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Networks and social capital in the UK television industry: The weakness of weak ties

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ABSTRACT

Accounts of the shift to post-industrial modes of employment have tended to present an over-simplified view of networks as an assemblage of contacts used to gain individual advantage in the labour market. Creative industries represent a challenge to this as typically they rely on networks to foster collaboration, trust and co-operation. In this article we explore how a variety of networks are used to promote both individual competition and co-operation in an industry where re-regulation has resulted in the break up of bureaucratic organizations and widespread casualization of the labour market. We argue that there is a need to extend the debate on the role of networks in a casualized labour market to examine how individuals organize themselves via the plethora of networks that result from organizational break up. We use qualitative data from a series of interviews with freelance television production workers in the United Kingdom to suggest that workers use networks as a source of competitive advantage and, at the same time, support and co-operation. Overall our research suggests that network activity is more complex, and networks themselves more dynamic, than existing research and theory implies.

KEYWORDS

employment ▪ labour markets ▪ networks ▪ social capital ▪ television

Introduction

Academic research concerning the emergence of post-Fordist employment relationships has focused on the diversity of contractual arrangements and the so-called 'flexibilization' of employment (Marchington et al., 2005). Related to this is the notion that work is becoming increasingly insecure, individualized and competitive, forcing workers to rely on networks of contacts to gain personal advantage in the labour market. Alongside research on flexible employment a substantial body of literature has considered the changing nature of organizations (Piore & Sabel, 1984; Miles & Snow, 1986; Powell, 1990). Like employment, organizations are argued to have become fragmented, less bureaucratic and hierarchical, and increasingly reliant on the outsourcing of work based on networked relationships involving trust and reciprocity. Thus work is frequently organized around projects that span organizational boundaries and rely on the co-operation and collaboration of a diverse group of workers with differing contractual agreements and different employers. In treating employment and organizational change as separate entities, opposing pictures are drawn of networks as mechanisms for individualized competition among workers on the one hand, and co-operation and collaboration on the other. This leads to the value of network ties being expressed in terms of either individual advantage or mutual dependency according to whether one is concerned with the 'flexible employment' or 'networked organizations' debate.

Assessing the value of network ties is no easy task. In recent years their value has been conceptualized as 'social capital', which broadly defined, refers to the resources made available to an individual or group as a result of belonging to a network (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In relation to individualized employment relationships, commentators have tended to take the view that building social capital through networked ties is a strategy deliberately undertaken by individuals whose motives are grounded in economic rationality (Burt, 1992; Fevre, 1992; Dex & Smith, 2000). From this perspective the value of network ties lies in their ability to provide access to information about employment opportunities. While this approach makes intuitive sense, it fails to take account of the social and organizational settings in which these networks are embedded and so overlooks the work of commentators such as Coleman and Putnam who stress the role of social capital in fostering co-operation, reciprocity and mutuality (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Putnam, 2000).

The UK television industry provides a fruitful arena in which to investigate the complex and diverse functions fulfilled by networks in a fragmented world of work. Following the publication of the Peacock Report in

1985, successive waves of legislation resulted in the casualization of employment and a major shift towards the use of 'freelance', project-based labour. Increased competition and the compulsory contracting out of 25 per cent of programme production provided the impetus for a new 'independent' production sector which was almost completely reliant on freelance workers (Saundry & Nolan, 1998).

Within the expanding freelance labour market, 'social mechanisms' such as networks assumed an increasing importance in the allocation of work (Baumann, 2002: 31; Paterson, 1999). The use of informal recruitment methods grew and the importance of personal contacts in securing work and advancing individual careers was heightened (Dex et al., 2000; Paterson, 2001; Antcliff, 2005). Strict financial and temporal constraints placed producers under constant pressure. Thus long-term relationships frequently developed between producers and networks of freelancers, based on collaboration, and repeated contracting among trusted individuals or firms (Starkey et al., 2000; Cook et al., 2001). In a sense these networks served to foster co-operation and create a sense of community within a fragmented industry (Nachum & Keeble, 1999; Scott, 2004).

As Rubery et al. (2002) point out, despite a growing body of literature, links between the growth of networks, changing organizational structures and the employment relationship remain under-theorized. This is evident in the fragmented and partial approach of extant research on the role of networks. This article seeks to redress this partiality by extending the analysis of networks beyond a simplistic notion of individual economic rationality. We set out to examine how freelance workers use the variety of networks that have resulted from organizational restructuring to organize both individual careers and collective interests. Our principal concern, therefore, is how individuals navigate these networks rather than the specific structural nature of networks themselves.

The article is organized as follows. First, we examine the contribution of social capital theory to our understanding of networks. This is used to develop a conceptual framework that reflects the dichotomy within existing literature between open and closed networks and which identifies three key attributes of networks: structure; function; and consequences. After the research design is explained, we use this framework to organize qualitative data from a series of interviews with freelance television workers. Having identified different types of network we examine how workers use them and finally explore the implications of networks for workers and for employment relationships more generally. Overall our findings suggest that individuals use networks to fulfil multiple and diverse functions. Furthermore, they play a key role in balancing the complex and sometimes contradictory mix of

individualized competition, collaboration and co-operation that characterizes freelance employment.

Social capital and networks

In essence, theories of social capital focus on the value of network ties. This makes it an ideal tool for conceptualizing the inter-relatedness and complexities of contemporary society (Baron et al., 2000). Of course the study of social networks is not new and social network analysis is a long-established area of research with recognized methodologies and techniques for evaluating network ties. Such methodologies typically take the network as a unit of analysis and seek to identify characteristics of the network as a whole, or of individual members, by mapping the structure of relationships. While we do not intend to use these methodologies here, as our concern is how individuals navigate multiple networks, social network analysis and theories of social capital do share number of central concepts that inform our analysis. Specifically a concern of both social network analysis and the social capital debate is the relationship between the structure, or degree of 'closure' of a network and its function.

Early social network analysis identified structure, or the degree of 'connectedness' among members of a network as an important variable in determining the behaviour of individual members (Bott, 1955). In applying this concept to labour markets, Granovetter (1973) argued that a large, open network of 'weak ties', between the individual and others who do not know each other (especially ties that form 'bridges' between an individual and other networks) is 'indispensable to individual's opportunities and to their integration into communities' (p. 1378). This suggested for the first time that informal connections could be more useful in gaining employment and advancing one's career than a tight-knit family circle (Portes, 1998). Moreover, Burt (1992, 1997) has argued that individuals can gain competitive advantage by brokering (and therefore controlling) information that flows across 'structural holes' within, or between, large open networks. From this perspective social capital is viewed as an individual asset and actors as utility maximizing individuals, while networks themselves are reduced to mechanisms for individual profit maximization. Indeed, Fine and Green (2000) argue that the rise of the utility maximizing individual as an explanation for contemporary behaviour across disciplines has given economists the opportunity to 'colonize' the social sciences, importing methodological individualism and reductionism that restricts concepts of social capital to economic rationality on the part of individuals.

An alternative perspective highlighting the benefits of closed networks is offered by Coleman (1988) who identifies three forms of social capital: obligations, expectations and trustworthiness; information channels; and norms and effective sanctions. The first form of social capital refers to the expectation of mutuality and reciprocity among members of a network. The second incorporates the notion that members can trust information supplied by others, and the third suggests that sufficient ties between members can guarantee the observance of norms (Portes, 1998). Each of these forms of social capital assumes that relationships are underpinned by trust and dense or closed networks that facilitate the collective resolution of problems because individual risk is offset by the certainty of community support and reciprocity.

Putnam (2000) also claims that social capital is an important *collective* property that produces trust between strangers and hence tolerance and a culture of community and civic mindedness. As such it is both inherent within, and generated by, social institutions such as clubs, societies and associations. Putnam draws a distinction between 'bridging capital' that is links with people 'unlike me' and 'bonding capital' or links with people who are 'like me'. Key to Putnam's analysis is the different type of benefits accruing to each form of social capital. Bonding capital based on homogenous populations sharing, for example, common ethnic, religious or class ties can provide support and encourage niche economies. However, over time the factors that encourage the generation of bonding capital, such as trust and solidarity may restrict the entrepreneurial activities of individuals who must then seek associations within wider society. In other words they must open up their networks if they are to accumulate 'bridging capital' (Leonard, 2004). This is necessary because while bonding capital is good for 'getting by' bridging capital is necessary for 'getting ahead' (Putnam, 2000: 23).

Putnam's work draws attention to two aspects of networks that have received little attention in studies of post-Fordist employment and which constitute the principal conceptual concerns of our article. First, his work suggests that in order to optimize their accumulation of social capital, individuals need to belong to both *open* and *closed* networks. Podolny and Baron (1997) also stress the multiple goals sought by individuals. While open networks prove to be useful in maximizing access to information, closed networks provide workers with a clear sense of organizational identity, which can be equally useful in advancing their careers. Furthermore, the same network may fulfil a variety of functions. The multiplicity of goals and complex nature of network relationships they identify may help to illuminate the mechanisms through which freelance workers seek to balance individual competition with the need for co-operation and collaboration.

Second, Putnam's assertion that dense networks may place restrictions on individual behaviour points to the negative consequences or 'dark side' of network relationships (Borgatti & Foster, 2003) whereby the same mechanisms that allow individuals and communities to accumulate social capital can have other, less desirable consequences (Portes, 1998). The dense ties that allow for co-operation and collaboration within a network, for example, can result in what Gargiulo and Bennassi (2000) refer to as 'amplified reciprocity'. Amplified reciprocity results when pressure to reciprocate past favours is intensified because an individual is obliged to reciprocate *all* past favours within a dense network or risk gaining a tarnished reputation that may restrict their ability to make new contacts, or to renew past contacts in the future. Hence the strong ties that lead to mutuality and trust *within* a network can result in inertia and inhibit exchange *between* networks (Fukuyama, 1997). Closed networks may offer freelance workers the prospect of mutual support, trust and reciprocity, but this has to be balanced against the risk of excessive obligations that restrict new opportunities and the potential of dense groups to implement sanctions and tarnish individual reputations outside of the network.

Conceptual framework and research issues

From the above discussion it is clear that networks can have a variety of structures, functions and consequences that may be either beneficial or detrimental to the individual or to the network as a whole. Indeed it seems that any discussion of networks and social capital can be cut many ways. On the plus side networks can provide individuals with access to scarce resources, encourage reciprocity and trust and moderate deviant behaviour. On the other hand they may be exclusive and restrict individual freedom. Table 1 draws together key elements of the social capital debate outlined above to establish a framework for conceptualizing networks in the UK television industry. It is organized around three main strands that emerge from the literature. The first column refers to the structure of the network. The dichotomy of 'open' and 'closed' networks is a recurrent theme within the literature referred to inter alia as: 'embedded and weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973); networks 'with and without closure' (Coleman, 1988); and 'embedded and autonomous' networks (Woolcock, 1998).

The second column conceptualizes the association between structure and function or purpose. Studies suggest that the function of open networks most closely resembles the self-seeking individualism implicit in accounts of post-industrial employment. Building individual ties in an open network is

Table 1 Framework for conceptualizing networks

Structure	*Function*	*Consequences*
Open		
• Members do not all know each other • Inclusive – heterogeneous membership	• Getting ahead • Raising individual profile • Improving employment opportunities • Enhancing individual reputation	• Competition • Individualism • Flow of information
Closed		
• Members know each other • Exclusive – homogeneous membership	• Support • Maintaining collective norms • Reciprocity	• Sense of belonging • Trust • Exclusion • Obligations • Sanctions

useful for 'getting ahead' (Putnam, 2000), maximizing the effectiveness of information (Burt, 1997) and increasing mobility opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). Closed networks, on the other hand, are associated with collective functions such as mutuality, trust and regulating deviant behaviour. Belonging to a closed network can provide the individual with support necessary for 'getting by' (Putnam, 2000) and ensure that obligations are honoured (Coleman, 1988).

The third column sets out the potential consequences of networks, both positive and negative. This aspect of networks has received less attention in the literature than their functions and structure; indeed it is often glossed over and portrayed as exclusively positive. Yet networks may represent a means of stratification, exclusion and sanction as well as a mechanism promoting individual competition.

Conceptualizing networks in this way allows us to address the potentially complex and contradictory roles played by networks and so contribute to understanding how freelance workers negotiate a fragmented and insecure world of work.

Our data come from a qualitative study of freelance television production workers. Personal contacts were the main source of employment for respondents and building a large, open network of contacts was regarded as vital to survive and succeed. Yet many of these relationships had a social element that to some extent replaced the collegiality of the traditional workplace. Freelancers were required to sell themselves as commodities in a

competitive marketplace. In the context of short-term projects and repeated contracting this often involved trust between parties and led to long-term relationships. The downside of self-commodification and word-of-mouth recruitment was summed up frequently with the phrase 'you're only as good as your last job'. Respondents believed overwhelmingly that news travelled fast across industry networks. Only those with long-established reputations felt able to take a stand against low production values or poor conditions of employment without substantially damaging their careers. We are interested to explore how freelancers use networks to navigate and reconcile these conflicting pressures. Three principal questions seem pertinent. What type of networks do freelance television workers use? Do they use open and closed networks to fulfil different needs, or as Podolny and Baron suggest can the same network fulfil a number of functions? What, if any, are the consequences of networks in the context of fragmented employment?

Employment restructuring, employee networks and freelance work

Television production in the UK provides a unique test-bed to explore the role of networks in the context of organizational break up and casualized employment relationships. Traditionally television broadcasting in the UK was organized as a 'cosy duopoly' comprising the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), funded from a licence fee from the public, and Independent Television (ITV) which was made up of regional companies each with a monopoly over advertising revenue. The industry was vertically integrated and provided long-term stable employment with structured internal labour markets.

A succession of regulatory and technological changes throughout the 1980s and 1990s triggered a process of vertical disintegration (Saundry, 1995). In particular, the BBC and ITV companies were required to commission at least 25 per cent of their programming from independent producers while Channel Four was established with a specific remit to source programming from the independent production sector.

Re-regulation of the industry had far-reaching repercussions for employment (Barnatt & Starkey, 1994; Saundry, 1995; Dex et al., 2000; Starkey et al., 2000; Paterson, 2001). Both the BBC and ITV companies were forced to make significant redundancies as cost reductions were sought and production and post-production were switched to independent companies who maintained low levels of permanent staffing. Between 1979 and 1990 it is estimated that the BBC and ITV companies shed some 12,000 permanent

jobs (Goodwin, 1998). Many of those they made redundant were re-employed on short-term, project-based contracts, while others sought work in the independent sector. By 2003 it is estimated that around a third of the workforce was working on a freelance basis. However, the percentage was considerably higher in some occupational groups, notably sound (44 per cent freelance), cameras (56 per cent), producing (49 per cent) and runners, which is an entry-level occupation (64 per cent) (Skillset, 2004).

Re-regulation thus created intense individual competition for work. However, the collaborative nature of television production and pressure to adhere to deadlines underlined the need for trust and co-operation. Consequently, television production is frequently configured through what Starkey et al. (2000) describe as 'latent organizations', or networks of individuals who repeatedly disband and reform as members obtain work. Thus while a casualized employment relationship in television production may militate in favour of individualized competition, organizational restructuring and the nature of creative work are likely to encourage co-operation and reciprocity. It is possible therefore that the need to build networks as part of an individual enterprising strategy (Storey et al., 2005) may be balanced by a desire to use networks to create a sense of community based on trust and reciprocity.

Research design

Data for the project come from a series of interviews with a sample of 37 freelancers and seven key informants. Key informants included trade union officials, representatives from interest groups such as Women in Film and Television and co-ordinators of Internet-based networks. None of the sample were employers themselves nor owned their own production company. The sample was located through professional associations and published directories of freelancers using 'purposive' sampling principles (De Vaus, 2002).

Data detailing the size and compostition of the workforce in television production are not routinely collected, however Skillset, the Sector Skills Council training body for the audio-visual industries, produces annual estimates. In 2004 it was estimated that 60 per cent of the workforce was male, 8 per cent were over the age of 50 and 41 per cent had previously worked as permanent employees (Skillset, 2004). While we make no claim that our sample accurately represents the freelance workforce, it broadly reflects the demographic characteristics outlined by Skillset. Some 64 per cent of our sample of freelancers was male, just over a third had previously worked as permanent employees and around 5 per cent were over the age of 50.

Individuals were approached from occupational groups known to include a high proportion of freelancers. Attempts were made to recruit individuals from all age groups by targeting lower-level occupations such as runner and researcher as well as producers, directors and technical occupations. Respondents were invited to suggest colleagues who may be willing to take part in the project. This resulted in a degree of geographical concentration, particularly in the north and south-west of England where several members of established networks were recruited. Respondents continued to be added to the sample until it was felt that we had reached 'theoretical saturation' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and no additional interviews were necessary to understand the nature of networks.

Initial semi-structured interviews were carried out between June and December 2004. Further interviews were then carried out to explore key themes. In total 51 interviews were conducted. Initially it was hoped to carry out face-to-face interviews, but the unpredictable nature of freelance work made these difficult to arrange in advance and five of the respondents preferred to be interviewed by telephone as this could be rescheduled at short notice. Interviews were seen as the most useful tool to gather data on the complex relationships that are a regular feature of freelance employment. Interviews place an emphasis on the interviewees' own perspective and allow sufficient flexibility for adjustments to the schedule should new issues emerge in the course of the interview (Bryman, 2001). This was important as the focus was on understanding individual experiences, perceptions and interpretations of the way in which networks operate. Interviews were transcribed and explored using NVivo software.

The findings are presented below. First, we examine the structures of the different 'open networks' that were identified during our research. The functions and consequences of these networks are then discussed. We then repeat this process in respect of 'closed networks'.

Findings: Open networks

The type of network mentioned most frequently by respondents was typically referred to as an 'address book': a list of personal contacts who may be useful in obtaining work. This represents an open network in the sense that the membership is heterogeneous and members do not necessarily know each other. Among our sample the motive for building an 'address book' was largely grounded in economic rationality. Workers sought to accumulate 'weak ties' that would attenuate their insecurity by providing access to information about future projects and raise their profile among those in a position

to allocate work. This type of network was vital for freelancers competing for short-term, project-based work. The experience below is typical of our sample:

> The best kind of introduction I find is a personal recommendation, a link between somebody I know, somebody new and somebody they know and the link for me is usually a cameraman . . . the first thing they [the employer] pick is the cameraman. Then they think to themselves, well, we need a sound recordist. Why don't we get one that the cameraman knows and likes . . . so if I can stay well connected with a range of cameramen then they tend to introduce me to a range of clients and sometimes those clients will use me again even though the cameraman's not available.
>
> (Male Television Sound Recordist)

In one sense then the 'address book' exemplifies the type of open network identified by Granovetter (1973), Burt (1997) and Putnam (2000), where a heterogeneous membership seeks to accumulate social capital in the form of 'weak ties' that will benefit them individually. While the motivation for freelancers to build an individual address book is clear, less obvious is why many of our sample were prepared to share that information with others. Respondents reported instances where previously unknown employers had contacted them with offers of work because a colleague had recommended them. Indeed, despite being in competition for work, the majority of respondents described how, when unavailable themselves, they would pass on work to other members of their 'address book'.

> . . . last week somebody rang me from Newcastle saying they had been given my name by somebody at Yorkshire, could I start in a fortnight, actually I couldn't but . . . I rang another friend of mine and said there's a job going there, because you never quite know when people are out of work, but if somebody comes to me and says can I do this job and I can't I have about six names that I give them of people I know are good at it, equally they pass me on to people, that guy who gave the name to Newcastle was somebody I work with at Yorkshire.
>
> (Female Picture Editor)

The motivation for recommending competitors appears to be an expectation of a reciprocal introduction at some point, a function more usually associated with network closure. For freelancers this strategy is inherently risky because there is a possibility that the person they introduce

will gain favour with the employer and be used in preference to them on future projects. Yet the expectation of reciprocity was widely reported among our sample and seems to question the picture of a freelance labour market populated with profit-seeking individuals using network ties solely to their own advantage.

One consequence of closed networks is the use of sanctions. However, we found that this also pervaded open 'address-book' networks. Those respondents raising grievances or challenging the authority of their employers risked being labelled as a trouble-maker and consequently erased from the address books of potential employers. The ease with which information flows around open networks ensured that bad news travelled fast, increasing the power of any sanction. Consequently, the threat of such sanctions was a powerful force controlling the behaviour of freelance workers and ensuring adherence to group norms.

Alongside the growth of freelance employment in the television industry, advances in Internet technology and increased access to home computers have given rise to a second form of open network. Respondents pointed to numerous web-based networks providing freelancers with a wealth of information and in many cases offering job-matching services. A number of specialist sites organized along the lines of a virtual community have developed through online discussion groups and forums. One of the founders of VirtualTV explained the rationale of the network:

> It started with a forum so that people could ask advice off other freelancers about whatever topic it might be. And we have a mailing list so that we can keep people up-to-date of any new issues that might affect freelancers. So it was purely, for me, that feeling of being on your own really, and not having enough ammunition to get a fair deal . . . it was set up really, to tackle that feeling of isolation.

Another network (TVWeb), formed in order to raise the issue of the exploitation of freelance workers in television, developed as a result of a discussion on the 'watercooler' forum of a further web-based organization TVJobs, which specializes in providing an employment matching service for freelance television workers.

> A whole group of us got together over a huge argument . . . we all arrived at the conclusion that what was happening was that the various broadcasters found that they could cut production budgets without incurring too much of a loss of quality because people would work for

> less . . . for the freelance market as it was then, it was impossible to find out what the going rate was . . . I felt very strongly that we needed a site where we could peruse employment law and also a place where you could post your rate.
>
> (Co-founder TVWeb)

The premise for these open, heterogeneous networks appears to be sharing rather than individual competition. Freelancers shared not only information about rates of pay but also details of working hours and of bad employers and poor employment practice. Indeed, a senior manager at TVJobs claimed that he wanted to move beyond providing a job-matching service and hoped that members would:

> . . . start using the weight of numbers of people who are on TVJobs so it can become a proper self-knowing community . . . basically it's a social service, it's a source of information and back up.
>
> (Senior Manager, TVJobs)

Virtual Internet-based networks appear to fulfil several of the functions typically associated with open networks. First, many offer an employment matching service for freelance workers and employers. In this respect these networks are consistent with the functions of open networks proposed by Granovetter and Putnam. Members use them to enhance their employment prospects and to get ahead in the industry. A second function of these groups is less consistent with conventional distinctions between open and closed networks. Sharing information about employers and pay rates suggests a degree of mutuality and reciprocity. A number of respondents commented that although they were in competition with other freelance workers exchanging information about pay was important to maintain conditions across the industry. Respondents frequently referred to this as 'real' information about rates of pay as opposed to the minimum rates available on trade union web sites. In this respect sharing details of the rate one charges may be seen as economically rational. Yet, these networks were also seen by many respondents as creating a sense of community and source of support among a fragmented workforce. Respondents made use of them to seek advice on technical issues, legal matters relating to freelance employment, pay rates and the past behaviour of potential employers. There was thus a feeling that they provided some sense of the support and camaraderie of the traditional workplace. This was summed up by a young researcher talking about the most widely used Internet forum 'TVJobs':

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

Yet despite this sense of community an important attraction of Internet-based networks for many was their anonymity:

> VirtualTV I do log onto occasionally because, quite often because people can be anonymous they can say what they are really thinking, whereas if names are attached to it then, I don't think it is paranoia myself, I think people do make a note of these things.
>
> (Male Television Sound Engineer)

This would suggest that virtual networks, and their ability to provide anonymity, are in some respects a response to the 'dark side' of network activity. Using an electronic alias mitigated the threat of sanctions, allowing respondents to discuss poor employment practices, despite their reluctance to raise the issue with their employer directly. Consequently, virtual networks provided a safe place in which individual grievances could be aired, shared interests developed and collective concerns articulated.

Overall, therefore, open networks do not simply foster competition and individual aspiration. Even 'address book' networks are interlaced with reciprocity that has the potential to generate trust and dense ties between individuals. Moreover, their potential to facilitate sanctions has triggered the development of virtual networks which, while open in structure, provide support and a sense of belonging among a disparate workforce. This suggests that networks may not only serve multiple functions (Podolny & Baron, 1997) but also allow individual workers to interact in a manner that reflects the mixture of co-operation and competition inherent in a project-based industry.

Closed networks

In addition to the open heterogeneous networks described above many respondents participated in occupational networks. These closed networks included a number of professional associations such as the Institute of Broadcast Sound and the Association of Vision Mixers. Although membership served to enhance reputation, it was the sense of identity rooted in professional knowledge and specialist expertise that respondents cited most

frequently as their motivation for participating in occupation-based networks. A sound engineer explaining why he belonged to the Institute of Broadcast Sound summed this up succinctly:

> I don't look to get any work through it. What I look to get is a sense of feeling I'm part of a community of a technical and all sorts of natures actually . . . there's a whole lot of information out there that people know and they will share it with you and I find that's a very good place to find stuff out . . . but it's mainly a community of sound people.

As well as providing a focus for social activities and the exchange of labour market information, respondents in our sample referred to the role of occupation-based networks in promoting collective learning and maintaining professional standards in the face of reduced training budgets across the industry. Members were often themselves involved in training and several older respondents expressed a desire to pass on the professional practices and skills of their occupation to a new generation. Respondents argued that this was important because cost-cutting had reduced training budgets in the sector and led to a lowering of the standards expected by broadcasters.

Thus occupational networks played an important role in maintaining the norms and practices of the profession. This was achieved in many cases by restricting membership to workers with a proven track record in the industry. As such membership conferred a badge of expertise. A member of the International Association of Wildlife Filmmakers (IAWF) explained this as follows:

> We tried to establish some norms regarding things like the quality and amount of equipment that would be supplied, ethics, etc. These were generally respected – people entering the profession generally joined the IAWF as associate members as this gave them contacts and access to expertise – and in most cases they did get assistance from existing wildlife film makers and as a result they respected the informal norms and rules. The norms tended to be respected because those on the Committees were those who enjoyed the most respect within the industry.

The hierarchy and exclusivity implicit within such closed networks underpinned a sense of professional identity and community which in turn generated shared interests and collective support. Importantly, it also provided a degree of control over the competitive nature of the freelance labour market, by influencing labour supply and preventing new entrants undercutting established freelancers.

We also found smaller, less formal, networks made up of workers who shared a common employer, occupation and geographic location. For example freelance journalists working for BBC Radio in Manchester had formed the Northern Freelance Network. Although the network was founded in response to a dispute with the BBC over the relocation of programming to London, members again expressed the rationale of the network in terms of community and mutual support:

> It's really important to have that fellowship if you like of other people who are in the same situation as you. And if you do feel you've been treated badly you know there's always somebody you can phone or email and you know, have a rant to about your treatment. And you know, they, we have really really supported each other and it's certainly been a good thing in my life.
>
> (Member Northern Freelance Network)

Respondents also identified a further form of network with an occupational dimension, the 'project' network. In most cases project networks were based on long-standing teams of workers drawn together for the duration of a project. Among our sample long-term relationships had developed between camera and sound technicians, especially in the context of local and national news programmes where camera operators are typically required to supply their own sound technician.

Project networks have an essentially closed structure. Members know each other and groups evolve over time as workers progress their careers and new members are sought. Respondents who belonged to this type of network pointed to numerous examples of reciprocity. Often this involved recommending a worker for a project they were unable to be involved with themselves, or working at short notice to help out a friend. There is clearly some overlap between project networks and individual 'address books' illustrating the way in which individual networks were embedded in, and shaped by the organizational structures of the industry. As project-based employment requires repeated contracting between groups of individuals, often involving relationships of trust built up over time, a worker's 'address book' can contain a mixture of strong and weak ties, or as the extract below suggests a 'variety of levels of contacts':

> I was very lucky to get a rolling contract with BBC Wales for two years and that allowed me to get to know quite a lot of people in that company . . . people I've worked with in the past, it's very easy to chat to. Some people I'm effectively cold calling. So it's a variety of levels of contacts.
>
> (Male Producer)

While this combination of strong and weak ties was generally seen as advantageous among our sample, the presence of strong ties within the 'address book' did serve to restrict the individualized competition more generally associated with freelance employment. Hence whereas accepting work from a new employer, or client, to whom you had been introduced by a colleague was regarded as acceptable, attempting to 'steal' that colleague's work by approaching the employer oneself was deemed highly improper. Moreover, once recommended for a job, there was an obligation to perform well as not only your own, but also your colleague's reputation was at stake:

> . . . if you alienate people by trying to steal their clients particularly that's the worst thing to do. It's the quickest way to get a bad reputation particularly in London and you'll be guaranteed no further work from them or anybody they know if you've stolen somebody's client . . . or you've upset someone's client by behaving badly or doing a bad job.
>
> (Male Sound Recordist)

The interdependence between members of project-based networks was underpinned by dense social relations and implicit trust in their ability to 'do the job'. As such, the reputations of network members were inextricably linked. The consequences for the workers involved were complex. Failure to perform in accordance with the standards of the 'team' could result in exclusion from both this and wider open networks. Yet despite this 'dark side' to project-based networks, younger respondents were keen to gain a foothold in a project network, although they viewed them as largely impenetrable and based on favouritism and patronage. The rationale for seeking membership was only in part a desire to improve employment opportunities. The strong ties of the project network were perceived to provide a degree of collective security difficult to attain in a competitive, freelance labour market. Just as a project-based network can marshal its resources against a dissident member, so it can use those same resources to defend the interests of team members against unfair treatment and exploitation.

Project and occupational networks exhibit a number of the characteristics that commentators suggest typify closed networks. They are underpinned by dense social relations and offer mutual support and reciprocity in return for adherence to collective norms. This has positive consequences in terms of high levels of trust and a sense of belonging which can be used to defend collective interests. Nonetheless these important collective attributes are rooted in a sense of occupational and industrial identity which is indelibly marked by the professional aspirations of individual network members.

Discussion and conclusion

Re-regulation of the UK television industry has resulted in organizational break up and casualization of the employment relationship. As a consequence a variety of networks have developed that provide important mechanisms for organizing employment and production. Our findings in respect of each of the network types we have identified are summarized in Table 2.

Our concern is with how workers navigate these networks. Accordingly, we have developed a heuristic framework based on theoretical distinctions between the role of open and closed networks. Some aspects of network activity fit neatly within this structure. In open 'address book' networks workers exploit 'weak ties' with other, often more powerful, workers to raise their labour-market profile, improve their employment opportunities and ultimately 'get ahead' (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973). To this extent open networks could be said to reinforce the competitive and individualistic nature of relations between labour market actors. At the same time occupational networks most closely resemble the archetype of a closed network. Based on common interests, concerns and experiences, for individuals they constitute a buttress against the competitive climate of the industry and a forum where like-minded workers can seek and provide mutual support.

However, our data suggest that the binary distinction between open and closed networks that emerges from the literature is not straightforward. As a result it fails to capture the complex reality of individual network activity and the opportunities afforded to freelancers via the way in which they navigate different types of networks. To illustrate this we look at four issues.

First, it is problematic to distinguish between 'open' and 'closed' structures. To do so underplays the centrality of power relations in shaping network activity. For example 'address books' are not open and inclusive. Access is dependent on a range of factors including status, reputation, ability, social and familial connections. There is a distinct hierarchy whereby those members who control access to employment opportunities and broker information across networks (Burt, 1992) wield significant power over those workers looking to build their careers. This restricts individual competition and places individuals under an obligation to abide by the norms of the network, or more accurately the norms imposed by those in positions of power. This reflects the 'dark side' of social capital in that the same networks that can enhance employment prospects also have the potential to destroy them.

Second, our findings suggest that network structures reflect the dynamism of the social relations on which they are based. For example, weak

Table 2 Applying the framework

Network type	*Structure*	*Function*	*Consequences*
'Address books' (open)	• Members do not all know each other • Heterogeneous membership • *Inclusive? – varying levels of access. Entrance constrained and controlled* • *Effectiveness based on strength of ties* • *Hierarchy based on reputation and influence*	• Getting ahead • Raising individual profile • Improving employment opportunities • Enhancing individual reputation • *Status*	• Competition • Individualism • Flow of information • *Weak ties convert into stronger ties* • *Reciprocity based on social ties and relations*
Virtual networks (open)	• Based around anonymity – no hierarchy • Heterogeneous membership • *Inclusive – no restriction on access*	• Limited impact in relation to advancement of individual aspirations • Information exchange • Sense of community	• Flow of information • Information shared to support labour market transactions • Sense of belonging • Development of shared interests and grievances • No obligation – no sanctions
Occupational networks (closed)	• Members know each other • Exclusive – homogeneous membership • *Entrance dependent on track record* • *Loose hierarchy – often reflecting reputation and experience*	• Support – *social and professional* • Maintaining collective norms • Reciprocity • *Focus of technical knowledge and expertise*	• Sense of belonging • Trust • *Shared identity* • *Collective action* • Exclusion • Obligations • No real use of sanctions
Project networks (closed)	• Members know each other well – *underpinned by strong social ties* • Exclusive – homogeneous membership • *Strong informal hierarchy*	• Support – *social and professional* • Improving employment opportunities • Mutual dependence • Maintaining collective norms • Reciprocity	• Sense of belonging • Trust • Exclusion • Obligations • Sanctions • Individual advancement

ties inevitably convert into stronger ties as individuals work together, build trust and develop social relations. Consequently a degree of reciprocity emerges which is used to attenuate competition inherent within freelance labour markets. In some cases, what began as loose groups of acquaintances sharing stories and tips about equipment has evolved into formalized professional associations with clear rules of entry and a hierarchical structure as individuals have sought to build barriers against the vagaries of the freelance labour market.

Third, our data suggest that individuals not only use different networks to fulfil different goals but that many networks serve multiple functions. For example, virtual networks provide the potential to make contacts and search for employment opportunities. At the same time members, under cover of electronic anonymity: share information; discuss experiences; co-ordinate pay demands; express grievances; and even engage in campaigning activity. Similarly, project networks appear to provide 'social capital' in the form of trust, friendship, mutuality and reciprocity yet they are vital in enhancing the labour market opportunities of the workers involved.

Finally, there is some evidence that organizational break up and casualization of the employment relationship has led workers to seek collegiality and support from the same networks that provided them with opportunities for employment and individual career advancement.

In Figure 1 we present an alternative conceptual framework that attempts to more fully reflect the dynamism of network activity. As opposed to a dichotomy between closed and open networks we would argue that networks have a range of different structures, functions and consequences. The framework is used to map the four main network types that our research uncovered. This reveals a complex picture suggesting that the way networks are used by workers, and the ultimate consequences of network activity, are not determined simply by structure. Figure 1 illustrates how workers traverse different types of network and exploit different aspects of those same networks in order to enhance their careers and defend their interests in the workplace. Their ability to do that is conditioned by the way in which they interact with those networks but also how different networks interact with each other.

Marchington et al. (2005) argue that the importance of networks lies in their potential to shed light on the previously ignored dynamics of competition and collaboration. Nowhere is this more true than in the UK television industry. Placing the individual at the centre of our analysis allowed us to explore the complex and diverse nature of networks in a fragmented and casualized industry. Ultimately network activity is about individuals responding to the environment they find themselves. The way in which they use networks is laced with tensions between individual aspiration and

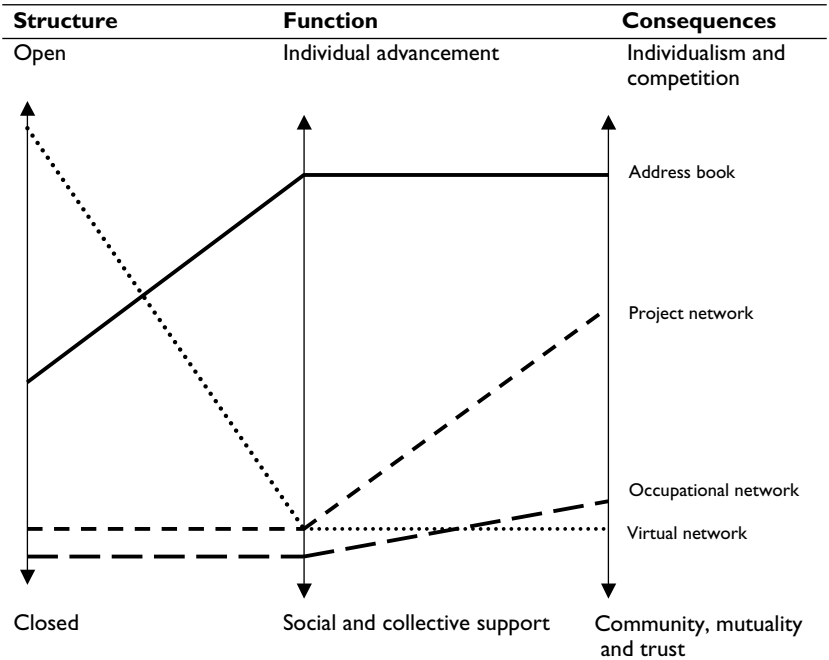

Figure 1 A new framework

collective support and between competition and collaboration. In turn these tensions emerge from the inherent contradictions within organizational structures and production relations of the television industry.

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