since they apply also to all other social groups. Barber pointed out four central attributes necessary for the 'professional project' that enables the analysis of a profession within different socio-political systems:

*The first of these is the systematic knowledge that is transmitted through university programmes (an attribute that is usually left out of the analysis of journalism since it is usually not required in the labour market, but is pivotal in the analysis of the way a profession is socially positioned);*

*The second is the self-control and behaviours – such as codes of ethics – that are internalised through work socialisation and professional organisations;*

*Third is an orientation to community interest rather than individual self-interest;*

*The fourth and final attribute is a system of rewards – monetary and honorary – that confer the prestige appropriate for community interest and the profit appropriate for self-interest. (Barber, 1963)*

These attributes are still relevant today. Elizabeth Gorman & Rebecca Sandefur (2011) analysed the body of scholarship engaged with sociology of the professions or – what they argue has in the past few decades become the ‘study of knowledge-based work’ – and have identified similar attributes important in the analysis of a profession. They concluded that expert knowledge, autonomy, normative service orientation and high social status, income and rewards still feature centrally in contemporary research in the field. These attributes could be classed as ‘internal’ to the professional project; however, they do not include the ‘external’ agents that are involved in the development of a profession. In this respect it is useful to add the list created by Burrage, Jarausch & Siegrist (1990) who point out four external agents that are included in the differentiation of a profession through negotiation processes:

*The first of these types of agent are states that either grant autonomy and self-regulation to professionals and their associations (in the Anglo-American context) or actively license and regulate them (in the continental European context).*

*Secondly, there are universities that produce the knowledge-base and provide credentials for professions which support occupational closure regimes (i.e. define the ways membership is limited)*

*The third group of agents consists of the users of professional services, who, through their expectations, shape the way the professions practice and organise and legitimise the (high) status of a profession.*

*Finally, there are the practitioners themselves, who attempt to protect an area of exclusive competence. (Burrage, Jarausch & Siegrist, 1990, cited in Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2011:139).*

The next section analyses these external agents and internal attributes as they are applied to journalism as a profession, with a specific focus on Croatia.

## External agents involved in the professional project

### The state

Journalism in Croatia has always been closely connected to politics. Over the course of the twentieth century, Croatia formed part of several different political formations,<sup>1</sup> and in 1991 it became an independent state. The role of the press changed in the course of history: at times it functioned as an advocate for national independence, at other times as a mechanism of unification and suppression of nationalism, depending on the official state ideology.

During World War II (WWII), the Yugoslav Communists organised the Partisan resistance led by Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) against occupation and fascist quisling forces, and emerged as the leading force in Yugoslavia at the end of WWII. Post war, Yugoslavia sought to create a new, revolutionary, socialist enterprise based on national brotherhood and unity, nationality policy and self-management in the economic

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1 The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, 1918–41, renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929, the quisling fascist regime called the Independent State of Croatia during World War II (WWII) (1941–45) and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945–91).

domain (Ramet, 2002). After WWII, the media were publicly owned, self-regulated and controlled by the Communist Party. The press, radio, and later television were given the function of instilling the socialist spirit into the masses while the main task of journalists was to inform the people of facts from the political domain and the activities needed to establish a socialist society.

In the first years after the war, the press was controlled with a view to creating a 'favourable' public opinion towards the government and the Communist Party (KPJ). In accordance with the Soviet model, an 'Agitprop' (agitation propaganda work) unit was set up within party organisations and offices to distribute information at the federal, republican and local levels of government. The Agitprop unit worked across several areas: ideological education in accordance with the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, control of intellectual work in the area of culture, and propaganda and control of the press (Šarić, 2010). However, the Soviet-style system introduced after WWII was abandoned following the conflict with the Soviet block and the Tito-Stalin disagreement in 1948. Tito then 'abandoned earlier policies of control and repression and embraced liberalisation' (Donia & Fine, 1994, cited in Ramet, 2005:249). Thus, in the 1950s, Yugoslavia opened up to the West and the foreign affairs doctrine of the Non-Aligned Movement developed, resulting in more critically oriented ideas ('constructive critique') entering the public discourse and this led to further professionalisation of journalism. In the 1960s, control of the press weakened, while the influence of Western media strengthened (Senjković, 2008; Zubak, 2014).

The way in which journalists were normatively defined under Yugoslav law indicates how closely tied they were to state-party politics: in 1956, the Press Company and Institute Act defined journalism as a *socio-political profession*, a *public service* and a *full-time occupation* (Novak, 2005:529). In the 1982 Public Information Act, a journalist was defined as a

*worker whose job it is to provide information to the public. A journalist has the right and duty to, in an engaged manner, socio-politically responsible and professionally, conduct tasks in the area of informing the public, and to organise active and equal participation of all subjects in the process of provision of information to the public. (Novak, 2005:881)*

In the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, as a consequence of the political, cultural and economic fragmentation of Yugoslavia, civil turmoil spread across the state reaching crisis point in 1989–91. As a result, tension between Croatia and Serbia grew, which ultimately led to the Croatian War of Independence (1991–95) characterised by intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic controversies that are 'interpreted in contradictory ways by different communities' (Bjelajac and Žunec, 2010:236). Franjo Tuđman, who was the elected president of Croatia in 1990, was partially responsible for the exacerbation of the crisis (Ramet, 2005). His 'authoritarian style of governance' had a negative impact on the political climate in Croatia during and after the war. Tuđman's regime endorsed corrupt forms of privatisation, nepotism, subversion of the electoral process, control of key media outlets, homophobia and extreme nationalism that included 'a readiness to accept the Independent State of Croatia, *Nezavisna država Hrvatska* (NDHas [...] an expression of Croatian national aspirations' (Steindorff, 2001, in Ramet, 2005:258).

In these circumstances, democratisation processes were stalled and the media were subjugated to political control by the emerging nationalist/ethnic political regimes across the entire region. The political elite created an institutional framework for the management of the privatisation process which posed difficulties for media and journalists who were critically oriented towards the regime (Thompson, 1999).

Following President Tudjman's death in 1999 and elections in 2000, the Croatian media landscape was shaped by two dominant forces: the European Union (EU) policies that promoted the development of a liberal market economy and opened up the field for commercial media, and the remnants of the recent authoritarian political regime in which political power had dominated social processes and institutions. The political parties active in the political arena since 2000 have, irrespective of their particular declared ideological position, all taken a similar approach, advocating a positive attitude towards EU accession and similar economic measures (Popović, 2014). In terms of media regulation, political actors have embraced the idea that was prevalent within the EU, which was that the 'mixed model' was the best model. In the comparative analysis of media systems in Southeast Europe from the change of the regime in the 1990s, Sandra B. Hrvatin & B. Petković (2014) summarised the situation in the following way:

*The process began in the 1990s and the motto was: 'as little of the state as possible, as much of the market as possible'. Marked by the experience of restrictions on freedom of speech and media freedom during the period when the state played the main role and held the levers of repression, the new governments apparently relinquished regulation but in reality retained all 'invisible' levers of influence on the media. Public interest was simply exchanged for the special interest of political and economic elites. [...] The current [...] political and economic system literally forces media to establish 'incestuous relations' with various centres of power. (Hrvatin & Petković, 2014:25–26)*

Research on media integrity in Croatia (Popović, 2014) shows that the power of the State has been thoroughly investigated with regard to its influence on the media, but economic power structures have not been given the attention they deserve considering their increasing role in media systems.

### **Universities – is journalism an academic discipline or a specialised skill?**

The first national discussion about the education of journalists and the need for a journalism school was held in 1919 at the Croatian Journalists' Association (CJA); however, without a concrete outcome (Novak, 2005). The most common way for budding journalists to develop their journalistic skills was through engagement in the student press, and novice journalists were recruited upon completing their secondary school education or during their studies. The notion of systematic education of journalists was first expressed in the newspaper *Hrvatska Straža* in 1940, with the suggestion that a Department of Journalism should be set up within the Faculty of Law or the Faculty of Philosophy. It was almost a decade later that a one-year journalism school was established by the Journalists' Association (Novak, 2005:441). Vjesnik, the

leading newspaper and publishing house in Croatia had a large degree of autonomy from its 'founders' (Senjković, 2008) and played an important role in the education of journalists. In 1963, Vjesnik established a school of journalism within its own organisation, mainly accepting students who had a background in social sciences or humanities. The principle of mentorship was introduced, and the candidates who completed the course were offered a permanent position in Vjesnik (Novak, 2005:586). It was not until 1970 that the first journalism programme was established at Zagreb University when a one-year course was introduced at the Faculty of Political Science in collaboration with Vjesnik and Zagreb Radio Television. It was intended for students enrolled in their last years of study or graduates who had a degree in another field. The idea that the course was long overdue was voiced by Professor Davor Rodin who addressed those in attendance at the opening ceremony: 'We are opening the study of journalism at the University of Zagreb with a huge historical delay'. It was felt that the delay was inevitable because the precondition for a 'scientific study of the public, mass communication and journalism is possible only in democratic communities where the access route to the public has been demonopolised' (Rodin in *Editorial Information*, 1971:146–47). The idea was to establish a journalism study programme and to keep it close to the political domain, which was in accordance with the role journalists played in the promotion of the dominant socialist ideology of the time. In 1975, a 2-year course was developed, and then finally in 1986 a full-time four-year programme of journalism studies was established. The curriculum included a high proportion of modules offered through the political science curriculum. In the current decade, the curriculum is slowly delinking from political science as a discipline, substituted either with a cultural studies approach or with vocational training conducted at the Faculty. The reform of the higher education system (Bologna) and the commercialisation of higher education has triggered a mushrooming of programmes in journalism, media and communication studies, public relations studies and cultural studies, mostly established from 2004 onwards in Croatia. It has also enabled excessive enrolment of students who upon qualifying are unable to find a job in the labour market.

The hegemonic 'applicability to the market' discourse has guided recent developments in higher education in Croatia. This has resulted in a decrease in public expenditure on education<sup>2</sup> affecting social science and humanities programmes. There have been ongoing debates about the way the journalism curriculum should be structured: as an academic discipline or as vocational training. In the last decade the latter has increasingly been gaining the upper hand, underpinned by arguments stating that vocational training that prepares students for the market, and the 'real world of professional work' (Perišin & Mlačić, 2014) is more important than 'useless' theoretical knowledge grounded in social science and humanities. Thus, the field of journalism has remained relatively undeveloped as an academic discipline, since it is the '*terra nullius* of epistemology, deemed by anyone who wanders by to be an uninhabited territory of knowledge, fit to be colonised by anyone who's interested' (Hartley, 1996:39, cited in Turner, 2000:357).

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2 The overall trend in education spending since 2010 has been downwards. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP has decreased from 2013 to 2016 and is lower than the EU average (European Commission, 2017).

Advocates of 'strategic communication', including political communication and public relations, are on the rise. These are new forms of public communication which are very different from journalism based on a public service orientation. The new forms of public communication are solely in the interest of individual organisations that want to develop and sustain a positive public image, which means that their aims and functions are diametrically opposite to those of journalism.

In sum, the knowledge-based journalistic education provided at university level has a short history in Croatia. New ways of 'colonising' the field are coming to the fore – no longer through traditional disciplines, most notably political science, serving as a base for journalistic specialisation, but through new interdisciplinary approaches that give due attention to communication as a field of rising importance to society, a field within which journalism is subsiding. When considered in the context of a functionalist perspective on the profession, these trends do not provide the credentials necessary to provide occupational closure for the journalist profession – quite the opposite.

### **Media audiences as users of services: citizens or consumers?**

Within the sociology of professions framework, users of services legitimise the (high) status of a profession and consent to the different power relations between lay people and experts, based on their expertise. In 1890, 84.64% of the population in Croatia and Slavonia<sup>3</sup> worked in agriculture, while only 1.94% engaged in intellectual work. In 1910, when the population in Croatia and Slavonia was 2,602,544, of whom 49.28% of men and 61.91% of women were illiterate (Vranješ-Poljan, 1998), any type of intellectual work was distinctive compared with the work of the agrarian majority. This definitely created a divide between the peasantry and the educated elite. However, as opposed to the services of lawyers and medical doctors, in the case of journalism lay people could not consume/use the services journalists had to offer. The elite ultimately both produced and consumed press content; in other words they constituted their own 'public'. It was only in the socialist post-WWII era in Yugoslavia, when industrialisation swept across the country, that the illiteracy rate decreased. By 1953, only 16.3% of the population were illiterate (Croatian Bureau of Statistics [CBS]), which was a huge improvement compared to the first half of the century. These processes naturally resulted in a rising readership. This was also the period in which the use of electronic media – radio and later television – spread, which enabled a broader population to access content. This contributed to more widespread usage of journalistic products while the separation between lay people and experts was maintained, especially because only a small segment of the population was sufficiently educated to perform journalistic work at the time.

In contemporary Croatia, according to the 2011 Census, only 0.8% of the population is illiterate (CBS) while 31% of the population is educated to primary school level or below, 53% to secondary school level and 16 % of the population have a third-level university degree (CBS). The latter figure has increased due to the massification and commercialisation of higher education in the last two decades

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3 Croatia has, in the course of history, formed part of a variety of different political formations and geographical structures, and therefore any comparison of statistical data from different periods should take this into consideration.



(Matković, 2009), a trend which has been particularly noticeable since the implementation of the Bologna higher education reform in 2005, which has further increased degree holder numbers. Nevertheless, as Liessmann (2008) points out, the quality of the knowledge that is produced has to be questioned.

The users of services legitimise the (high) status of a profession due to the service orientation of the professionals. The dichotomy of media audiences, that is to say between the public and media audiences as market categories, is connected to two major institutional models of the media: as public services and as commercial enterprises (Ang, 1991). The dominance of the latter model has contributed to the erosion of the profession, since both aspects of the 'service orientation' pointed out by Gorman & Sandefur (2011) are violated: firstly, that a professional puts the client's interests above his or her own (in this case extended to the media enterprise), and secondly, that professionals serve the public good – since mass media entertainment cannot be considered an expert service of special social importance. Whether the media are more saturated with entertainment in the last few decades because of audience demand or as a result of the interplay between commercial media organisations and advertisers is a debate too extensive to be covered in this article – but it surely contributes to the erosion of the status of the profession.

The appearance and rapid development of digital technology has once again changed the ways in which media audiences, the public sphere and forms of interaction enabled by a medium are understood. It has, over the past couple of decades, led to a rise in theories concerning the democratic potential that the digital media carry (Dahlgren, 2003), and the emergence of new forms of public sphere mediated by digital technologies and convergence platforms. These processes have enabled practices that substantially change and interfere with journalistic work and ethics: citizen journalism or public journalism as a participatory news practice, and crowdsourcing (Curran, Fenton & Freedman, 2012) that have challenged some of the core dimensions of professionalism. The above-mentioned processes make the division among professionals providing content and lay people using/consuming it less clear, since production and consumption practices are intermingled.

### **Journalists as practitioners**

Croatian journalists first associated within the Croatian Literary Association established in 1900. The Croatian Journalists' Association (CJA) was established in 1910 with 61 members (Novak, 2005:85). That was a time when priests, professors, lawyers and doctors were replaced by a generation that developed journalism as an occupation. Journalism became a job in its own right, but not yet linked to any specific formal type of education. The first document regulating the professional code of behaviour of journalists affiliated to the CJA was published in the Official Gazette in 1942, enforced by the state bodies of the fascist regime of the Independent State of Croatia. A journalist was defined as 'a person who creates press content through writing, reporting and images as well as through other intellectual work and for whom journalism is the main source of income' (Novak, 2005:307). After WWII, the CJA was reestablished and a new generation of journalists recruited through their engagement in the antifascist movement. In the 1960s, when Croatia was part of Yugoslavia, the

journalistic profession flourished: new newspapers were established; the number of journalists rose and journalism became a respectable profession in society. This was also the period when the first publications that dealt with the development of journalism as a profession were published.<sup>4</sup> In this period the United Nations recommendations on freedom of information were embraced, which further enhanced journalism. In 1962, the CJA developed the concept of 'active journalism', a new approach whereby journalism would no longer be 'an instrument of transmission serving the party' and a means of 'one-directional communication' (Novak, 2005:535). In Yugoslavia, the Journalists' Association was the principal organisation whose function it was to coordinate professionals through the political actors and organisations responsible for media control, whose importance varied depending on domestic and foreign political processes.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the turmoil that ensued in Eastern and Southeastern Europe in its aftermath was the backdrop for the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1990. A period of chaotic processes followed which involved the reframing of values and institutional change. In 1990, the Journalists' Association of Croatia defined the ethical principles of professional journalism, published in the association's newspaper *Novinar*. Here, it was suggested for the first time that journalists should distance themselves from politics in their work and take a neutral position in their professional conduct (Novak, 2005).

As in every modern war, in the Croatian War of Independence (1991–95), the media played an important role in spreading intolerance and hatred to homogenise the nation (Županov, Sekulić & Šporer, 1995). This created a split among journalists: the majority who, at various levels of engagement, ranging from subtle 'cheering' to overt hate-speech, participated in the construction of the nation-state; and a minority attempting to remain critical of the evolving negative trends in reporting. Critically oriented journalists had a hard time coping with the social and political pressures.

From 2000 onwards, the legislative framework governing the media started to change as a result of EU legislation harmonisation processes. This was a period of large-scale commercialisation and privatisation of the media. Due to ever-mounting commercial pressures, the quality of media content was reduced and the position of journalists as a workforce became increasingly insecure. Current Croatian laws make provision for a detached discursive construction of a journalist who is 'involved in collecting, processing, designing or classifying information for publishing through the media' and is 'employed [...] or self-employed' (Article 2, Media Act, 2004), indicating 'flexibilisation' of the work and precarious working conditions. The status afforded to journalists is quite similar across the region as well as in more advanced industrial countries in which different 'professionalising occupations' (Tunstall, 2002:14, cited in Hesmondhalgh, 2013:84), including journalism, have deteriorated: they work 'in a labour market in which most creative workers are either underemployed [...] or underpaid'. (Hesmondhalgh, 2013:84).

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4 In 1962, *The History of Croatian Journalism 1771–1939*, by Josip Horvat, and, in 1964, *Contemporary Journalism* edited by Božidar Novak, to which 54 journalists in Yugoslavia contributed.

In contemporary Croatia, the CJA seeks to safeguard the professional interests of journalists and ensure their material and social protection. A Code of Honour has been adopted, but the strongest measure that the association is empowered to deploy is to morally condemn those guilty. Among Croatian journalists 2,797 are members of the CJA (data from 2012, Table 1), which accounts for 57% of the total number of journalists in Croatia. CJA membership is declining. More than 65% of the members have a university education (BA, MA, PhD), while around 1,000 members are educated to secondary school level. The association members are typically ‘mature’ – generations that went through formal schooling during socialism, and witnessed the horror of war and social anomie in the early 1990s. The current situation is alarming: unemployment among journalists has increased, especially since 2010 (in 2013, there were 729 unemployed journalists according to the Croatian Employment Service). Typically, working as a journalist in contemporary Croatia implies a precarious working position, a low level of autonomy and engagement in production processes often reduced to technical skills.

There is no consensus among journalists on the role of journalism in society. As Matic & Valić Nedeljković (2014) point out concerning journalists in Serbia, a portion of them think that journalists should serve as watchdogs and protect the public interests (‘professional journalists’ – in accordance with the liberal model), others, however, ‘view the media as important state-building and nation-building mechanisms (‘‘propagandists’’). In addition ‘‘sensationalists’’ have evolved with the development of the tabloid press and commercial television. They perceive the media as a commercial

**Table 1: Membership of the CJA**

Year	CJA members
1910	61
1918	91
1928	355
1936	179
1945	220
1948	400
1989	1,934
1999	3,000
2009 <sup>a</sup>	3,185
2012 <sup>a</sup>	2,797
2016	2,340

Note: CJA = Croatian Journalists' Association.

Source: Novak, 2005; <sup>a</sup>Popović, 2014.

profit-making activity, regardless of the social consequences of violations of ethical rules, which they consider irrelevant' (Matić & Valić Nedeljković, 2014:373). This way of thinking may be encountered across the entire region, and it is easy to trace the trajectory of the mutually exclusive positions, by looking at the social and political context over the past 25 years.

## **Internal attributes of journalism as a profession**

The section that follows will discuss the internal attributes of the profession, including: expert knowledge, autonomy, public service orientation and social status (income and rewards), based on two relatively recent empirical studies including journalists in Croatia. The first study was quantitative – an online survey conducted by the Ministry of Culture, the results of which were collated in a database made accessible to me.<sup>5</sup> The second study was qualitative and included three focus groups conducted by the author of this paper; it is a piece of research that exemplifies the discursive construction of the media field from the perspective of the journalists who participated in the focus groups.<sup>6</sup>

### **Expert knowledge**

Journalism has never required expert knowledge in the form of specialised higher education, unlike other professions such as law, medicine, architecture or psychology. No formal requirements exist for entrance to the profession. Trends, such as the massification of higher education, the 'dumbing down' of media content and the quest for skill-based work, make the form of knowledge needed to engage in journalism relatively easily codified and easily appropriated and applied by others.

According to the online survey results, 44% of respondents stated that there has been no significant change with regard to the importance of formal education (holding a recognised qualification) in the last few years. Furthermore, 30% claimed that the importance of a formal qualification has decreased. Holding a recognised qualification has never been an entrance criterion for accessing journalistic work in Croatia, but the findings suggest that the relevance of a formal qualification in journalism is decreasing further.

The journalists who participated in the focus group discussions held a similar view on the (non)usefulness of a formal, higher-level qualification in journalism, claiming

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5 An online survey on experiences and attitudes of media workers, conducted by the Ministry of Culture in Croatia between December 2013 and January 2014, served as a basis for the development of a media strategy. The survey was sent via email to 2,703 journalists working in the Croatian media; 661 of whom (24%) replied. The survey results were made available to me by the Head of the Media Department of the Ministry of Culture, Milan Živković. It should be noted that contained in this article is an interpretation of the data concerned, reduced to simple frequencies, as I did not participate in the construction of the survey, nor the data processing.

6 Focus groups were conducted within the research project South East European Media Observatory – Building Capacities and Coalitions for Monitoring Media Integrity and Advancing Media Reforms (2012–14). It included three focus group discussions with journalists conducted at the end of 2013 in Zagreb. The focus groups were organised according to the type of media sector within which the journalists worked: the third sector media (TSM) – small critically oriented media – (predominantly but not limited to civil society associations) with seven members, commercial media (CM) with six members and public service media (PSM) with five members (for a detailed outline see: Popović, 2014).

that a formal qualification was not an essential prerequisite for being able to produce journalistic work of high quality, especially in circumstances where holding a formal qualification did not necessarily guarantee that a person would be a well-educated specialist:

*Some of Croatia's most prominent journalists of all times do not have a formal qualification, so I think it is completely irrelevant, except when it comes to being able to secure a better [employment] contract. (Commercial Media focus group)*

The focus group participants also pointed to the low quality and prestige of institutions offering journalism courses in Croatia. Despite this, the levels of interest in enrolment in such programmes are consistently high.

## **Autonomy**

Within the sociology of professions, another important element at the core of a profession is autonomy, meaning that professionals themselves define the rules that they have to follow, as stated in codes of ethics, while the state, clients or any other outsiders are not permitted to control their work. There are two levels of autonomy: the individual level – actors controlling their own work, and the professional level – professional groups that regulate their members without outside interference (Freidson, 1970:369–70, cited in Gorman & Sandefur, 2011:279).

Croatian journalists are, on the legislative level, autonomous and self-regulation is legally ensured. The difficulties arise from the organisational forms that have become dominant in the journalistic field. Media corporations and private enterprises are first and foremost guided by self-interest aimed primarily at profit making achieved through trading content, audiences and influence. In such a context, professional ideals are brought into opposition with organisational goals. Another problem is that the control over editorial production is not necessarily in the hands of professional journalists but business managers, which means that the criteria and values of the profession become subordinated to the rules of the employer (Turner, 2000).

The focus group discussions pointed to a sharp division between managerial and editorial staff and journalists within media organisations. Editors were depicted as figures who were often professionally incompetent and worked in the interest of the owner and/or other powerful actors, juxtaposed to journalists and their professional standards. Censorship and self-censorship shapes editorial policy, embedded in a complex setting of profit interests, sustainability of media outlets and connections to the political and economic power structures (Popović, 2015).

By contrast, the online survey showed very different estimations of individual versus professional group autonomy. The survey participants were asked to provide an estimate, measured on a scale from 1 to 5, ranging from weak to strong, of the level of impact they felt certain factors had had on journalism in general in Croatia in the last 5 years. There was a high level of agreement that the impact of the interests of media owners and related business circles had increased (86%). The interests of the political elites were also estimated to have increased, albeit by a somewhat lower percentage, with 72% of the journalists claiming this. The participants indicated that commercialisation and privatisation of the media in Croatia had changed their *modus*

*operandi* and that competition had a huge impact on journalism (77%). Connected to this change, there was a high level of agreement that pressures arising from the need to generate profit had an increasing effect on journalism (88%).

However, when estimating the influence that different factors had on their individual autonomy, journalists emphasised the importance of their own values and beliefs, guided by journalistic ethics. The influence exercised by editors and editorial politics was also estimated as high. The level of influence of directors and owners on journalists' work was seen as relatively weak, and this may be attributed to the fact that their powers in large organisations are exerted indirectly through editorial policies and appointed editors. Another interesting finding was that more than 50% of the respondents claimed that government representatives and politicians had no influence whatsoever on their individual work. A somewhat smaller proportion (45%) claimed that this was true of business elites also. This was at odds with the statements made earlier about the rising impact of media owners and political elites on journalism in general. Clearly, as individuals, the journalists reported in accordance with the normative expectations placed upon them: they depicted themselves as having professional integrity and being immune to pressures.

### **Public service orientation**

In the sociology of the professions, service orientation as a concept presumes that professionals serve the public good and this implies the existence of a professional community that shares a code of ethics. In journalism, service orientation is defined as informing on matters of public interest (Hardt, 2004). According to the online survey results, journalists are well aware of the principles of the code of ethics. The most highly valued principles were objectivity/truthfulness, balanced reporting, combined with the watchdog function, accuracy and enabling people to express their opinion. Explicit political alliance (being for or against the government or creating a positive image of political leaders) was rejected as unimportant. However, supporting national development was estimated as extremely important or very important by 70% of the journalists, suggesting that national development was somehow perceived as disconnected from the field of politics. This may be indicative of the broad support for the nationalist movement from the 1990s onwards and public distrust of different political regimes in the course of Croatian history.

While the 'liberal' concept of professional journalism has been internalised to a certain extent on a normative and declarative level, it is not practically followed in Croatia. Breaches of ethical standards without repercussions are frequent as is the dominance of tabloid and sensational reporting. In the contemporary media environment, critical voices and public interest advocates mainly come from small third sector media organisations, largely financed through the state/public subsidies. Journalists place the responsibility for the media operating in the profit interest rather than the public interest on actors other than themselves. As one of the focus group participants claimed,

*We never seem to be able to finally distinguish between the public interest and the things that interest the public, because the public is interested in sensational*

*stories! [...] We should separate important things from the unimportant ones but of course we cannot do that due to the conditions within which we work and the matters that top the editorial board's agenda. The question is to what extent do we go with the flow and do the easier thing, although producing lower quality and thus following the interests of owners but also readers. (Third Sector Media focus group)*

In the complex structural relationship between media organisations, content and 'clients' (audiences), the main argument for 'dumbing down' of content articulated by journalists is that they 'only give the audience what they want'. This way of transferring responsibility onto the audiences indicates an abandonment of the journalist project by the professionals themselves, since they are in effect abandoning the service orientation and, at the same time, their professional autonomy.

### **Social status, income and rewards**

Within the sociology of the professions, high rewards offered by society imply gratitude for performing tasks that are viewed as difficult to perform and as contributing to the common good, while award systems *within* a professional community enable it to participate in ritualistic events that have symbolic meaning and create ties between the participants and motivate them to excellence in performance. The CJA has issued awards to journalists since 1954. Currently, it issues nine different awards per annum. Society offers high rewards for specialised services (e.g. the salaries and honorariums of lawyers and doctors). However, in contrast with such other professions where rewards are allocated to members more evenly, there are huge differences among journalists with regard to the individual rewards they are afforded and this is one of the reasons why it is difficult to maintain solidarity. The majority of Croatian journalists work in precarious conditions without any privileges. A cursory glance at the pay-scale indicates a low status. The salaries of journalists are considerably lower than the average salaries in the respective countries in the region and basic employment and social protection rights of journalists are not recognised or are significantly reduced (Petković, 2014). The relatively high social status of journalists during the socialist period has eroded significantly in the past two decades.

### **Conclusion**

The normative principles of 'professional journalism' operating within 'free' media, having a watchdog function and ensuring pluralism and diversity have not materialised in the actual media systems in the Croatia. They are recognised, but on a declarative level only. The 'civilising' liberal normative values, imported into this region seem to be ineffective.

An assessment of socio-historical peculiarities helps to understand why this is so: the media in the region have never been 'neutral', and political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) has always been a characteristic feature of Croatian media. While 'engaged' journalism was explicitly advocated under socialism in connection with the important role of journalists in promoting the official ideology, the idea of 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' is at the core of the discursive construction of journalist ethics today.

This might be viewed as anachronistic, since the ideas of 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' have been contested in the last few decades through (post)positivist critique, postmodern theory and the interpretive epistemological tradition, among others.

Based on the results of the two aforementioned studies and other research carried out, we can conclude that the journalistic profession in Croatia has eroded significantly. The effects of neoliberal tendencies (particularly the 'free market logic', corporate rule and commercialisation) have been devastating. The 'engaged journalism' concept that became established in socialist Yugoslavia from the 1960s onwards will likely be looked back on with fond memories when one compares it with the trends shaping journalism today.

Today, expert knowledge is not codified, whereas in Yugoslavia, working as a journalist implied a solid knowledge of social science and humanities that was 'upgraded' through specialisation in journalism. Current trends do not provide the journalistic profession with credentials that support occupational closure regimes but rather quite the opposite.

The distinction between lay persons and professionals is slowly vanishing, both as a consequence of lowered standards of mainstream media production, and of converging processes connected to technology that blur the distinction between media producers and consumers. Commodification of journalism has contributed to the erosion of the profession, since a large portion of media production can be considered neither an expert service, nor information of social importance and public interest. With the public interest removed from the equation, enforced by commodification processes, it is hard to legitimise the profession and to ascribe a high social status to it.

The powers the profession has to promote shared interests and create a shared identity are weakened, mainly due to the highly differentiated position of journalists in the labour market. In addition, competition between media organisations makes unity and solidarity among journalists difficult to attain. Corporate ownership and private sector management are practices that go hand in hand with cuts in public expenditure – all of which fundamentally change journalism. Professional associations seem powerless compared to the emerging organisational structures that ultimately define the goals and interests which *in fine* are sustainability and profit making by media organisations.

The structural changes that have emerged in the last two-and-a-half decades have affected the journalist profession. The promise of free and independent, pluralist media has not come to pass, contrary to expectations – to a large extent due to commercialisation and commodification of previously non-commodified social domains. Based on an analysis of the internal attributes and external agents and using the results of quantitative and qualitative studies on Croatian journalism, it may be concluded that the 'professional project' of journalism is undergoing a process of gradual decay.

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# Collective values in an entrepreneurial world: imagining craft labour in cultural work

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## **ABSTRACT**

Established entertainment industry unions are often perceived to be in decline in a new landscape of work that requires new forms of organising, but the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Allied Crafts (IATSE), a union that represents precarious workers in the entertainment industries in North America continues to expand its membership. This article analyses a shift from seniority-based to skill-based hiring practices in IATSE locals that began in the mid-1990s. Case study research on the formation of a skill-based Canadian IATSE local in 1998 finds that skill-based and seniority-based hiring are each representative of different conceptions of labour. However, the picture this case study sketches also suggests that these seemingly opposing concepts of labour – skill-based and seniority-based – are entangled. The idea of hiring based on ‘skill’ proved to be an effective organising strategy, but intensified precarious working conditions for IATSE employees, and relied on a more entrepreneurial conception of labour.

## **KEY WORDS**

unions, cultural labour, craft, entertainment industries, precarious work

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## **Introduction**

Precarious working conditions are a great hardship for many people as non-standard forms of employment become more common (Eurofound, 2015; Lewchuck et al., 2013). In this sense, work for all citizens is increasingly coming to resemble the kind of precarious work that has been normalised in creative and cultural industries. Cultural workers who labour in technical trades in the entertainment industries have, since the late nineteenth century, been able to mitigate precarious working conditions in

project-based work organisation through membership in entertainment industry unions and guilds. While it is true that ‘labour precariousness would be much less likely to prevail in a situation where strong unions were able to negotiate collectively on behalf of workers’ (Hesmondhalgh & Banks, 2016:267) this statement does not accurately reflect the complexity of collective bargaining and employment relations in cultural industries.<sup>1</sup> Entertainment industry unions such as the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) negotiating for better working conditions for their members have also provided an essential service to employers by maintaining a skilled work force ‘that can be used when needed’ in the live performance, film and television industries in North America.<sup>2</sup>

At present, established entertainment industry unions like the IATSE are often dismissed as part of an old order that is ineffective in a new landscape of work that requires new forms of organising. Amongst cultural workers it appears that ‘a general antagonism has calcified towards collective forms of action which remain symbolically linked to the tired and pedestrian climate of the “old” economy’ (Banks, 2007:65). Several studies have found that cultural workers are ambivalent about being part of a union or guild (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Hesmondhalgh & Banks, 2016:267; Conor, Gill & Taylor, 2015). However, in many craft occupations in entertainment industries a union membership is still necessary to have access to work in skilled trades and the membership of the IATSE has continued to expand its jurisdictions and organise new members.

Between 1995 and 2008, the membership of the IATSE increased by 50%. While, prior to the 1990s, the IATSE followed a strategy of exclusion for non-members,<sup>3</sup> and the protection of good jobs for members, in the mid-1990s, the IATSE International

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1 Entertainment industry unions have sustained precarious working conditions while limiting the hardship of precarious work for their members. As well, the history of labour activism and organising that has been entangled with the industrialisation of cultural industry work and has shaped the contours of labour relations in these industries often appears to be forgotten in some studies of cultural work. It has been suggested for example, ‘that cultural industries are generally not unionised which has sustained the spread of precarious employment that results in insecurity and presents new challenges to the already difficult task of unionisation and collective bargaining’ (de Peuter and Cohen, 2015:306). However, while this may be the case for many cultural industry workers, precarious work is not a ‘new challenge’ for all cultural workers. There has long been ‘structured uncertainty’ (Randle & Culkin, 2009) affecting precarious working conditions in live performance, film, and television industries (Dawson, 1948; Atkinson and Randle, 2014; Ross, 2009).

2 As cultural industries became more industrialised during the early twentieth century, unions played an important role in maintaining a flexible and skilled workforce for employers; ‘unions were a response by employees to the instability created when management sought a work force on an “as needed basis”’ (Golodner, 1996:x).

3 Early versions of IATSE constitutions until the 1920s explicitly stated: ‘no Negroes. This organisation is for white males only’ (Perkins, 1982:160). In the Southern USA during segregation, International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) locals were divided by race and there were black locals and white locals that worked in black and white theatres, respectively. IATSE is notorious for hiring only ‘male and pale’ compared to other entertainment industries and guilds. There was some push-back against racist hiring practices in the 1960s (Dawson, 2012), but there is still a marked lack of diversity in the IATSE membership. The membership of locals in the IATSE reflects ways that traditional gendered divisions of labour persist in entertainment industries. Wardrobe locals have memberships where the majority is female for example.

In New York theatres, in the 1920s, ‘scenery built by others would be ferreted out by IATSE stagehands once it arrived at a Broadway house. Anything confirmed to be non-union would be promptly torn up and thrown onto the street as garbage’ (White, 2015:48). The response of the IATSE to economic changes in the 1950s and the shift to more project-based flexible working conditions was to regulate hiring practices by establishing a roster system to maintain seniority lines and to certify skill and experience in the film industry in Hollywood (Gray & Seeber, 1996b).

official policy shifted ideological gears. Faced with a sharp decline in membership, the Alliance altered its structure in response to new technologies and economic restructuring in media and entertainment industries in Canada and the USA. In the IATSE, a new focus on organising after 1995 has meant that in many IATSE locals hiring practices which were once based on seniority have instead followed a skill-based model. This is a significant change, because skill-based hiring is predicated on a different conception of labour.

The ideological underpinnings of the terms 'skill-based' and 'seniority-based', currently used to refer to hiring practices in IATSE locals, are representative of diverging concepts of labour. Richard Biernacki's (1995) historical study of the development of British and German textile industries in the nineteenth century interrogates how different conceptions of labour can be understood by paying attention to the 'micro-procedures by which workers and employers treated labour as a commodity' (145). Biernacki builds on Marx's conceptual approach 'that concepts of labour, like the other categories of political economy, are more than tools of analysis. They are also forms of social consciousness'. For Biernacki, labour is imagined as a thing: 'the strangely objectified form that labour assumes to mediate producers' relations to each other' is particular to capitalist relations and can be discovered through a careful study of material practices. Labour is an 'ongoing activity, is not a thing and has itself no exchange value' but must be conceived of in this way in capitalist employment relations (Biernacki, 1995:60). This leads Biernacki to form the hypothesis that the 'everyday practices by which labour was conveyed as a commodity and consumed in capitalist manufacture must have had correspondingly different structures in Germany and Britain' (Biernacki, 2001:179).

Biernacki's analysis of how labour is culturally constructed is a useful frame to examine a case of collective organising in which a group of scenic artists and props makers in Southern Ontario formed a skill-based IATSE local in 1998. There are several key factors integral to this story including the convergence and integration of media entertainment industries and the emergence of a new genre of musical theatre, but the focus here is on the stance taken by the IATSE International to economic restructuring of the industry that contributed to this group of workers forming a skill-based local. This collective action was directly related to the IATSE International's strategy to organise as many workers as possible in the live performance, film and television sectors of the entertainment industries to gain some control over bargaining within a more flexible project-based form of work organisation. The case study explores the complexity of the concept of skills-based labour. In this case, it is evident that hiring practices based on the skills model allow members who have experience to maintain their positions as gate-keepers who decide which new members can be brought along and trained. Access to work is not decided by seniority, the amount of time a member has been a member of a local; this is instead predicated on those with seniority deciding who has 'skills'. While this study reveals that in many ways skill-based hiring is fundamentally inseparable from seniority-based hiring, there is an ideological difference between the two approaches.

The research methods used to gather information for this case study are qualitative. I engaged in participant observation at three workshops that have contracts with IATSE locals, and at an IATSE Canadian district convention in the fall of 2016. Participant

observation is a fieldwork method based on social relationships between individuals and the ethnographer. The researcher learns through observing and participating in everyday activities and work practices with community members. As is standard practice, there was no formal recruitment process for this component of the research. My analysis of the field notes recorded from this method of research utilises an auto-ethnographic methodology to reflect on and draw from my past work experience as a member of IATSE local 828 and as a props builder and scenic artist. I have considered my memories and experiences as fieldwork and I have used those experiences to help me interpret the field data I obtained during my time working as a props builder and scenic artist. The story of the formation of the local was a tale often repeated by the members I worked with. I also conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with IATSE members who work as scenic artists, props builders, stagehands and carpenters in theatre and scenic manufacturing projects.

## The IATSE

The IATSE began as a collective of 17 stagehands who worked in New York theatres in 1886. In 2017, it is one of the largest entertainment industry unions in the USA and Canada. In 2015, IATSE represented 122,000 members and by 2016 that number had grown to 130,000 in North America. There are 40 IATSE locals and over 20,000 members in Canada.<sup>4</sup> The Alliance represents craft workers in skilled trades as well as other workers in media entertainment industries and could be said to be a hybrid between a craft union and an industrial union because it represents workers of various types (child guardians who work in the film and television industry are a group of workers that have recently joined the IATSE). The membership of the IATSE that are part of locals that represent craft trades includes occupations such as carving, plastering, painting designing, animation and sign painting. As well, the IATSE represents camera technicians, costume designers, stagehands, fly-men, carpenters, electricians and welders. IATSE members work in several sectors in media and entertainment industries, in live theatre, film and television production, trade shows, television broadcasting, concert venues and set construction workshops.

Although soon after the signing of its first charter in the late nineteenth century, the IATSE became an 'international' alliance in 1893 that included Canadian locals, the majority of IATSE locals are American; the International Office is based in New York and patterns of bargaining in US locals influence practices in Canadian IATSE locals. There are 13 geographical Districts in the USA. Canada and locals in IATSE are organised by geographic location and craft jurisdiction. Canada is divided into two jurisdictions, 11 and 12, covering the terrains of Eastern and Western Canada, respectively. Following the lead of American IATSE locals, many Canadian locals now use skill-based hiring practices. In 2018, a third of Canadian locals recruited and hired members on the basis of skill and the issue of whether to remain seniority-based or skill-based was contested in many locals that were still seniority-based.

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<sup>4</sup> IATSE Changing Workplace review pdf file 2016. This file was distributed at an IATSE District 11 and 12 convention that I attended in September 2016.

The collective actions of individual locals are the building blocks that comprise the larger structure of the IATSE.<sup>5</sup> Each local of IATSE is unique; the contracts with employers are mainly achieved by the efforts of members who have been voted into executive positions,<sup>6</sup> and in the live-performance industry are specific to each workshop or theatre that the local has a contract with. When the contracts are negotiated, they are voted on by members who have worked for a minimum number of hours for the employer. The locals are autonomous, in that they maintain their own constitution and by-laws, elections and grievance procedures. Members can access services such as health benefits and retirement funds and, since the Education and Training Trust was established in 2012 by the International, there are opportunities for members to obtain training and education. IATSE represents below-the-line workers<sup>7</sup> who are paid an hourly wage for the time that they work on a project. Their status as employees means that along with other workers who work in standard employment relationships, they are eligible for employment benefits when they are unable to find work. However, their work relations cannot be confused with those of standard employees because their work is project-based.<sup>8</sup>

## Occupational cultures

The occupational cultures of various groups of workers in cultural production are often at cross-purposes (Caldwell, 2010), although there are also instances of successful

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5 The role of the IATSE International executive office is to support the individual locals and members in three main ways: the negotiation of national agreements with governments in the USA and Canada, policy reforms and supporting the individual locals in contract negotiations with employers (IATSE official website: [www.iatse.net](http://www.iatse.net)).

6 The executive board of the locals is made up of members who have been approved by the membership through a nomination and voting process. In the smaller locals, with less than 100 members, these individuals receive a small amount of money (about \$3,500 Canadian dollars or less depending on what executive position they fill) each year to do the work. In larger locals, there are paid positions for executive members.

7 Residuals, sometimes referred to as 're-use fees' or 'supplemental contributions', were first implemented to pay individuals for their performances in 1941 by the American Federation of Radio Artists (Paul & Kleingartner, 1994:669). The terms above and below the line were originally used to refer to how workers were paid in the film industry in Hollywood in the 1940s (Atkinson and Randle, 2014). Depending on the kind of contract they have with the employer, workers are often able to receive residuals as payment as well as the fee or wage negotiated, but residuals are only paid to occupations that are considered above-the-line.

8 So confusing is the distinction between employee and independent contractor that it is a common practice for employers to try to take advantage of employees' ignorance of their rights as employees by pressuring them to sign forms that grant the employer permission to treat them as independent contractors. Recent amendments to the Employment Standards Act in Ontario were put into place by Bill 148 in January 2018 to deter abuses of the Act by employers who misclassify their employees as independent contractors. Misclassification happens in many types of work, but in cultural labour, the line between independent contractor and employee is often hard to delineate and appears grey rather than black and white. This confusion can be linked to the vocational aspirations of cultural workers, to notions of creativity and individualism, and to occupational identity. Misclassification happens when employers who do not have contracts with labour unions in the live performance, film and television industries attempt to take advantage of workers' uncertainty about their employment status to avoid paying them vacation pay and following other employment standard guidelines outlined in the Act. It is difficult to police these abuses, spot-checks are rarely done, and workers, although they may be aware of their rights, are reluctant to complain and ruin their reputation. Many IATSE members also work for employers which do not have contracts with IATSE. In recognition of their members' vulnerability to exploitation, IATSE locals try to educate their members about their employee status, by providing information about the Employment Standards Act on their local's websites.



partnerships between unions (Ross, 2009:21). Workers of one profession or trade might expect very different working conditions and relations with employers from others. For example, the perception that a group of freelance writers are exploited because they must work in teams and they do not receive royalties or recognition for their creative contributions (Cohen, 2012) stems from ideas of what it means to be a writer and how a writer is remunerated for their work. In contrast, scenic artists who work collaboratively in teams do not consider themselves exploited for not receiving royalties every time a live show is performed. These are 'cultures that are known of in advance of entering the terrain, and that also give rise to distinctive pathways in the longer term within each sector' (McRobbie, 2016:78).

The particular cultures within entertainment industry unions and guilds and in turn within individual locals are influential in policy formation: 'unions are also "cultural institutions" and there are distinctive cultures associated with a self-consciously guild-oriented group of film workers (SAG)<sup>9</sup> and a union-oriented organisation who come out of a broadcasting tradition (AFTRA)<sup>10</sup>' (McKercher & Mosco, 2006:131). The diversity of occupations the IATSE now represents is considered a strength (Gray, 2001). Variations in occupational identity can be divisive, however: in a case study that examines a decision on the part of two unions in Hollywood not to merge for the purpose of consolidating bargaining power the authors argue that: '[t]he particular characteristics of the unions, including their history, culture, sense of craft identity and the lived experience of members, derailed the unity effort' (McKercher & Mosco, 2006:133).

The work that IATSE members do is not considered artistic or based on individual creative talent. IATSE members negotiate collectively for standard wages.<sup>11</sup> In the past, the 'least individualistic arrangements' were thought to be 'those of the IATSE which specify that producer's payments go into the Motion Picture Industry Pension Plan and the Motion Picture Health and Welfare Fund both of which benefit the union's membership as a whole' (Paul & Kleingartner, 1994:671). And on the other side of the spectrum, 'the most individualistic entitlements are found in the DGA (Directors Guild of America) and the WGA (Writers Guild of America) basic agreement, which specify that residuals be paid directly to the individuals who contributed to the final product' (ibid.). Although members of the IATSE are considered less individualistic than some worker organisations in the entertainment industry, the members of IATSE, or certain occupations within it, can still be described as 'self-employed employees' or 'Arbeitskraftunternehmer' a concept developed 'to illustrate a highly market-oriented and individualised form of labour supply' (Haunschild & Eikhof, 2009:156).<sup>12</sup> Cultural workers who are members of the IATSE must often act like independent contractors because of the project-based nature of the work in media and entertainment industries

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9 SAG (Screen Actors Guild has now merged with AFTRA and is SAG-AFTRA).

10 AFTRA (American Federation of Television and Radio Artists).

11 An exception to this is the practice of 'scale rates' in the film and television industry. IATSE members who are in demand for their skill can negotiate contracts that are above the standard wages that are negotiated collectively with employers.

12 This study examines the labour of actors who work on short-term contracts in theatres, but it is possible to argue that this concept can be used to describe the kind of labour relations experienced by IATSE members.



although their hours, location and other aspects of work are more controlled by employers: '[t]he extent to which workers have to exhibit self-management and self-marketing skills to succeed depend not on their legal employment status, but rather on the actual enactment of their employment relationships' (Haunschild & Eikhof, 2009:160). So, while they may be employees, in many ways the way they get work takes the form of independent contract work; work is precarious, workers have the freedom to refuse work and getting calls relies on informal networks.

## A case of organising

*They came up from New York quite early on to try and certify us. They used to call us 'ice-backs' because Mexicans were 'wet-backs' we were called 'ice-backs' because our dollar was cheaper, and we were taking their work. (Scenic artist)*

This section describes the circumstances that led to the decision by a group of scenic artists and props makers to form a new IATSE local in Southern Ontario in 1998. The reflections of charter members provide a Canadian perspective on the marked increase in runaway production, or the outsourcing of theatre production to Canada from Broadway producers based in New York during the 1990s. Drawing from my interviews and conversations with members, it is clear that this collective action cemented relationships between them as they became not only individualised freelance workers, but also members of a local.

As scenic set construction work was outsourced from theatre producers based in the USA in the 1990s, set construction workshops moved outside of the city of Toronto. This allowed employers to take advantage of cheaper rents and labour, beyond the boundary of the IATSE local 58's jurisdiction in Toronto. The workshops were located in local 129 territory, a stagehands' local that had been chartered at the beginning of the twentieth century. Along with the members from local 129 who worked in the shops there were also scenic artists who were not members of a union. The scenic artists worked on the same productions alongside IATSE members as independent contractors. There was quite a lot of work; the Canadian dollar was low relative to US currency, and the success of the mega-musical<sup>13</sup> genre of musical theatre had driven more investment by large media conglomerates into the live-performance sector. Although the runaway production, the fact that scenic painting and construction work was moving away from New York, was not seen at all favourably by the locals that represented scenic artists in New York, it also provided an opportunity for organising.

These events coincided with changes in the IATSE. In 1995, under the leadership of a new IATSE International President, Tom Short, there was a push within the Alliance to organise as many workers as possible. Short curtly stated his agenda at the time: 'control the work force, control the industry' (Gray, 2001). Instead of attempting to ensure steady employment for members, a 'job for life', the Alliance adjusted to changes in economic organisation and policy by going with the flow of precarious work. They focused on organising rather than trying to limit precarious work, bringing in more members to improve the working conditions of precarious workers in below-the-line

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13 Term coined by D. Lister (1995) 'The cloning of Andrew Lloyd Webber', *Independent*, 11 February: 25.

crafts. This agenda was met with anger and resistance from some members during a time when there was an increased amount of runaway production from Hollywood and Broadway to Canada and elsewhere. A member who attended an International Convention during this period recalls Short resorting to turning off the microphone when discussions got too heated:

*And there were huge fights between the American and Canadian IATSE locals and Tom Short was the President and he was a stagehand from Cleveland and you know he was a tough guy and guys would walk up to the microphone in this huge room – like 2,000 people – and guys would get up there and they would start screaming – you know ‘the film industry in Canada is killing the film industry here and blah and the companies in Canada are taking our work’ and Tom Short would say ‘F–you – we are all in the same union’ and ‘if we are all in the same union and the work is up there you support your brothers up there’. (Scenic artist)*

Short made his position clear: a divided union would never be able to withstand the more mobile production processes now possible in the live performance, film and television industries. What little power the union had in negotiations would be broken if it did not bend. By the mid-1990s, it had become apparent that IATSE must adapt as the bargaining power of the organisation declined along with the numbers of members; there had been a gradual decline in IATSE membership from 1979 to 1988 (–3%), and from 1988 to 1994 there was a loss of 17% of the members (Gray & Seeber, 1996a:36). Short used his constitutional power as International President and forced locals to merge and consolidate bargaining power and to be more open to organising new members (Gray, 2001).<sup>14</sup>

One of the challenges that the IATSE faced was that in the USA, the power of unions to organise workers was and still is limited by government legislation in many states. This ‘right-to-work’ legislation that meant banning closed shops (all-union workforce agreements) diminished workers’ power to challenge employers starting in the late 1940s (Kraft, 1996:175). As film and television production became more mobile due to new technologies, employers began to set up production hubs in right-to-work states. As IATSE attempted to bolster a decline in membership in the mid-1990s, this central tenet of union busting, doing away with the closed shop, was taken on as part of a new organising strategy. At the IATSE Sixty-Second Biennial Convention in July 1995, Victor Van Bourg, a lawyer representing the General Council of Ironworkers and honorary member of the IATSE, gave a persuasive speech that simultaneously called for organising *and* the elimination of the closed shop in the IATSE:

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14 When Short retired, in 2008, the membership of IATSE had increased by 50% during his tenure as President (Simmons, 2008). Short

*won a court challenge in 1996 and followed with pre-emptive moves in other sectors, reducing the number of local unions from 750 in 1993 to 473 today. He also challenged traditional local union practices with respect to membership admissions. Locals are now expected to reach out to all who are employed in their jurisdiction or face the prospect that new members will be forced on them. (Gray, 2001:128)*

Although the membership of the IATSE has grown since 2001, presently there are fewer locals than in the early 1990s because of mergers.

*We cannot couple a closed shop with a closed union. You bet, but not because of the law, because it's immoral to keep people out of our union membership. You have also become imbued with the notion that it's dangerous to admit new people into membership.*

*So, we have a constant clash between organising and exclusion, because if you bring too many people into the union you might not have enough jobs. But the concept of organising is not merely the concept of organising into membership, it's organising the industry, so you organise jobs too. (Van Bourg, 1995)<sup>15</sup>*

His argument is emphatically against the exclusion of non-members, but the replacement of seniority-based hiring with skill-based hiring that this entails implicitly fosters a more individualistic and entrepreneurial concept of labour that is now incorporated into the IATSE structure.

By 1997, the Canadian scenic artists working in the scenery workshops that had contracts with producers in the USA began to feel pressured because the scenic locals in New York affiliated with IATSE and USAA (the United Scenic Artists of America) would insist on having Head Scenics from New York oversee the quality of the work done in Ontario. At times, the arrangement worked and there was little tension, but in other cases the work of the Canadian artists was managed by the American Scenic artists and they felt patronised that their work was not considered to be as good as the work done by American Scenics:

*In a lot of cases we were discredited, not fairly because the truth of the matter, and I found this out afterwards firsthand, the scenic artwork we were doing here was at least equal in quality to the artwork people were doing elsewhere and some cases it was better, and they were really threatened. (Scenic artist)*

*They sent up American Scenics who would head the show and then we would have to work under them because they were not quite trusting that they knew how to do it and so they were a little bit patronising – but okay we thought we are the colonies and we can't do it. And then we started getting good at it and we started to realise we can do this. (Scenic artist)*

The tensions created by this dynamic were one factor that motivated the Canadians to consider becoming part of a union. At that time, there were two American unions that they could join, IATSE and the USAA and both approached them with invitations to organise.<sup>16</sup> The USAA was formed in 1812 as the United Scenic Artists' Association and

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15 IATSE official convention transcripts. Bound volumes of these transcripts are given to each local and I was able to borrow these from an older local that was established before 1910. The speech by Van Bourg is on page 73 and was given at the Sixty-Second Convention, Fontainebleau Hilton Head Hotel, Hollywood Florida, 17–21 July 1995.

Combined Convention Proceedings, 1995–2005 IATSE Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts of the United States, Its Territories and Canada AFL-CIO, CLC. These volumes are issued from the IATSE head office 1430 Broadway, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10018.

16 There was a scenic artist and props builder local – IATSE 873 – with a jurisdiction in Toronto that represented these occupations in the film and television industries established in the mid-1950s, but their territory did not extend to the suburbs, the greater Toronto area. At that time, it was a seniority-based local, but has since made the transition to being skill-based.

later became the United Scenic Artists of America. The USAA was part of IATSE for a brief period in the early twentieth century, after which time they chose to be autonomous from IATSE for almost a century (White, 2015).<sup>17</sup>

Previous attempts to discredit the work of the Canadians had made them dubious about joining the USAA. They felt that if they joined the American Scenic local their work might be more controlled by the Americans and fewer scenic projects would be given to Canadians. IATSE had many old and established locals in Canada while the USAA only represented American Scenic artists and set designers:

*we decided ... we could go with them (USAA) but it would be very expensive, and it didn't make much sense because we would be the only people up there and we didn't know how much support we would get and everyone else was IATSE.*  
(Scenic artist)

Another consideration was the pay differential between male and female scenic artists. Negotiating with employers as individual contractors for each project there was often an inequity between the wages that men and women received from the companies they worked for. In one situation, several scenic artists who were working on the same project compared pay checks and found that the men were all making more money for the same work. For the female scenic artists who made up roughly half of the group, it was a great advantage to have equal pay for equal work and membership in a local that negotiated a standard wage for the work from each employer that the local had a contract with.

The option to hire on the basis of skill was more appealing and was something that the USA couldn't offer. As part of IATSE, while they had to abide by a general charter template they could make up their own work rules and decide how they wanted to organise their local:

*We were offered, they offered us – was which was great – which was what the other union couldn't do – said the whole International was trying to move to a non-seniority-based union. He said you guys because you are painters cannot have a seniority-based local because it doesn't work that way. If you need to paint a drop you can't send somebody who doesn't know how to paint a drop just because they joined three years earlier. So, he said you will be Canada's first*

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17 An early association that preceded the USAA, The Scenic Art League, wanted to cut ties with what was then the National Alliance of Stage Employees (later the IATSE) because 'the idea of labor intervention was distasteful, and the goal of the League was to protect the dignity of the profession' (quoted in Crabtree & Beudert, 2005:413). They saw themselves as artistic and felt there was little to be gained from joining forces with the stagehands represented by the National Alliance of Stage Employees. The USAA was also affiliated with the Commercial Papers and Wallpaper Hanger's Union. Scenic artists in New York organised a local in 1892, the American Society of Scene Painters. This was the Broadway branch of the International Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paper Hangers (IBAP). The USAA left the security of salaried positions in theatres on Broadway and chose to work on contracts in the early years of the twentieth century:

Broadway's painters, designers and carpenters finally abandoned the in-house employment of the nineteenth century for good, making their bed in the far more industrialised option of a trade union. They bypassed older notions of apprenticeships and loyalty to a mentoring actor-manager or producer and took a rotating series of regulated contract gigs on a contract basis (White, 2015:46).

A year after local 828 was chartered in 1998, the USAA, after almost a century of being separate from IATSE, joined the Alliance and became local 829, adding another 3,100 members to the Alliance.

*non-seniority-based local where it is a craft-based local and you will send people according to their talents to the jobs. (Scenic artist)*

The decision of the scenic artists to become a skill-based local meant that their local, while still offering their members some of the benefits of a trade union, such as RRSP<sup>18</sup> contributions and health coverage, did not follow the traditional trade union organisation based on seniority:

*But it was the type of situation like if you needed someone to paint a drop for – if they didn't know how to draw or paint – you could get them to base coat but you could not get them to do the things you do – you couldn't use them past their ability – and the International are moving past that and more locals are going non-seniority and it just makes it fairer that it is skill-based rather than Bob has been here for forty years he doesn't do anything but he gets the first call because he has been here. (Scenic artist)*

The scenics believed that they could have a more meritocratic type of organisation while enjoying these benefits and that this would make their local more competitive. In the above quotes, it is apparent that the seniority-based labour provided by 'Bob' is assumed to be less skilled and there is a belief that a worker hired for a job must have the capacity to move flexibly from one task to another. A worker who 'can't be used past their ability' is not as useful to the collective. Comparing these two conceptions of labour, it is apparent that both are cultural constructions. Both must be understood as 'an enigmatic transaction whose original strangeness now eludes us: the sale of human labour as a commodity' (Biernacki, 1995:1).

The scenics considered their labour as more artistic and thus more individualised when compared with that of the stagehands and carpenters of IATSE local 129:

*I think the language of scenery and construction easily dovetails into technology. Rather than somebody draw it out on a blueprint they can now auto-cad it. So, the carpenters can still understand it, because the end result is the same. It is not as subjective as a designer who wants a design painted in a certain way because that can be interpreted in so many ways. A cut is a cut a joint is a joint. (Scenic artist)*

It matters who does this job of interpretation, and some are more talented than others at this task. Also, at times, 'the hand' used is important and can't be exchanged for another's without compromising the integrity of the finished work. This notion of their labour as artistic in comparison to the labour of the seniority-based local they worked alongside contributed to their resolve that they could not have the same type of hiring based on seniority. This is a small but significant change: individuals are hired on the basis of their special talents and the skills that they possess, not because they have been part of a local for many years.

In technical trades practical experience is necessary to learn skills. However, because there is no formal measure of qualifications, and no standard basis to assess

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18 Registered Retirement Savings Plan.

what 'skill' entails, the skill-based model is another way of envisioning the labour performed, but it also functions as a disciplinary tool. An employer (or project head) can complain that a worker is not 'skilled' enough and hire someone else if he chooses, and a worker's reputation is still all that stands between unemployment and employment, making work feel more precarious for individual workers even if they are IATSE members. This rarely happens in practice because skilled members with experience are usually in demand, but there is more pressure felt for fear of not being asked back.

## Collective individualism

The craft of scenic art necessitates the possession of individual talent that must be directed towards collective work with others. Scenic art is not considered to be an art by those who make a living as scenic artists, although the job requires a high level of technical skill and the ability to interpret renderings, skills that are often considered to be artistic. As one scenic comments, 'it is not the skill of inventing or having a vision. That's why I think, I mean I think the word scenic artist is a little misleading, scenic painter is a little better because we are just copying, we should be just copying.' This statement reflects an understanding of the work that is characteristic of craft labour; 'labour in service of the artist, one who supports the "talent" while operating under the scrutiny of managers' (Banks, 2010:312). In theatre production work, scenic artists are paid an hourly rate, and generally will not receive any recognition or prestige for the work. The scenic artist's labour being craft labour is 'abstract labour, unnamed and uncelebrated' (Banks, 2010:312).

In the interviews and conversations with scenic artists about their work practices, the desire to express themselves in their work is often spoken of as something that must be suppressed or disciplined. There is a phrase that scenics use, 'you are loving it too much' to caution other workers about becoming too invested in the work; or another saying, 'you have to turn it off and turn it on,' suggesting that sometimes you really put yourself, your soul into something and sometimes you do the minimum that the job requires. Studies of creative labour that reflect on the 'romance' of cultural work show how workers' perceptions about labour can lead to exploitation (McRobbie, 2016:38). Angela McRobbie examines how this romance is translated at an institutional level so that it functions as a kind of '*dispositif*' (italics in original), a self-monitoring, self-regulating mechanism. As such contemporary incarnations of creativity in cultural work are, in McRobbie's analysis, determined by 'current modes of biopower' to be creative is to 'participate in a practice of self-romanticism' (McRobbie, 2016:38).

The occupational identity of scenic artists, while ostensibly 'not-creative' entails a romantic notion of what this labour is, but with a caveat. The way that they understand their labour as romantic and artistic is tempered by a collective craft ethos in the context of work that is decidedly unglamorous manual work; there is an identification with a group and enforced humility; and there is little possibility that a scenic artist achieves recognition for talent except within the community of other scenics and membership and status within the group.<sup>19</sup> For McRobbie, 'what individualisation

means sociologically is that people increasingly have to become their own micro-structures, they have to do the work of the structures themselves by themselves, which in turn requires intensive practices of self-monitoring or “reflexivity” (McRobbie, 2002:518). A scenic describes this dilemma:

*You are not going to be able to please everyone all the time. This has been the huge ongoing narrative of my career. Who to go and work for when without pissing the other one off, and not being part of that project because this one is going to take me further. I can't tell you how many times I have felt guilty. I've worried about letting someone down. The fear that I have chosen the wrong project because essentially, I have been in charge of my own employment for the last thirty years because no one else is making these decisions for me. (Scenic artist)*

It is necessary for this person to be part of a group, to cultivate alliances, show loyalty to others, while also ‘being in charge of my own employment’, sometimes being able to choose who to work with and where to work. Taking the wrong project can be costly, because the project that is turned down could go on for months while another might fizzle out in a few weeks and it is difficult to gauge which offers the more secure path.

The practice of hiring based on skill does require more competitive work relations because members cannot rely on seniority status to ensure steady employment. The group of scenic artists was also aware that local 129, still seniority-based, was not able to provide a guarantee of steady work for its members. There was no expectation that the union must provide continuous work for members. In interviews participants often made comments about how they had a preference for temporary work. The unpredictable and temporary nature of the work was appealing to many of the scenic artists I interviewed and, as one scenic artist confided,

*I like this, and I recognise this and at some level I think well ... I should be a contract person. I imagine working at the same place every day for a year – you start with a year contract and I think my god how am I going deal with that?*

The move to act collectively was eventually sparked by the instability of the companies that they worked for. Scenic workshops are often rather fly-by-night operations. Just before local 828 was chartered, one of the scenery shops that employed the scenic artists for projects was unable to pay its employees. As independent contractors, the scenic artists realised that the challenge they faced as individuals to negotiate with employers and receive the wages that they were owed could be mitigated by collective

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19 Keith Negus (2002) in a study of musicians also comments on this dual individual/collective aspect of certain forms of cultural work: Artists and cultural producers may be notoriously individualistic, continually questing for ‘autonomy’ and ‘independence’ and desiring the ‘freedom’ to pursue their own whims. Yet, at the same time, creative artists are continually contributing to solidarities in a way that dissolves any simple individual collective dichotomy or pattern of us versus them prejudice and discrimination. The practices of cultural producers continually bring about such possibilities (129).

action. The shop went bankrupt, but soon after, the owner started to build sets again in another location. This incident was remembered by several people as influential in the decision to form a local.

The choice to hire based on skill instead of seniority was a source of conflict with the members of 129 that they worked alongside in set construction workshops and theatres in the area.

*And that was a huge thing because all the stage-hand locals were terrified because they didn't want to lose seniority and we embraced non-seniority because we felt we couldn't do it any other way and all the carpenters would come and yell at us and all this stuff – they understood it, but it was threatening to them. (Scenic artist)*

These fears were not unwarranted; although local 129 still holds to seniority-based hiring, in recent contracts with one of the workshops included in this study the local has given up the 'closed shop' aspect of its seniority-based hiring, rendering it almost meaningless in practice:

*It took a long time for us to give up and it wasn't giving up – the ability to hire – they [the employer] always wanted that and I said – 'look it is hard for us to find people' and I was on his side – you have a brick and mortar building, they will come and drop off resumes rather than to us (the local), rather than go through the BA<sup>20</sup> – and finally we just put it into an agreement that they are free to hire, there are still restrictions of course, if people do not want to become members then they will fire them. (Stagehand)*

The change from seniority to skill in hiring is still contested in many locals that have remained seniority-based. There is the fear that failure to adopt a skill-based organisation will encourage the kind of workers who 'give unions a bad name' or 'those who have lost their passion for the work' to have access to work. Many members of skill-based locals feel it is the only way to stay competitive, to offer a talented and passionate workforce to the employers they have contracts with.

In the case of local 828, being part of a collective has been positive in many respects; the formation of the local gave the scenic artists access to standardised wages; collectively they were able to access health care and other benefits through membership in the IATSE organisation. Many members of the local have worked hard at negotiating contracts to better their working conditions and the local now has contracts with ten workshops and theatres. Many of the charter members of the local are still working on projects together almost 20 years later in the live-performance sector and have been core members of the scenery workshops and worked in theatres in the area. Some charter members are teachers in local colleges and universities and they often select talented potential new members from their groups of students. The difficulties of developing and training young scenic artists and maintaining these standards in a changing industry are something that the members of the local must confront. This is often mentioned as a challenge to be faced. What is not discussed, however, is that there

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20 The Business Agent is an executive member who assigns work to members who call in available to work on projects.



is really no formal consensus as to what these skills actually are. It is the experienced members' view of what skill is that dictates the training and learning of new potential members, and their expertise (which is effectively seniority that is enforced informally) that affords them the skills to do this.

In 2017, almost 20 years after the local was chartered, local 828 still lacked a formal way of assessing members' skills. There is little guidance for new members on the skills needed to apply to be a member and no technical exam has been organised. The fact that the local remains relatively small means that everyone knows everybody else and a reputation needs to be established. A potential new member will often only have one chance, one call to audition. Although there have been some attempts over the years to discuss making member acceptance more formalised or standardised, there are presently two pathways to be considered for membership in this local. One is to work a certain minimum number of hours and then apply for membership; the other is to submit a portfolio and resume, or both if possible. The new member's eligibility is then voted on by the membership at a meeting. The membership in the local has remained steady for the last several years, hovering around 75 members. Some new members stay for a time, but if they cannot get the amount of work necessary to keep going, they leave and are replaced by others who want to work in the industry.

This change in approach to hiring workers for jobs, which ostensibly means that a worker is hired for a project based on perceived skill not the amount of time that worker has been a member of a local, appears to pit worker experience, acquired through many years of practice against worker skill. It seems that experience is valued less, and that individualistic and entrepreneurial values (which are required for the self-promotion associated with skill-based hiring) are more important than the amount of skill a worker has gained through years of experience. While in practice this is not always the case, skill-based hiring is a way of keeping precarious workers in line.

The ideology inherent to the skills model fits within a 'culture of enterprise' paradigm in which individual subjects must develop and train themselves to become 'entrepreneurs of the self'; '[O]nce a human life is conceived of primarily in entrepreneurial terms, the owner of that life becomes individually responsible for his or her own self advancement and care; within the ideals of enterprise, individuals are charged with managing the conduct of the business of their own lives' (Du Gay, 1997:302). As Mark Banks has commented (following the work of Nickolas Rose and Paul du Gay), a 'discourse of enterprise' that allows for 'strong incitements to become more self-directed, self-resourcing and entrepreneurial may enhance possibilities for worker *self-exploitation* and relatedly *self-blaming*' as individuals are disconnected from 'collectivised environments and structures of support' (Banks, 2007:43). However, it is not possible to understand occupational cultures represented by IATSE locals solely in these entrepreneurial terms. Within the IATSE collective goals remain important to members. In skill-based locals, new members can be inducted if they accumulate enough hours to be considered (although they must be nominated by at least two members and their membership is decided by vote). Members of IATSE locals are committed to the goal of organising: they volunteer their time to better their working conditions, work together to negotiate collective agreements with employers and strive to maintain a sense of community within the IATSE.

Beck & Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) concept of 'institutionalised individualism' is useful for analysing the change and continuity in IATSE hiring practices discovered in this case study research. For Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, understanding individualisation as creating an 'autarkic human self', isolated and alone, contradicts everyday experience (and sociological studies) of the worlds of work, family and community, 'which show that the individual is not a monad, but is self-*insufficient* and increasingly tied to others' (2002:xxi). In this respect, the change and continuity in IATSE hiring practices highlighted in this case study bears some relation to what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim would term 'institutionalised individualism'. In an individualised 'risk society' where individuals experience a 'dis-embedding without re-embedding' as institutional structures change (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), there is continuity as informal kinds of support or networks develop, just as in the past. In this case a kind of 're-embedding' has occurred because the IATSE structure has flexibly altered its structure.

Using comparative case studies of different cultural conceptions of labour in textile industries in Germany and Britain, Biernacki (1995) discovered that

*the difference between the principles adopted in Germany and in Britain cannot be explained by the ease or efficiency with which the piece-rate structures served the function of appropriating labour for a wage. The two systems served this purpose equally well, they differed, not in their material function, but in their intelligible form. (64)*

Similarly, the distinction made in the workshops between a more individualistic notion of labour related to an individual's 'skill' and the skill gained through years of experience of working is a key to understanding how workers in IATSE trades conceive of their labour and employment relations with employers. However, in practice, the differences between these two apparitions of labour cannot be completely teased apart.

## Conclusion

An emphasis on organising over the past 20 years has been crucial to maintaining and growing IATSE's membership and is considered a successful response to economic change (Christopherson, 2008, 2009). Entertainment industry unions have always had to adapt to precarious working conditions: 'these unions have survived and even thrived in an environment that from all appearance would seem hostile to union organising' (Amman, 2002:113). Furthermore, the recent trend of outsourcing and movement of cultural work to different areas, which has meant precarious work for many workers in these industries, has also simultaneously led to organising in the places where work has re-located. As Andrew Ross has observed, 'in some cases the migration of an industry to new regions has even helped generate a pioneer union presence' (Ross, 2009:21).

Scholarship on cultural labour has not yet addressed how established entertainment industry unions like the IATSE have in recent years attempted to balance employers' needs for a flexible workforce, while serving the interests of members. While a focus on organising did contribute to a growth in the IATSE membership from 1995 to 2016,

there is a lack of employment data on the percentage of members who can sustain a living through their membership in the IATSE. Many of the benefits for members are not equally shared. At present, some members can access the RRSP and health benefits but not all, for members are required to work for a minimum number of hours to be eligible for benefits without 'topping up', or paying a fee on top of union membership.<sup>21</sup>

How workers imagine their labour shapes their collective bargaining with employers and affects their expectations and vulnerability to exploitation. As the IATSE responded to recent challenges by attempting to organise the occupations in the industry as a whole, it was necessary to become open to a more individualistic concept of labour. In this case, the occupational identity of the scenic artists, and the cultural meanings and attitudes to their labour were influential in their decision to join the IATSE. The skill-based concept of labour and the practice of hiring based on skill were compatible with how they viewed their labour. The picture this case study sketches suggests how, in practice, these seemingly opposing concepts of labour – skill-based and seniority-based – are entangled. The shift to hiring based on skill did not attempt to limit precarious working conditions but was able to use entrepreneurial conceptions of labour to organise new members.

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21 In one of the few studies of employment relations in entertainment industries that includes the live-performance sector, factors that make entertainment industries distinct but also create challenges for researchers in organising and analysing employment data are outlined: workers often have multiple union and guild memberships; there is a high level of unemployment and many workers have to hold jobs outside the industry to make a living; collective bargaining only often provides the minimum wages workers can negotiate (i.e. in the film industry the practice of scale pay systems allows below-the-line workers to negotiate individually above standard collective rates); the project-based nature of the work which means that workers work for multiple employers and the fact that unions are 'more isolated' from other sectors of employment in collective bargaining (Gray & Seeber, 1996b:6–7).

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# **'I am a single mum. I don't feel like I can be as competitive as other people': experiences of precariously employed staff at UK universities**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Universities play a central role in informational capitalism. However, higher education institutions have undergone economic, political and cultural transformations leading to competition, market orientation and new management forms. These changes have effects on many levels, including the working conditions and practices of individuals involved in the information gaining process. This article aims to find out how the existing working conditions and practices at universities form the meanings, identities and experiences of individuals by focusing on precariously employed academics. I address this question based on a theoretical analysis and qualitative interviews with casualised academic staff.

## **KEY WORDS**

academic labour, universities, information work, precarious work, casualisation, informational capitalism

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## **Introduction**

The economic and political transformations of universities in recent decades have attracted criticism from several quarters. This is also reflected in a growing academic literature investigating these changes in the context of neoliberalism and the rise in the interweaving of private and public providers. Within universities, a new entrepreneurial and managerial spirit has been carefully fostered and produced that has resulted in the implementation of market-driven rules and competition (Deem, Hillyard & Reed, 2007). It is argued that educational institutions nowadays aim to respond to market demands whereby the public character of education tends to fade away (Peters, 2003).

Critical scholars speak about ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter & Leslie, 1999), the ‘corporate university’ (Giroux, 2002) and ‘Uber.edu’ (Hall, 2016). These structural transformations have had several impacts on the working conditions, practices and relations of subjects including, to name but a few, the intensification and extension of work, the blurring of work and free time, casualisation, precariousness, self-exploitation and self-marketing. How these conditions are experienced by different subjects is open to debate. While the experiences of work in other sectors such as the cultural and creative industries are well documented, there is still a lack of understanding of labouring subjectivities in academia, as well as a lack of analysis of how the existing conditions are experienced by academics (Gill, 2014:12–13).

This article strives to find answers to the following question: How are the existing working conditions and practices at universities perceived and experienced by precariously employed academics?

I address this question based on a theoretical analysis and qualitative interviews with casualised academic staff at higher education institutions in Scotland. In particular, some theoretical foundations of the study of academic labour are outlined in the next section. The following section presents the methodology of the empirical research that was conducted. Then, some findings of the study are presented and discussed in relation to job insecurity, workload, management, control mechanisms, mental and physical health and gender. The article concludes with a summary and a discussion of the further implications of the study.

## **Theoretical foundations**

In this section, I will outline some theoretical foundations of the study of academic labour: in particular, job insecurity, workload, management, control mechanisms, mental and physical health and gender. Among others, these are important dimensions that shape the working conditions at higher education institutions. For a systematic model of the working conditions at universities, see Allmer (2017).

### **Job insecurity**

Employment in higher education is characterised by a tendency of casualisation and temporality. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2016), 128,300 permanent/open-ended and 70,035 fixed-term academic staff worked at universities in the UK in the academic year 2014–15. On top of that, there were 75,560 academic atypical staff in the same year. Adding up those on a fixed-term contract with the academic atypical staff means that the majority (53.2%) of academic staff work on a temporary basis in UK higher education. Casualisation allows the university to test the performance of the academic, strengthens ‘Darwinian selection’, reduces labour costs and gives the opportunity to respond quickly to changes on the education market to deal with low and high peaks of demand (Bryson & Barnes, 2000:193). The number of staff needed also depends on how successful a university is in terms of marketing and attracting students for the upcoming academic year. Universities compete with each other in a market for potential new students. Casualisation of academic staff can therefore be considered as one of the outcomes of applying quasi-market, neoliberal rules at higher education institutions:

*The university could never be sure about enrolments size or profitability; it had to remain forever poised to take action, to stimulate enrolment, to cut costs, to keep growing. The permanent flexibility this required meant that the staff had to be proletarianised and stratified into temporary part-time workers, permanent teachers and permanent researchers. (Shumar, 1995:94)*

Pratt (1997) highlighted that employing part-time and fixed-term staff at universities had become a management strategy. Twenty years since this pioneering analysis was carried out, those working at a pre-1992 university are now typically on research-only contracts, work part-time, have less than five years work experience, are female and are under the age of 40. Additionally, non-white and non-UK staff are most likely to be on temporary contracts (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016).

Temporary contracts tend to have an impact on the employee's economic security and control, exclusion from the department, relationship with other colleagues and lack of opportunity for career development and promotion (Bryson & Barnes, 2000:217). Gulli (2009:5) highlights that the expansion of temporary staff is typical for the neoliberal discourse as it brings flexibility to the university at the cost of individual insecurity that can lead to anxiety, disruption, stigmatisation and loss of dignity. A contradiction between inclusion and exclusion characterises the employment of temporary staff. Temporary staff are much needed and included in economic terms, but tend to be invisible and exposed and therefore excluded in social and political terms. Tirelli (1999) has therefore stressed that casual contracts trigger labour segmentations within the academic workforce leading to increased hierarchies and potential for conflict. Neoliberal universities tend to decrease the number of relatively established and respected permanent staff and increase the number of relatively powerless temporary staff. This does not, however, imply that only temporary staff are affected by neoliberal conditions, but rather that casualisation runs throughout academia. From a trade union point of view, casualisation also brings political changes that advantage the management and weaken the academic workforce. 'Faced with a restive mass of immaterial labour, a university administrator's best strategy – backed by centuries of academic hierarchy – is to ensure that regular and contingent faculty remains divided' (Dyer-Witthford, 2005:78).

## **Workload**

Drawing an analogy with the idea of the 'factory without walls' (Dyer-Witthford, 1999:80) from Autonomist Marxism, Gill (2010) argues that the neoliberal university can be considered as 'academia without walls'. Autonomist Marxism claims that capital tends to subsume the whole of society into the production process and the logic of the factory is thereby extended to the whole of society (Wright, 2002:37–38). Society functions as a moment of production, where the border between working and spare time becomes more and more blurred both spatially and temporally (Gorz, 2010:22). Just as the larger social factory is a factory without walls, neoliberal universities have intensified work in terms of time and extended it in terms of space with the help of digital technologies. Academics tend to have fluid boundaries between their working space and other spaces of human life and their labour and free time (Ross, 2000:23).



Always-on cultures have transformed the university to a 'fast academia'. 'Ever speeded-up mobile technologies intermesh seamlessly with the psychic habitus and dispositions of the neoliberal academic subject: checking, monitoring, downloading whether from BL (British Library), beach or bed, trying desperately to keep up and "stay on top"' (Gill, 2010:237).

This theoretical assumption can be underpinned with empirical data. The University and College Union has conducted several online surveys of workload and work-related stress among its members in the UK (Court & Kinman, 2009; Kinman & Wray, 2013; University and College Union, 2014; University and College Union, 2016). In 2014 ( $n = 6,439$ ), 79% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they found their job stressful. And 53% indicated that their general or average level of stress was high or very high. Almost half (48%) responded that they experienced unacceptable levels of stress often or always (University and College Union, 2014:1–2). According to the 2016 survey ( $n = 12,113$ ), academic staff worked an average of more than the full-time equivalent of 50 hours per week. Especially among early career academics, a culture of long working hours was prevalent (University and College Union, 2016:18). Factors contributing to stress in higher education included, among others, the lack of time to undertake research, excessive workloads, problems in obtaining funding, lack of promotion opportunities and job insecurity (Court and Kinman, 2009:61). Academics regularly work evenings and weekends to cope with the high demands of their job (Gill, 2010:235) and do not take their full entitlement of annual leave (Crang, 2007:510).

## Management

A 'new managerialism' has been implemented in higher education institutions in recent decades. New managerialism can be understood as the adoption of organisational forms, technologies, managerial control practices and ideologies from private business that are applied to public sector organisations such as universities (Deem et al., 2007:24–28). Under neoliberal and post-Fordist conditions, UK universities are becoming increasingly corporately managed. Academic functions are thereby broken up into controllable processes (Lorenz, 2012:610) leading to a fracturing of professional profiles. The private sector style of management brings into being a hierarchical organisational structure, division and standardisation of work, narrow specialisation and routinisation of tasks to increase accountability and measurement by management. Prichard & Willmott (1997) pointed out that universities were implementing many elements of 'soft managerialism': urging academics to meet performance targets and thereby encouraging self-discipline without the need for 'hard management'. As a result of the pressure to meet performance objectives, individual resources for actively participating in the decision-making process on the institutional and school level are becoming scarce:

*Yet, in effect, increased managerialism implies that the input of staff into decision-making is degraded from collegial participation to, at best, a consultative role in which staff willingly accept and support their heads of department who then managerialize the process through which resources are won and allocated.*  
(Willmott, 1995:996)

Tancred-Sheriff (1985:384) compared the decision-making process at universities with a 'kiddie steering wheel in daddy's car' with heaps of relatively powerless committees and panels, despite formal decision-making powers. More than 20 years ago, Prichard & Willmott (1997) conducted 36 interviews with senior post holders such as vice-chancellors, deans, heads of school and heads of department at four UK universities about their understanding of managerialism. The authors reported that their interviewees 'talked of the implementation of strategic initiatives, of managing staff, of taking responsibility and even of being a small-businessman' (Prichard & Willmott, 1997:313). Miller (1991:111) argued that vice-chancellors tended to act like chief executives.

### **Control mechanism**

Although procedures of surveillance, monitoring and audit cultures are not new control mechanisms within universities (e.g. the Research Assessment Exercise has been in place since the 1980s), nor is the university the only or the most extreme place of surveillance, such procedures have been taking hold significantly at higher education institutions in the UK for some years now (Burrows, 2012:357). Metrics operate at different stages, such as the institutional, national and international level, but all of them must be confronted by the individual academic (Burrows, 2012:359). An elaborate set of monitoring procedures and metrics exists at universities, including grant income, citation scores, workload models, transparent costing data, research 'excellence', student evaluation, employability scores, impact factors and commercial university league tables (De Angelis & Harvie, 2009:11–14). Burrows (2012:359) identifies that British academics are now subject to more than 100 different scales and indices. Academics are measured individually against other colleagues as well as grouped and measured against other groups to assess and rank academic values. Gill (2014:22–24) argues that surveillance culture and audit regimes lead to a new psyche and structures of feeling at universities that include individual pressure, anxiety and threats. The proliferation of league tables triggered a culture of naming and shaming that results in self-surveillance:

*Being hard-working, self-motivating and enterprising subjects is what constitutes academics as so perfectly emblematic of this neoliberal moment, but is also part of a psychic landscape in which not being successful [...] is misrecognised [...] in terms of individual (moral) failure. (Gill, 2010:240)*

### **Mental and physical health**

Several empirical studies have investigated mental and physical health issues at higher education institutions. In a survey of the University and College Union (2014:2), 60% of the respondents showed evidence of some level of psychological distress. According to Watts & Robertson (2011), the burnout level among teaching staff at universities is comparable with 'at risk' groups such as health care professionals. The psychological distress of academics exceeds many other professional groups and is caused by factors such as high level of conflict between work and private life (Kinman & Wray, 2013:6). Academic and academic-related work tends to 'spill over into the home domain both physically (e.g. working at home during evenings and weekends), and psychologically

(e.g. preoccupation with work problems, difficulties in sleeping, and irritability with family and friends)' (Kinman & Wray, 2013:7).

## **Gender**

Among other characteristics such as class, ethnicity, age and disability, gender plays a part in shaping the experiences of academic workers. Altogether, there are 273,895 academics (part- and full-time academic staff and academic atypical staff) in UK higher education. Overall, 37% of full-time academic staff have salaries between £43,325 and £58,172. Higher proportions of male full-time academic staff (25.3%) have salaries of £58,172 or over than female full-time academic staff (13.9%). The proportion of academic females is 45.0%. For full-time academic staff, the proportion of females is 40.0% and for part-time, it is 55.1%. Around 47.2% of the academic atypical staff population are women. In addition, the higher the position in the hierarchy, the fewer women can be found in higher education. For example, 56.2% of students in the UK are female but only 23.1% of the professors are women (all data for the academic year 2014/2015: Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016).

## **Methodology**

This article draws on a small case study in which I conducted ten semi-structured, face-to-face, qualitative interviews with academics. The focus was on people who were employed 'atypically', such as on a fixed-term contract, a casual contract, an hourly paid basis or a zero-hours contract at higher education institutions. The participants were chosen from nine different universities (five pre-1992, four post-1992) across Scotland, using a quota sampling strategy (Lune & Berg, 2017:39). The variables used to establish the quotas included gender, educational level, higher education institution, terms of employment and age. The interviewees were found through university websites, had no personal relationship to the interviewer and were approached directly via email. The interviews took place in offices, university rooms and cafes in 2016. After individual consent was obtained, the interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Participants had the freedom to withdraw at any stage during the interview. All data were stored securely, treated confidentially and anonymously. The interviews lasted between 50 and 100 minutes. A copy of the transcript was sent to the participants for further comments and final approval. The scripts were analysed with the help of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Lune & Berg, 2017) and to find answers to my questions about how academics perceive their existing working conditions to be shaped by political and economic contexts.

The socio-demographic profiles of the respondents are given in Table 1.

Several authors have already conducted empirical work in this context (e.g. Prichard & Willmott, 1997; Deem et al., 2007; Archer, 2008; Norkus, Besio & Baur, 2016). My study aimed to add to this body of knowledge by focusing on academics who are employed precariously at higher education institutions using an in-depth analysis of meanings, identities and experiences of individuals that favours a qualitative, instead of a quantitative approach (Gray, 2004:22).

**Table 1: Socio-demographic profiles of the respondents**

Gender	Six women, four men
Citizenship	Seven British, one German, one Austrian, one Belgian
Educational level	Ten doctoral degrees
Job description	One teaching fellow, eight (postdoctoral) research fellows/ (postdoctoral) researchers/research associates, one lecturer
Subject area	One education, one politics, two social studies/sciences, one psychology, two sociology, one informatics, one economics, one health sciences
Higher education institution	Six pre-1992 universities (two Russell Group universities), four post-1992 universities
Mode of employment	Seven full-time, one part-time, two hourly paid
Terms of employment	Nine fixed-term (one currently on leave), one 80% fixed- term/20% open-ended
Age	Youngest 33 years, oldest 56 years, average 42 years

## Analysis and interpretation

This section presents and discusses some findings regarding job insecurity, workload, management, control mechanisms, mental and physical health and gender. Among other things, these dimensions were discussed in the interviews I conducted. For a structural overview of the interview questionnaire, see Allmer (2018).

### Job insecurity

When asked how much they consider job insecurity in their current post, participants mentioned concerns and worries about their insecure situation and reported feelings of precariousness, lack of prospects, increasing competition and need to make multiple job applications. Most of the participants were concerned about the insecure nature of their jobs and aspired to economic security. 'I really wanted a more secure position,' claimed Participant 2. This view was echoed by Participant 6 who said that 'I would rather have a permanent position and stop wondering where I will be in five years'. A postdoctoral researcher emphasised that her insecure job situation was depressing, making her feel devalued and affecting her self-esteem. Another female researcher told me that she could not concentrate on her work anymore due to the insecure job situation. The precarious nature of the job worried her and was constantly in her head.

Interviewees also reported feelings of precariousness and described inadequate payment and economic insecurity. A teaching fellow, who was the course organiser of a large programme at his school, told me that teaching fellows are paid on grade seven, although many of them have responsibilities and commitments intended for staff on grade eight, including being a course organiser, lecturer or programme director. He continued by saying that teaching fellows do grade eight work, without receiving

appropriate contracts or salaries (these grades refer to academic roles and profiles at British universities). A young academic mentioned that her previous departments wanted her to fulfil tasks without getting paid:

*The other departments I had been working for were still wanting me to do lectures and marking but weren't going to pay me. There came a point where I said 'no'. 'No, I am not doing this anymore'. They interviewed me for a teaching fellow job, didn't give me the job, but still wanted me to do the odd lecture and the marking for it [...] but not even offering me the hourly pay. (Participant 2)*

One hourly paid lecturer had two other jobs in addition to her main one to have some financial security and to be able to work within higher education. She described her plans to write journal articles during the unpaid summer holiday to make her more appealing in the academic job market. Interviewees also claimed that preparation time for teaching was not adequately compensated within their pay. Interviewees described being confronted with a lack of knowledge, confusing information and a lack of prospects in their jobs. A teaching fellow was confused about his prospects within the institute:

*All through January, February, we were told 'it is looking great, they are going to make everybody permanent, there is a real move to get rid of these temporary contracts' and then they told us the complete opposite. (Participant 1)*

A female research fellow said she felt terribly insecure and did not know what would happen after her current grant had finished. An hourly paid lecturer was aware that she would not get any information about contract extension until shortly before the start of the next semester. A contract researcher told me that she felt insecure in terms of not knowing when and where the next contract might come from, not knowing what percentage of a full-time equivalent position she might be able to secure and not knowing when a particular project might start. Interviewees felt driven to be competitive and hard-working at all times by the temporary nature of their work and the related insecurity.

Simultaneously, these respondents were aware of, and worried about, the competitive atmosphere among staff. Interviewees told me that competition and pressure for permanent posts and secure jobs were constantly getting higher, which they found difficult on an individual level.

Participants mentioned their fears and worries of being unemployed and the risk of being made redundant as an academic. A teaching fellow made the case that if student numbers were to drop at his school, fixed-term academics, including him, would be the first to be made redundant. A young researcher described how she had found it really worrying to be unemployed after she had finished her PhD. Many interviewees said that they were constantly screening the job market and applying for new jobs. A fellow at a Russell Group university mentioned that as a fixed-term academic you are constantly looking for something else. 'The longer we are teaching fellows, the less research output we generate so the harder it is to compete with the people who are outside, who are already in lectureship posts' (Participant 1). Others complained that finding a new job was time- and energy-consuming, tiring and humiliating:

*Oh it is just time wasting. It is tiring. It is [...] I don't know if I can say, it is humiliating at the same time [...] And if it is not writing applications for jobs, it is also writing applications for projects and I just want to do something else.*  
(Participant 6)

Participants also described how difficult it was for them to find the time to write job applications and prepare for interviews properly.

## **Workload**

Many participants reported overload in their working environment. A teaching fellow mentioned that he has to write feedback for more than 20 dissertations in addition to a heavy teaching load. He continued by saying that supervising personal tutees was also a major task. Another interviewee told me that working on hourly paid contracts in different departments at the same time was the hardest work she had ever experienced:

*Because I was trying to work in several different departments, because I didn't have a salary, I was paid by the hour, and I was course coordinating and getting one hour paid for preparation time [...] I think that was the hardest I have ever worked.* (Participant 2)

A project researcher was confronted with a high workload in her project and felt particularly pressured because she had to deal with the double load of having a baby and working full-time. An older academic at a post-1992 university told me that people were overloaded and overburdened and tended to be workaholics, but the older she got, the less she was willing to work overtime. A young researcher was aware that he worked 'more than normal' (Participant 6), but considered this to be essential. Another interviewee mentioned that there were highs and lows in terms of workload in her projects, but pointed out that this is hard to control by yourself as a contract researcher. She went on to say that 'you permanently rely on other people'. A lot of the participants complained about work pressure and a high level of stress. As a teaching fellow recounted, a lot of pressure is generated by the fast turnaround time of assignments. He added that it was considered normal to work overtime at the school where he was employed.

Another interviewee recalled a time where she saw some of the students more often than her family and could hardly find time to eat and sleep properly. A contract researcher described how very stressful and pressurised research projects can be, especially at the final stage. Another project researcher contended that principal investigators tend to promise a lot in the proposal which can then lead to a high-pressure working environment for the entire research team. She went on to explain how having different commitments to several projects simultaneously can lead to a very high level of stress. A teaching fellow said that he tried to avoid working at weekends, but this just resulted in long evenings of work during the week; he still had to top things up by working at home from time to time. As another interviewee put it, 'There is no time for weekends' (Participant 2). A young mother recounted how she frequently worked in the evenings, after she had come home from an 8-hour working day.

Several participants shared offices and tended to work in different places, including the office, cafes and from home. While some enjoyed the flexibility, others were

concerned about a blurring between work life and private life. Participants reported difficulties in taking their full entitlement of annual leave because of their heavy workloads. One interviewee had never managed to take all his annual leave and found it hard to get time off at the same time as his partner. Another participant confessed that she did not take any annual leave at all because she felt 'something would suffer' (Participant 2). A contract researcher said that it is difficult to take annual leave if you work on three different projects. There is always at least one that needs you in that particular week:

*It is not easy when you have multiple contracts to try and take annual leave for example [...] If you have multiple contracts, there is always going to be one that really needs you to be doing something this week, or next week. (Participant 9)*

## Management

Respondents were asked for their views about the management at their department. Several mentioned harmful experiences with an authoritarian management style, lack of support from more senior staff and giving up being loyal and ambitious. A female postdoctoral researcher spoke about negative experiences with an authoritarian management style in her previous job. She went on to say that the management brought a lot of bad feeling and negativity and made people leave. A young researcher said she did not feel supported by more senior staff in terms of career progress. Others backed this up by saying that there was a lack of support in their departments, especially when it came to conducting research and career development. Managerialism, hierarchical organisation structures, narrow specialisation and routine tasks led to frustration and anger for these participants. A teaching fellow told me that he did not see the need to be loyal and ambitious anymore, since his contract had not been made permanent:

*They weren't going to renew my contract, I am not really sure anymore how bothered I am about showing that I am super loyal hard working, ever ambitious. (Participant 1)*

Similarly, a single mother spoke of her experience of putting a lot of effort into a project without getting any rewards, which resulted in her giving up loyalty entirely.

## Control mechanisms

Participants were asked about their experiences in relation to mechanisms to control their performance as an academic. They discussed annual review processes, the Research Excellence Framework (REF)<sup>1</sup> and talked about 'playing the game'. A young academic told me that many people in his department saw the annual performance and development review as a purely managerial activity, an irrelevant exercise that did not mirror their actual work or concerns. Most of the participants had not been submitted to the REF but were familiar with the procedure. A postdoctoral researcher thought

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1 The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is an evaluation process that assesses the research of higher education institutions in the UK. With some variations, it takes place every sixth year and is used to decide on the amount of public research funding for individual universities.

that the REF was an unfair and inaccurate mechanism, especially for those who have teaching commitments. A research associate claimed that the REF is biased as it advantages well-known people:

*If you have already a name, or a reputation, your papers will be more likely to get to the three-four-star journals and therefore you are more likely to attract funding.*  
(Participant 7)

He also thought that the REF made it unattractive to conduct historical-longitudinal studies and helped to create a tick-box culture. 'Everyone is playing the game here', a young research associate at a Russell Group university told me. He criticised these developments but admitted to also being a part of it. When an older teaching fellow spoke about his experience of talking to young academics, he mentioned that people are aware of the contradictions within higher education, but do not have much hope of political change at the moment which leads to a 'playing the game' culture:

*People know there are these things going on but at the same time they don't see there is much hope of things changing, so they try to play the game somehow.*  
(Participant 1)

## **Mental and physical health**

Asked how far the working conditions affected their mental and physical health, interviewees mentioned psychological and emotional distress, narrowed social life, strained work relationships and misrecognition. A research fellow told me that she was constantly tired and snappy and there were times where she could neither sleep nor eat properly because of stress and overwork. She continued by saying that teaching was permanently in her head before going to sleep and she could not get rid of it. Another interviewee also reported that work is always there in the back of her head. Another described how she had experienced stress and exhaustion in the past that had also affected her health conditions. A young research associate at a Russell Group university complained that 'the fact that I am in an insecure position has had an impact on my relationship as well, because I am bitter and I am not the nicest person to live with at the moment' (Participant 6). Another participant claimed to feel better at the office while being worried and stressed when not at work:

*When I am away [...] I am more stressed [...] I think about the job more, like, and I am worried that I am away, it worries me [...] when I go to the office [...] I feel better, then when I do not [...] even if I have taken annual leave.* (Participant 10)

Another interviewee, speaking about the final stage of his PhD which he had to write while simultaneously starting to teach at university said 'I did not have a social life, there was no social life' (Participant 10). An hourly paid lecturer described how social life was narrowed down and the suffering that was caused by stress and overload. A young academic from Belgium told me that because of insecurity, temporality and mobility, he did not even register with the National Health Service (NHS). Another participant maintained that she had managed to achieve a relatively good work-life



balance, but that this might have been the reason that she had not achieved a permanent contract:

*I normally do not work at weekends, I am not a workaholic. I tend to have a good balance between family and job, but that is probably also the reason why I am still on a temporary contract and do not have a permanent role (laughs). (Participant 5)*

An older teaching fellow at a Russell Group university described a situation in his department where there were tensions between staff, where people were divided into different camps and fundamental issues remained unresolved. A contract researcher noted that lecturers, especially those who were newly appointed, tended to treat more junior researchers on their projects in a patronising way, which could lead to tensions and make things difficult. Being precariously employed, obeying hierarchical organisation structures and constantly fulfilling narrow tasks also had an impact on perceptions of identity and recognition of academics. A female research fellow said that it could make you feel narrowed down if you were required to work to a managed timetable and given little autonomy in your work. She continued by saying that it was difficult for a research fellow to be taken seriously. Another interviewee argued that tutorial staff were not only being paid poorly, but were not getting the recognition they deserved either.

## Gender

Asked about gender issues, female researchers informed me that academia brought both flexibility and insecurity, particularly for women. Participants recognised gender bias in the job market and argued that it was still harder for women to succeed in higher education. This perception is reinforced by the statistics, which show that the higher up in the hierarchy you look in higher education, the fewer women that can be found with, for example, women making up only 23.1% of professors in the UK in the academic year 2014/2015 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2016). Because women are more likely to be employed precariously within higher education, I conducted the majority of my interviews with female academics, to better reflect the overall picture. The majority of the female interviewees also had child care commitments, which is likely to be related to the young age of the participants, which is further connected to their precarious employment. In the following section, I will present some quotes from those interviews, without suggesting that gender inequality within higher education only affects mothers of young children.

A female research fellow with a 6-month-old baby told me that people are constantly worried that you might take maternity leave. She also heard colleagues talking about the concern that an interviewee might be pregnant:

*The last interviews that happened here in the department, they were employing three new lecturers, I know that they were concerned with one of them. She came for an interview, that she might be pregnant [...] I have heard people talking about that concern. (Participant 4)*

Another female academic made a similar point, saying that as a female contract researcher it is very difficult to get a job at a certain age, because principal investigators

fear that you might become pregnant during the project. A young female researcher asserted that she could not compete, because she had to look after her son as a single parent and thus felt disadvantaged in academia:

*I am a single mum [...] I don't feel like I can be as competitive as other people [...] I do feel at a disadvantage. [...] It feels like you are really restricted in what you can do [...] As well it is that insecurity, it is just like a vicious circle because you are having to keep on these short insecure contracts, because you can't compete on a level to get something permanent. It is [...] it perpetuates. (Participant 8)*

A female lecturer opined that men tend to be better in terms of selling and self-presentation in the academic environment. A young researcher mentioned that she did not feel comfortable raising her voice in a male-dominated research group and thus felt silenced.

## Summary

This article has engaged with some theoretical foundations of academic labour and working conditions at universities. It also presented and discussed the findings of the qualitative research in relation to job insecurity, workload, management, control mechanisms, mental and physical health and gender. The key findings can be summarised as follows.

### Job insecurity

The research confirms the findings of other scholars that there is a tendency of casualisation and temporality of employment in higher education. Temporary contracts tend to have an impact on employees on many levels. Participants in this study mention concerns and worries about their insecure situation and report about precariousness, missing prospects, inadequate payment, increasing competition and job applications.

### Workload

These results also confirm earlier research that academics tend to have fluid boundaries between their working space and other spaces of human life and their labour and free time and that always-on cultures have transformed the university to a fast academia. In my study, most respondents reported overload and overburden in their working environment. Some interviewees were also concerned about a blurring between work and private life.

### Management

According to the literature, universities are becoming increasingly corporately managed, which is described as 'new managerialism', as a response to the post-Fordist conditions. Academic activities are thereby broken up into controllable processes. This study provides further evidence of this: participants mentioned harmful experiences with an authoritarian management style, lack of support from more senior staff and giving up on being loyal and ambitious. Managerialism, hierarchical organisation structures, narrow specialisation and routine tasks led to frustration and anger for many academics being interviewed.

## Control mechanisms

This research also provides further illumination on the way that the metrics operating at the institutional, national and international levels impact on individual academic workers, with respondents describing their negative experiences of annual review processes and the REF and talking about 'playing the game'.

## Mental and physical health

The psychological distress of academics exceeds many other professional groups and is caused by factors such as a high level of conflict between work and private life. This is evidenced in this study in interviewees' descriptions of psychological and emotional distress, narrowed social life, strained work relationships and misrecognition.

## Gender

Finally, this study confirms earlier findings relating to gender bias in higher education, with female respondents describing the additional challenges they face in the job market and the trade-offs that have to be made to combine work with parenting. While some have chosen academic work because it appears to offer greater flexibility than other forms of work, they have paid a high price for this in insecurity.

## Conclusion

Universities play a central role in informational capitalism. However, higher education institutions have undergone economic, political and cultural transformations leading to competition, market orientation and new management forms. These changes have effects on many levels, including working conditions and practices of individuals involved in the information gaining process. This article has aimed to find out how the existing working conditions and practices at universities form the meanings, identities and experiences of individuals by focusing on precariously employed academics. The theoretical foundations and empirical findings suggest that precariously employed academics feel insecure and overworked and experience new forms of managerialism and control mechanisms that impact their mental and physical health. However, when it comes to politics, struggles and alternatives, further questions have to be raised in future research, both theoretically and empirically: What are the broader political realities and potentials in terms of solidarity, participation and democracy at universities? What are the challenges to reclaim the university as a site of struggle? How far can the struggle at universities be connected to broader societal struggles? What do the political potentials of alternatives within and beyond higher education look like? Although those questions were outside the scope of this article, they would help to find strategies to overcome the challenges academics are facing today as analysed here.

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