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Net work: the professionalization of web design

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New/Media/Work

In the decade or so since it first emerged as an area of work, web design has normalized. From its birth as an anarchic free-for-all, web design has undergone a process of standardization, resulting in recognizable job titles, core skills and an emphasis on adhering to the guidelines established by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and other international standards.

At the same time, a great representative burden is placed on the shoulders of web designers. They are portrayed as exemplary of the future of work and of working in the new economy. Their work is emotional and affective, it is claimed. They are either creative and autonomous producers of culture for the digital economy, or victims enslaved to the mundane and low-paid, or to the insecurity of portfolio knowledge work. As Rosalind Gill stated in 2002, web designers and other new media workers are 'invoked rhetorically all the time but rarely studied' (Gill, 2002: 75).

This article addresses the call made by Gill and others for more empirical studies of (new) media workers, which move away from rhetorical invocation and burdensome representation, to focus on how this group of cultural labourers feel about their work, and what work means to them. The paper focuses on a topic which is central in web designers' talk about their work – that is, the professionalization of web design. This issue has not been sufficiently acknowledged in the limited body of literature on new media work (though Christopherson, 2004 and Gill, 2007 are exceptions). Instead, this literature has focused on other issues in cultural work, such as affect, creativity, networking and risk, themes which all, in turn, map onto broader debates about the contemporary social formation. The prevalence of these issues in the literature sidelines the professionalization

debate which plays a central role in the discursive repertoires of web designers and developers.

This article proposes that a concern with professionalism in web design can be seen as holding these other aspects of cultural labour together. Affect and passion, creativity, networking, and risk/precarity are not separate elements of the work of producing the WWW. Rather, they are experienced as an interwoven web of factors to be negotiated in contemporary Net work. The concepts of professionalism and professionalization prove useful in making sense of this web.

The article draws on research with web designers on Inclusive New Media Design (INMD),¹ a project which aimed to explore the best strategies for encouraging web professionals to make websites which are accessible to people with intellectual disabilities² and so to develop knowledge about new media work. On INMD, we worked with 31 experienced web professionals (13 women and 18 men) from a range of backgrounds and with a range of job titles, including: web designer, web developer, digital content producer, creative director, information architect. We gathered 'data' about their work through questionnaires, interviews, training workshops, online files including blogs, mailing lists and the websites they made.

Other articles emerging from collaborative research in this field directly address the experiences of the people with intellectual disabilities at the centre of our work, such as Bunning et al. (forthcoming) and Kennedy (2008). In contrast to those articles, this article focuses on how the web gets made, and on which strategies to deploy to ensure that it gets made inclusively and accessibly, because such a focus can contribute greatly to the digital inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities. As interdisciplinary endeavours such as Cultural Studies and Science and Technology Studies have proposed, it is necessary to analyse *all* of the processes that come together in the 'circuit of culture' (du Gay et al., 1997) – representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation – in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of cultural objects. The section that follows maps out some of the issues that arise in literature about the production of new media, before the article turns to a discussion of what web designers themselves say about their production practices.

Work and the affective, risky, networked, creative turn

A central theme in recent scholarship concerned with media work in the information/knowledge/creative economy is the affective character of such labour. Terranova (2000) uses the term 'affective labour' to refer to the passionate commitment to Net technologies, culture and community which leads some Net workers to give their labour willingly and voluntarily. Elsewhere, Wakeford (2003) has raised the spectre of the role of immaterial affective

processes such as intuition and ‘gut feelings’ in new media design practice. A range of affective and emotional intensities have been identified in the limited research that has been carried out with new media workers. For example, Gill’s study of Dutch new media workers found an extraordinary degree of enthusiasm for work among its research subjects (Gill, 2007; see also Christopherson, 2004; Kennedy, 2009; Neff et al., 2005). The intense passion that web professionals feel for their work derives from a sense that this is a pleasurable activity. Such views are not unique to web designers – throughout the creative and cultural industries, there is something of a disavowal that the activity of producing culture can be characterized as labour at all, because it is so playful and creative.

Indeed, within cultural and media studies, creativity itself has assumed increasing importance, and is widely acknowledged to be instrumental for economic growth. This creative turn is manifest in the growing number of courses in creative industries studies and creative industries research centres, and the proliferation of literature concerned with the activities of creatives (for example, Florida, 2003). It is not just the work practices of creatives that have simultaneously been appropriated into mainstream economic activity and subjected to academic scrutiny, however, but also their lifestyles. In a process that Ross (2003) defines as ‘the industrialisation of bohemia’, the rhythms of creative life have become the norm in new media companies such as Razorfish, the subject of his ethnographic study. Uneven, project-based working patterns (sometimes resulting in working 80-hour weeks), flexibility and adaptability are elements of creative life which have migrated seamlessly into new media work. Such working patterns are celebrated by some for the freedom and autonomy they bring (Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999) or for the heterarchical (as opposed to hierarchical) organizational structures that result (Wittel et al., 2002). But they are also lamented – for example Sennett (1998) bemoans the ‘corrosion of character’ that results from lack of stability and frequent movement at work.

Flexibility, adaptability and project-based portfolio work lead to insecurity, long working hours and a constant drive to re-skill. As a result, there is an increased sense of risk, which is also both embraced (Deuze, 2007) and lamented (Sennett, 1998, 2006). Deuze and Sennett both acknowledge the increased individualization of work, in which individuals assume responsibility for taking care of their working conditions and associated risks. For Ehrenstein (2007), the concept of precarity provides an opportunity to move beyond such individualized self-regulation, emerging as it does from the struggles of temporary and flexible workers in Continental Europe, to identify commonalities through which to develop new political strategies. The link between precarity and affect is important for Ehrenstein because, she argues, ‘efforts in the affective realm ... form a starting point for a mobilisation of experience’ (2007), which moves beyond the notion of individual responsibility for the management of risk.

Another strategy for dealing with unstable and risky working conditions, and another human relation skill lamented by Sennett for supplanting experience, is networking. The argument that culture has become increasingly characterized by the network is clearly well-rehearsed (Castells, 1996), but networks and networking have also been identified as core to new media work. Wittel's article 'Towards a Network Sociality' (2001) reports on a study with web designers in London at the turn of the century, and identifies network sociality as a significant practice among new media workers. Network sociality, argues Wittel, is a matrix of fleeting and dynamic encounters, a response to the transient and disembedded conditions of late capitalism. Wittel's analysis is only slightly less pessimistic than, for example, Sennett's, for whom the replacement of hierarchies with loose networks in the workplace is indicative of increased ambiguity and other ills in work today.

Much of this literature makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the character of work in the media and cultural industries. Passion and enthusiasm, risk and precarity, networking strategies and creative practices are all significant features of work in this field. But none of this is new. There may be an affective, risky, networked, creative turn in cultural and media theory, but such a turn is not so evident in media work practice. Media work, new or old, has always been risky, precarious, based on (unequal) networks, affective, emotional, impassioned – except, perhaps, for the small minority who managed to secure permanent work and favourable conditions at the BBC in the UK.

Nor is it productive to apply such characterizations to all media work. Claims about media work need to acknowledge the specificity, diversity and particular local conditions of this very varied industry. These conditions can only emerge through empirical investigation. In carrying out such research, it is necessary to ask to what extent, and how, are risk, the affective/creative turn and the rise of networks lived and experienced by, for example, web designers working in a particular time and place? Do they, and if so how do they, impact on the web design and development process? Do they, and if so how do they, impact on designing inclusively?

Answering these questions will add substance to debate about the conditions of work in the cultural industries, and that is what the remainder of this article does, highlighting how these factors weave together in the work experiences of web designers. Furthermore, the article proposes that if there is anything that is new about the work of web designers – not radically new or revolutionary, but gradually new and evolutionary – it is the notion that the field is professionalizing. This was manifest among INMD participants through what I characterize as a desire to be a good professional. 'Being a good professional', I suggest, is a project which incorporates adopting web standards and working with accessibility guidelines, and through which web designers self-regulate, self-discipline and self-organize. The following sections, then, highlight the concern with the professionalism and professionalization of web design which is central to the experiences and discursive repertoires of web designers.

On professionalism

What does it mean to be professional, or to occupy a profession? A number of competing and overlapping definitions of these terms exist. In his classic study *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labour*, Abbott (1988) discusses a range of definitions of, and assumptions about, the professions. He points out that in early sociological literature, the professions were assumed to be ‘organized bodies of experts who applied esoteric knowledge to particular cases. They had elaborate systems of instruction and training, together with entry by examination and other formal prerequisites’ (1988: 4). Other defining characteristics of professions were codes of ethics, licensure and exclusive professional associations. Abbott is critical of these definitions, however, for a number of reasons. Any occupation can obtain licensure or ethics codes, he points out, naming beauticians and estate agents as examples. For Abbott, an important element of the professions is abstract knowledge. This distinguishes professions from, for example, crafts, as the latter focus more on technique. Another defining feature of professions for Abbott is jurisdiction – that is, control over the occupation itself and the abstract knowledge mobilized within the occupation. Professions are usually self-regulating – they set their own standards, establish codes of conduct, set criteria for admission, discipline members and so on.

Within the literature about new media work, there is very little discussion of professionalism. Respondents in Gill’s Dutch study identified the professionalization of new media as one of the field’s recent changes, although they do not provide any precise details about the characteristics of this process (Gill, 2007). Christopherson (2004) also addresses professionalism in new media work in her discussion of the relationship between policy and work identity. She argues that while workers in old media like television and film previously defined themselves as professionals – ‘occupational groups that are self-governing’ (2004: 551), in her terms – recent economic and regulatory changes mean that old and new media workers alike are increasingly entrepreneurial – that is, ‘self-investors’ whose ‘career goal is success as an independent contractor, not in full-time, long-term employment’ (2004: 552). She argues that as management has accrued more control over the exercise of skill in media industries, media workers have lost their jurisdiction over their (abstract) knowledge. An entrepreneurial model is subsequently appealing, given the control that it permits over some work practices and conditions.

Thus Christopherson argues that, at least in the US, new media work is more appropriately characterized as entrepreneurial than as professional. But professional and entrepreneurial modes of operation are not opposed – Christopherson’s own definitions assign different, but not contradictory, characteristics to each. Further, while entrepreneurial models of labour might exist in web design, this is not an issue that preoccupies its practitioners. Rather, among web designers, on web design guru blogs and in discussion forums

around the globe, the topic of professionalism is hotly debated. Of particular concern is the question of whether the work of building the web should be regulated through a professional association, a code of ethics or a code of professional conduct. The extent of web designers' engagement with this debate can be seen in the almost 600 responses that web evangelist Molly Holzschlag received to her call for a 'new professionalism' among web designers and developers. Holzschlag defines this new professionalism as follows:

The essence of this new professionalism isn't about being perfect at what we do. It's being able to say: Hey, I don't know that. Let me go find out. This new professionalism means taking responsibility for the education of ourselves and each other. (2005)

The concerns expressed here – with control over knowledge, education and regulation – bear many of the hallmarks of professional expertise as defined by Abbott and others (for example, Leicht and Fennel, 2001). This is not to say that web design is a profession of the kind that Abbott discusses, like medicine and law – occupying a profession is different from being professional. Rather, it is to acknowledge that professionalism matters to web designers, that many of them are concerned to provide a professional service, and that they are interested in talking about whether their industry is professionalizing. This point is elaborated in the next section.

Being good professionals

Many web designers want to be good professionals, and this was certainly the case among INMD participants. 'Being a good professional' is a project, I argue, which web designers negotiate individually, and which influences how they manage themselves and their work, and how they construct themselves in relation to their work. On INMD, commitment to this project could be seen in: participants' talk about the work of web design; their accessibility practice; their obsession with updating their skills; their seriousness about their craft; and their approach to networking. Each of these features of the project of being a good professional is discussed in detail below.

Talking about professionalism

Is web design professionalizing? Reflecting on this question was central to the discursive repertoires of INMD participants. Most acknowledged that web design is professionalizing, as in the following quote:

It's becoming more professional like everything. Everything's becoming more mature, technology is becoming more mature, and processes are becoming more mature. (William, senior web developer)

However, some were keen to point out that only some sectors of web work have professionalized – not all web designers have managed to become good professionals:

If you go to the majority of large web studios or if you go to ad agencies or in-house departments, the majority of the stuff is still horrible. (Paul, creative director, independent web design agency)

There's a lot of people who are building websites out there who I wouldn't consider using the word professional in their job title. They are definitely web builders and web developers but there are still far too many sites being built in an unprofessional manner, even by huge big multinational web design building companies. (Armando, web designer and lecturer)

It's not like architecture where there are rules and unions you have to follow. I think web design is more chaotic. (Hamilton, freelance web designer and post-graduate student)

Of significance here is how these respondents differentiate themselves within the category of professional web worker. They are not interested in distinguishing themselves from the amateur web producers who are taking centre stage in debates about Web 2.0 and user-generated content, but rather from bad professionals. They acknowledge that web work has professionalized, but they suggest that the professionalization of the field is partial, not widespread. They position themselves inside the category of good professionals, who produce quality output and have the professional capital to be able to distinguish between good and bad web design practice. This kind of talk represents an attempt to assert control over the knowledge and skill required to do good web design, and constitutes a form of self-regulation, of the kind discussed by Abbott and others.

Accessibility as a marker of professionalism

One area in which INMD participants' 'good professionalism' was manifest was in their expressed motivations for participating in the project. What made them give up several days of their time, when many of them are self-employed freelancers, for whom a day away from the computer translates into a day without pay? This is what some of them said:

I consider accessibility to be a core part of my discipline. (William, senior web developer)

I would like to improve my practical knowledge of web accessibility to improve my professional practice generally. (Frances, lecturer)

Need to adhere to best practice, or at least try to get there. (Billie, web developer)

Building an accessible web, one which is inclusive of as broad an audience as possible, is seen by many of our participants as a necessary component of the project of being a good web professional. Their commitment to web accessibility for groups of people with a wide range of disabilities is striking. This is one of the few aspects of web work that can genuinely be described as a 'turn', and it forms part of the turn towards professionalism. Ten years ago, when the idea that web designers and developers might build their sites in such a way that they could be accessed, read and understood by disabled communities was new, it was common to believe that designing accessibly limited creativity. This notion prevailed because, it was thought, an accessible site was, by necessity, a dull, media-poor and text-rich site. That historical moment now seems to have passed, as the above quotes indicate that a number of web designers and developers are increasingly committed to accessibility as an integral part of their work. As a result, perceptions of the relationship between accessibility and creativity have changed. Accessibility no longer hinders creativity – instead, creativity is mobilized as a means to come up with accessible design solutions, as shown in the following quotes:

I think you always use the word creative to find solutions to any problems, so you have to think creatively to be accessible. You can use the word creative as a method of thinking to find a solution. (Armando, web designer and lecturer)

I love limitations... If I'm faced with a blank canvas I'm terrified. It must be 700 pixels, accessible, work for blind people – accessibility can be thought of as a limitation, but not for me. It helps me. To stay sane in a world where anything is possible. (Pietrek, freelance web designer and head of media production facility)

Accepting limitations to creativity as a framework for design rather than a constraint on it, accepting – indeed embracing – accessibility as an integral part of web design, and actively seeking creative solutions to accessibility issues are all integral elements of the project of being a good professional, and of the professionalization of web design.

Keeping up: a professional obsession

Alongside this commitment to accessibility, another striking feature of many participants' desire to be good professionals was the effort that they make to keep up with their trade, often in their own time. Keeping up has been identified as a professional obsession among web designers, for example by Kotamraju (2002) and Gill (2007). This is captured nicely in the response of one of Gill's interviewees to a question about how much time he dedicates to keeping up: 'Sort of all the time' (2007: 30). As Gill states, pressure to keep up is experienced as a source of anxiety for some new media workers, and an

enjoyable norm by others. This is what two of our participants said about their efforts to keep up:

I listen to a lot of podcasts on my mobile.... I tend to listen to them when I'm washing up, walking or doing other things that I need to do, but don't need to think about. (Timothy, self-employed web developer)

I've got an iPhone and use that to send and receive emails, and subscribe to podcasts.... I update Twitter regularly using Hahlo and have even blog posted from my iPhone. I have gReader bookmarked where I read rss feeds.... I follow many in the standards community who are already using Twitter to share information, link to blog posts, etc. The reactions are immediate and there has been some interesting debate on Twitter, all in 140-letter posts! (Gregory, self-employed web designer)

For some of our participants, it seems, risk is experienced not primarily in terms of insecurity deriving from short-term, project-based, portfolio work, as some of the literature suggests, but in terms of a requirement to keep up. Here the risk is that they might fail to keep up. None of our participants spoke about a fear that the supply of work and income would run out, but some talked about their anxieties about, and subsequent strategies for, keeping up. One participant expressed her anxieties about keeping up like this:

It's something that I am lacking. It would be useful to access a network so you can bounce off ideas, and ask how others they have got over problems. (Billie, web developer)

Although this participant is talking about what she does *not* do, or what she is 'lacking', this represents precisely the new professionalism of web workers as Holzschlag defines it – that is, the ability to acknowledge and take responsibility for gaps in knowledge. Thus risk is experienced by web designers in relation to the specific conditions of their labour – in this instance, as the possibility of failing to keep up, or of failing to 'be a good professional'.

The keeping-up practices of our participants are also indicative of the 'always on' work culture co-opted from the lifestyles of creatives into new media work (and criticized by Ross [2003] and Terranova [2000] for the resulting Net slavery). To paraphrase Ross, new media workers recognize that such workstyles suck, yet simultaneously get a thrill out of them. Everyday life can be industrialized in this way, and value can be extracted 24/7, when workers approach their labour with the degree of passion and commitment that new media professionals commonly confess to. This is evident in Ross' study, in Gill's – one participant described work as 'like being paid for your hobby' (Gill, 2007) – and is also evident in ours. The same participant who lists the impressive array of mechanisms he deploys to keep up with his trade in the earlier quote (iPhone, Podcasts, Twitter, gReader, rss feeds, blog posts and so on) says this of his feelings about his work:

Probably the main reason I love the industry I work in so much is the communication aspect, so that anyone anywhere can communicate with anyone else because of this brilliant tool. And every day that excites me and it excites me how different people use it and the new things and the new ideas people are coming up with. Underpinning all that, my interest in usability and accessibility is trying to make sure that anyone, on any device, with any ability, can use that communication tool, because I think it would be a grave shame if we didn't make sure that it was open to everyone. (Gregory, self-employed web designer)

What comes first for this web worker, passion or professionalism? Instead of trying to separate out passion from profession, or either of these from creativity, risk or an obsession with keeping up, they are best understood in relation to each other, as interrelated factors in the cultural labour of this group of media workers. The commitment to keeping up is motivated by a desire to be professional and sustained by the strong emotional ties that they feel for their work. The possibility of failing to keep up is the dominant risk experienced; and wanting to keep up is a result of a sense of professionalism. And just as web workers deploy creativity to find solutions to accessibility problems, so too they use creativity as a tool for developing strategies to keep up – while washing the dishes, walking to the office or waiting for a bus.

A serious craft

One of the things that Sennett (2006) laments in the postmodern culture of the new capitalism is the shift from depth to surface. He contrasts the surface skills of adaptability and flexibility, which he argues count at work today, with the deeper skills of the craftsperson. In a discussion of the characteristics of craftspersonship, he argues that 'the more one understands how to do something well, the more one cares about it' (2006: 105). This definition is further elaborated by Campbell, in a discussion of craft consumption, where he defines the craftsperson as 'someone who exercises personal control over all the processes involved in the manufacture of the good in question' (2005: 27). But in the case of web designers and developers, these two 'types', the flexible worker and the craftsperson, are not opposites. Thus it is possible to be simultaneously an adaptable, entrepreneur-like labourer in contemporary flexible organizations, a craftsperson and a professional. The professional obsession with keeping up among web workers is a case in point. This obsession is the result both of caring about doing something well, to paraphrase Sennett, and recognizing the need to adapt and update skills in the fast-changing world of new media. Likewise, INMD participants demonstrated their commitment both to their craft and to changing their craft for ethical ends, through their desire to learn about how to make websites accessible to people with intellectual disabilities. Craftspersonship and flexibility are both intricately bound up with professionalism, as the desire to be a good professional involves caring

about realizing the craft of web design well, which in turn means being flexible and adaptable, and keeping up to date with new developments.

INMD participants demonstrated their commitment to their craft in a number of different ways. One instance of this, which reflects how much they cared about doing something well (Sennett), and how much they invested themselves in their work (Campbell) was the high degree of self-criticism which they demonstrated when they did not meet their own, exacting, high standards. For example, in INMD workshops, participants developed prototype web products incorporating techniques designed to enhance accessibility for intellectually disabled users, and then tested these prototypes with users with intellectual disabilities. Here are some of the things that they said about the user testing:

Planning for someone I couldn't really judge stayed a very vague thing for me and hence failed today! (Sofia, design agency director)

Some of the answers to my questions made me realize that my questions were stupid. (Timothy, self-employed web developer)

I am not trained to ask questions which will yield appropriate results. (Ayesha, web developer)

The last comment suggests that more training in how to communicate with people with intellectual disabilities could have been provided. However, as some such training did take place, it could be argued that, even after extensive training, communicating with someone whose cognitive processes are different from your own is difficult the first time you do it. More important here is that all comments are implicitly or explicitly self-critical. In the first two, the strong language of 'failing' and 'asking stupid questions' suggests that the participants have high expectations of the way in which they realize all elements of their craft/profession. In the third, although the language is less strong, there is still a self-critical acknowledgement of 'failing', which suggests an expectation of success.

Another way in which seriousness about their craft, or conscientious professionalism, was demonstrated was through the concern that some participants expressed over what they perceived as insurmountable obstacles to applying what they learnt on INMD. While some participants made changes to their design practice as a result of what they learnt on INMD, others felt that the nature of the projects they worked on or the tasks they undertook (such as back-end coding, rather than, for example, interface design) might prohibit inclusive web design. Others worried that their clients or line-managers might not share their motivations to include people with intellectual disabilities among their audiences. These different responses to the question of how to improve web accessibility are a result of the diversity of activities that make up web design, as well as the many and varied ways in which web designers

do their work. One participant spoke throughout the workshops about his experiences of clients in large media companies who had no interest in addressing the accessibility needs of people with disabilities. For this reason, despite his personal commitment, he was not optimistic about the possibility of being able to build on what he had learnt. Others were less jaded, as a result of more positive and open-minded line managers, perhaps, and were subsequently more optimistic about being able to build an inclusive web. Despite these differences, these deliberations on implementing learning reflect participants' commitment to realizing their craft well, to adapting their craft when needed, and to the project of being good professionals.

'I'd rather have my toenails pulled': a very particular kind of networking

A commitment to accessibility, an obsession with keeping up, a serious approach to the craft – these are all constituent elements of the professionalism of web designers. So too is a particular kind of networking. This is not the networking of 'those horrible kinds of business clubs', as one participant, Paul, put it (he would rather have his toenails pulled than participate in these, he claimed). Nor is it the networking that results from membership of a professional association – to date, there is no one, obvious professional association to which web designers and developers subscribe. Rather, this networking is more akin to the network sociality that Wittel (2001) describes. Based on transient and dynamic relations, not firmly established ones, formed by people working under precarious and unstable conditions, freelance and employed, short-term and permanent, such networks constitute a kind of informal, voluntary professional collectivity. These networks share many of the characteristics assigned to produsage (Bruns, 2008) or Pro-Ams (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004), terms, which collapse the binary distinction of producer/consumer, professional/amateur, to identify the online activities of the 'innovative, committed and networked amateurs, working to professional standards' (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004: 9) involved in building the web.

Although Bruns is writing about the activities of people who do not, on the whole, earn a living working on the web, these principles – and the notions of 'intercreativity' (Berners-Lee, 1999) and 'collective intelligence' (Levy, 1997) on which he draws – also apply to the activities of paid web professionals. When asked about whether networking is important in his work, Paul, the creative director who prefers toenail torture to business clubs said:

Networking is important when you think about being active in your industry. But if you're active in the industry and you're putting stuff out and you're out there being known for what you're doing then that's really important.... It does depend on how you define networking. (Paul, creative director, independent web design agency)

This idea of being active and ‘putting stuff out’ has much in common with the produsage principle of ‘open participation, communal evaluation’ as defined by Bruns (2008), as it is assumed by many web professionals that their work and code will be reviewed, commented upon and subsequently refined. This open critique, and openness to critique, forms part of the ethos of the WWW as a creative commons, a collective space for sharing creative works, which drives professionals, amateurs and Pro-Ams to ‘produce culture for the digital economy’ (Terranova, 2000), participate in projects such as INMD and share experience.

Another simple term for the networking practices described here is sharing. On our project, participants showed their commitment to, and enjoyment of, sharing in a number of different ways. Many expressed interest in each others’ views and experiences – this was given as a central reason for participating in our project by some:

... to participate in discussions, come away with ideas, other people’s opinions. (Pietrek, freelance web designer and head of media production facility)

I would like to share my knowledge and hopefully learn something too. (Gregory, self-employed web designer)

Sharing experiences was frequently mentioned as the ‘best thing’ about the workshops, and many participants shared what they learnt in them, by discussing them formally or informally at work, sharing physical resources like hand-outs and slides, or blogging about the project. One participant made a game for people with profound intellectual disabilities which she donated to the research centre which hosted INMD.

Participation in networking/sharing practices is voluntary, self-managed and self-regulated. By opening up their code for feedback from others, web designers assume individual responsibility for maintaining high, professional standards. The particular kind of networking outlined here is a constitutive element of the professional practice of our participants – it helps them keep up to date, improve their craft, learn new techniques. But it is not limited to those who get paid for their digital labour, as Bruns points out – it is common practice across all producers of culture for the digital economy, waged or unwaged. Neither do such practices represent a radically different break from the ways in which old media, or other groups of professionals, such as scientists, have historically operated. What is important here is to point to the specificities of networking for this particular group of media workers. For them, networking is an integral part of the project of being a good professional, a way of managing risk and keeping up, and a result of a passionate commitment to being part of the web community. Thus network sociality is not something to be bemoaned for its surface value, but rather a central feature of the collective character of Net work.

Conclusion: web design and the professional turn

This article represents an attempt to highlight how the professionalization of web design is a central concern in the discursive repertoires of web designers. While participants on Inclusive New Media Design had interesting things to say about their emotional commitment to their work, the risks they faced, the way they networked and deployed their creativity, these themes did not dominate in their conversations for the duration of our ongoing contact with them, despite what the literature might suggest. Instead, what did dominate was a concern with the project of 'being a good professional'. These were not necessarily the terms used by participants themselves, but what I have argued is that the concern they showed to do good work, and to do things right, represents a desire to be good professionals.

This article also proposes that there is a close relationship between web designers' desire to be good professionals and their experiences of risk, creativity, affect and networking. Dedication to keeping up is motivated by the simultaneous desire to be professional and to avoid the risk of deskilling. It is also motivated by strong affective ties to work. Commitment to one particular aspect of professional web design, accessibility, shapes how web designers experience creativity. And a particular kind of networking is a way of being a good web design professional, managing risk and keeping up.

Web designers assume individual responsibility for managing risk, keeping up, and so on. At the same time, they operate collectively, sharing code, resources and solutions to problems. What this shows, and what has surfaced throughout my study, is that binary opposites – in this case, individual/collective – are not helpful in understanding the labour of web designers. Rather, their working practices are both individual and collective. Likewise, they demonstrate characteristics of both entrepreneur and professional, as defined (and opposed) by Christopherson (2004), and craftsperson and flexible worker (Sennett, 2006). Web design cannot be characterized according to one or another binary opposite: its sheer diversity demands that more sophisticated terminology is used to describe the labour of its practitioners.

Another binary which did not really surface in my research is professional/amateur. Other writers referenced here call this distinction into question by collapsing it into terms like *produsage* or *Pro-Am*. In some creative industries, such as journalism, the growth of user- and amateur-generated content has led to concern that the field is deprofessionalizing, and to some debate about this topic (for example Deuze, 2008). It is interesting, then, that given the wealth of debate about user-generated content, producers, prosumers and Pro-Ams, INMD participants had very little to say about their relationships with amateur web producers. They did not compare themselves with amateurs – rather, they compared themselves with 'bad professionals'. They displayed what could be described as 'professional capital' – that is, the capacity to see the difference between good and bad web design practice, to know their craft and do it well.

That said, it is interesting to note that not all participants were good professionals all of the time. Laying out webpages using tables is perhaps *the* practice that symbolizes bad professionalism among web designers. This is because tables are intended for tabular data, not for structuring the visual display of a page. Yet at least one participant whose criticism of unprofessional practice is quoted above used this approach when he joined our project. Being a good professional is an ongoing project, then, which means different things to different web designers at different times. Because, of course, web designers are not all the same. They are not all committed to the project of being good professionals – they cannot be, because that would mean that there were no bad web designers for the self-constituted good ones to point to. But at the same time, the experiences recounted here are ordinary, in the sense that the concerns expressed by INMD participants are replicated on web designers' blogs around the globe.

If we are to recognize web design as professionalizing, then it might be productive to subject web design to the same scrutiny as existing professions. Is the professionalization of web design a form of control, and if so, who is controlling what? Are its ethical codes – of web standards and of accessibility – a means of excluding outsiders? If so, who is getting excluded when web designers talk about good and bad web design practice? Abbott has claimed that unwillingness to call mechanics, for example, professionals 'has less to do with the actual characteristics of automobile repair as an intellectual discipline – which are conceptually quite close to those of medicine – than it does with the status of the work and of those who do it' (1988: 8). What does it mean, then, ideologically, to talk about web design as professionalized and professionalizing, and what are the consequences for web audiences, especially disabled ones? It is laudable that accessibility and inclusion form part of a sense of professionalism among web designers, but what are the full political and economic implications of this? Addressing these questions will contribute to our understanding of the labour and politics of web design.

Notes

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2. Intellectual disability, defined officially and over-simplistically as mental impairment and low IQ, can include: difficulty communicating or socializing; problems with activities like reading, writing and using money; or difficulty understanding or controlling emotions or behaviour; depending on the support of others in the

ordinary activities of daily life; and an increased prevalence of sensory and motor impairments (for further discussion, see Emerson et al., 2001).

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