"Selling themselves": conceptualising key features of freelance work experience

Abstract

Existing research on freelance workers has highlighted its distinctiveness in terms of vocation, precariousness, work-life boundaries, professional autonomy and co-working. However, there is a need to better understand the lived experience of freelance working and its impact on practitioners compared to traditional employment. Using Arendt's (1958) conceptualisation of human activities, I analyse a case study of freelancers through notions of *work, labour* and *action* in order to conceptualise distinctive features of freelance work experience. This analysis brings into focus how freelance workers manufacture social arrangements and represent their output and work persona within their respective marketplace, whilst involved in and reliant on non-instrumental forms of sociality. Arendt's concepts make it possible to conceptualise tensions and contradictions within the underlying ends of everyday freelance activities, and how this affects freelancers on an experiential level.

Keywords: freelance, precarious work, Arendt, self, sociality.

Introduction

In 1935, Bertrand Russell was convinced that the problem of work would be resolved within a generation, given rapid technological advances taking place at the time. Three generations later, we are no closer to achieving Russell's aspirations. Neoliberalism has instead intensified work, driven down wages and injected further insecurity into the lives of workers. The post-war social

compact of institutionalised industrial relations, inflation-linked wages, collective bargaining, full employment and long-term job security now seems like a golden age of waged labour.

Much of our thinking about work, organisation and its wider effects on selves and society has been implicitly based on this relatively recent history, in which we unwittingly assume the existence of traditional employment relations, organisations as the main locus of labour, and work effort as fundamentally tied to salaried employment contracts. However, increasingly such taken-for-granted assumptions are being overturned by emerging realities of work where declining job security, low and intermittent income and the disintegration of labour markets are impacting the workforce (Fleming 2017; De Peuter 2014; Standing 2011). In discussing such questions, economic aspects are often understandably in the foreground. Commentators point to how insecure work and low pay permeate the lives of precarious workers, affecting anything from housing (Zukin 2010; Harvey 2013), career prospects and educational development (Standing 2011) to psychological well-being (Ertel, et al. 2005; Berardi 2009).

Other research has examined major changes in work and social relations. Commentators have highlighted the increasing blurring of work and non-work (Virno 2004; Hardt and Negri 2001; Vallas and Cummins 2015; Gregg 2011), in a wider attempt to demonstrate the commodification of social spaces and relations. Such research, often undertaken from an autonomist Marxist standpoint, demonstrates how productive efforts often take place within the social realm, outside of paid work. Indeed, research on self-employed creative workers shows how central identity and immediate social context are to work itself (McRobbie 1998; Storey, et al. 2005; Loacker 2013; Grugulis and Stoyanova 2012; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2012). This importance of highly specific social constructs to increasingly prevalent forms of self-employed work deserves more attention, especially concerning the lived experience of practitioners.

This highlights the importance of understanding how shifts in work towards self-employment, contracting and precarity impact on individuals and communities. Given the rise of the 'gig economy' and self-employed work, we need to further understand how such work is embedded within social relations, which specific social arrangements it relies on and how these are produced, and what the effects are on lived experience of practitioners. This is especially important given that social relations, goods and community are increasingly sites of capitalist expropriation (Virno 2005; De Peuter 2014; Arvidsson 2007).

Recent research has highlighted distinctive difference in the lives of freelancers and the self-employed, as reflected the centrality of networking (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2012), the importance of co-working spaces and arrangements (Merkel 2015), the close linkage of personal identity and one's work activity and output (McRobbie 1998), and alternative conceptions of value in terms of the process, such as those informed by aesthetics or craft (Banks 2010; Blair 2001; Bell and Vacchani 2020). However, we lack an integrated way of conceptualising these aspects of freelance working, and how freelance work activity is socially embedded and sustained.

In this paper I argue there is a marked difference not only in the institutional embedding and economic repercussions of freelance work, but also in the way it is experienced. To remedy this, I undertake an in-depth analysis of the lived experience of freelance workers. Using Arendt's (1958) phenomenology of human activity, I analyse interview accounts of freelancers through categories of *work, labour* and *action* in order to conceptualise the distinctive features of freelance work experience.

This is particularly important because many concepts for understanding work still assume the traditional employment relationship in some form or another. Using the work of Arendt, which

develops a historical contrast between modern full-time salaried work and work in antiquity and medieval history, we can reflect on some of these assumptions and rethink the conceptual basis of work using the perspective of freelancers themselves, and develop understanding of the social embeddedness of freelance working. In doing so, this paper connects with research on the appropriation of social commons and the immaterial labour through which they are produced (Hardt and Negri 2001; Virno 2005; De Peuter 2014). It also provides insight into the 'work-for-labour' that self-employed, freelance and precarious workers use to operate within the labour markets, extending research on contingent work and its social context (McRobbie 1998; Sennett 1998; Storey et al. 2005).

This paper also provides additional theoretical depth to analysis of experience at work by using Arendt's notion of human activities as a lens. While there is an established basis for using Arendt's work in relation to business ethics and management (Spoelstra 2010; Paulsen 2016; Van Diest and Dankbaar 2008; Henning 2011), it has not been used as a primary basis for the empirical analysis of work. Doing so allows us to interpret the experiences of freelance workers through the different modalities of work in Arendt's framework, and thereby to discern underlying and sometimes contradictory ends in freelance working life such as fabrication, the reproduction of life, and the inhabiting and manufacturing of social spaces. The conceptualisation of these differing ends elaborates and extends commonly acknowledged features of freelance working, such as networking, co-working and identity work, and sheds crucial light on the role of meaning and experience within this. By reading freelance work experience through Arendt's conceptualisation of work, a more complex insight into the challenges and ramifications of self-employment is obtained.

Freelancing work: autonomy, sociality and precarity

There has been considerable research into self-employment, documenting changes in employment relations. Many commentators have engaged critically with Handy's (1984) concept of the portfolio worker, which paints self-employed workers as proactive agents striving for increased work autonomy and personal freedom. This critical engagement follows what Smeaton (2003) argues is the complacency by earlier commentators to question Handy's assumptions (e.g. Cohen and Mallon 1999). Handy's 'portfolio model' of self-employment views it as 'a move away from alienating bureaucratic control toward independence, and task and time sovereignty' (Smeaton 2003, 380). Warhurst and Thompson (1998) are prominent detractors of this model, viewing self-employment largely as a refuge for those forcibly excluded from waged employment. Most accounts fall into one of two camps, one examining the economic, social and institutional 'sidetracking' of those in self-employment, and the other foregrounding the autonomy of self-employment and its cultural resonance in terms of breaking with traditional employment structures (Barley and Kunda 2006; Smeaton 2003).

These positions do not necessarily contradict each other, but rather point out the necessity of evaluating the agency involved in becoming self-employed. Stanworth and Stanworth (1995) introduce a typology of why people freelance. They argue that freelancers can be classified as refugees (unable to find in-house jobs), missionaries (freelance by choice) and trade-offs (freelance by because circumstances outside of work). Fraser and Gold (2001) add a fourth category to this: the convert, referring to those who start freelancing out of necessity but remain there by choice. But much attention is given to the individual dynamics of freelancing. It is, for example, likely that the account given by someone working as a freelancer will privilege an

agential view of themselves rather than a more passive one, given that they are self-managing their careers in a complex labour market. And prevailing discourses on the primacy of markets, enterprise culture (Du Gay 1996; Vallas and Cummins 2015) and neoliberal governmentality (Rose 1999; Loacker 2013) likely influence how workers articulate their personal and professional histories. Taking this idea further, Storey, Salaman and Platman (2005) carefully show how freelancers' identities are constructed in relation to enterprise discourse.

Studies of precariousness in work have generally argued that self-employed status deeply affects one's personal life (Sennett 1998; Standing 2011; see also Collinson 2003). There is evidence that the insecurity and unpredictability of freelance work influences health and well-being (Ertel, et al. 2005; D'Amours and Legault 2013). Dex et al. (2000) argue using a large-scale survey of freelancers in broadcasting that uncertainty is a major concern for the workers. They respond to this in various ways, such as by diversifying their sources of income, collecting useful information and building informal contacts. In their research, the respondents in their 40s are hit hardest by uncertainty and experience high stress levels as a result of this.

Surveying such contributions, we can say that there are a number of aspects that are distinctive to freelancing compared to traditional salaried employment. One key aspect of freelancing is networking by creating connections with peers and potential clients (Fraser and Gold 2001; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2012; Blair 2001). This is a way of building social capital that creates stable working relationships and additional work commissions. However, in many professions, such as the cultural industries, the necessary social and cultural capital is highly skewed towards white, male and middle-class entrants (Randle, et al. 2015; Grugulis and Stoyanova 2012), and this substantially affects job market opportunities. An important challenge concerning social capital in self-employment is how it develops over the course of working life, and how it is related to social milieu, market access and work opportunities.

Another aspect of freelancing is the importance of co-working for self-employed workers (Spinuzzi 2012). Co-working is not the same as networking: networking refers to the building of relationships with potential clients and peers. Co-working in existing research refers to self-employed workers' use of shared physical workspaces and their social function. Merkel (2015) argues that co-working spaces increase the potential for collaboration, and function as 'a sociomaterial infrastructure that enables networks of communication across a diverse set of people within and across cities, and a platform for new economic, political, and social action' (2015: 135). However, Gandini (2015) cautions against an overly positive view, and points out that co-working spaces can be seen to embody many contradictions of the casualised and precarious labour market, such as intercompetition between workers, or the 'branding' of co-working spaces themselves as extensions of one's reputation. A lingering question concerning co-working is whether such sites and practices are conducive to the development of collective forms of professional practice, sociality, or even political organisation.

A third aspect of freelancing is that of autonomy and freedom (Banks 2010). Fraser and Gold (2001) argue that freelancers obtain a higher degree of control over deadlines and remuneration compared to full-time employment. In a subsequent study, Gold and Fraser (2002) outline success factors such as membership of relevant professional bodies, connecting with fellow freelancers, having a financial safety net, and perseverance in building a practice. However, these are strongly related to social, cultural and economic capital, which is dependent on class, ethnicity and gender (Randle, et al. 2015). The playing field, then, is certainly not level. But these elements can be shaped by hard and tenacious work over time by those who survive in their profession. Nevertheless, the straightforward notion of autonomy as inherent in self-employment is problematic in light of this, and warrants further elaboration.

There are therefore further questions that arise from existing research. Firstly, we should further study the dynamics of social networks with peers and potential clients in freelance working, and how they are built and maintained. Secondly, it is important to more fully understand what freelancers do to become visible in the marketplace, and how this affects their wider social networks and relations. And thirdly, as insecurity and precariousness are a pressing concern, it is important to understand how the challenges of freelance working are experienced by practitioners, and how they relate to social relations that arise as part of freelancing practice.

To more fully conceptualise these aspects of freelance work and its context, it is necessary to focus specifically on the meaning of work as a human activity. For this, Arendt provides a key set of theoretical insights because she formulates a theory of working life through a phenomenological lens, accounting for the varying nature of tasks undertaken and their social embeddedness through the lived experience of being. Arendt argues that what we understand as work breaks down into different fundamental spheres of life activity, characterised by different ends. Since existing research on freelance work signals the crucial role of social networks and context, visibility in the marketplace, and insecurity and precariousness, Arendt's layered conceptualisation of work as composed of different fundamental activities allows us to interrogate and bring into focus how the realities of freelance working are accommodated in practitioners' experience. This also allows us to reflect on the ramifications of freelance work on a psychological and social level, in addition to its more widely explored economic implications. To this end, I will discuss Arendt's theory of human activity in further detail below.

Arendt, social organisation and the world of work

Hannah Arendt's work has had a broad-ranging influence within philosophy, political theory, and sociology, but has not been widely used in the field of organisation and management studies, with some notable exceptions (Van Diest and Dankbaar 2008; Henning 2011; Spoelstra 2010;

Paulsen 2016). Her book *The Human Condition* nevertheless holds great relevance for our understanding of work and organisation. Originally conceived as a critique of Marx, she develops an insightful analysis of Western capitalist modernity by tracing its emergence from classical Greek philosophy. As a phenomenologist, she strives to understand the nature of being through an inquiry into experience. However, rather than following Heidegger's primacy of thought over action, she argues that our engagement with the world around us is what makes us quintessentially human. As such, she investigates the fundamental human activities ('*vita activa'*) of labour, work and action. These are not empirical behaviours, but rather represent ontological horizons of being in relation to the world. From the perspective of organisation and management studies, it is remarkable that Arendt makes a philosophical distinction between work and labour. This allows for a fundamental interrogation into what constitutes productive effort. She argues that human endeavour can be distinguished by its process and by what it engenders.

Labour describes activity aimed at the reproduction of life. In ancient Greece, such activity was confined to the household, through cultivating the soil and harvesting its produce, hunting, tending livestock, preparing food, caring and nursing, and other activity largely considered part of domesticity. These activities follow biological rhythms of nature and the human body, responding to needs that make themselves felt affectively. The production here is cyclical, serving to maintain the human body (Arendt 1958, 110). Labour tends to necessity and subsistence, and does not leave a meaningful trace within the world, with its output immediately consumed. As such, the figure of labour is that of the *animal laborans,* the labouring animal, because we share this toil for our survival with animals. As such, it is the least human of the *vita activa*. Its cyclical, biologically bound cycle can only strive to produce comfort and abundance (or what we might call happiness), but remains fundamentally removed from social, worldly life.

This can be contrasted with work, the activity that aims at world building. Work describes the process of making objects that are durable, and useful for a role within the world of things. Work produces the environment in which life is lived. This is not strictly about the world of material things, for Arendt acknowledges too that writing for example largely belongs to the category of work. Work's manufactured artifice underlies the world of appearances (Bowring 2011, 18), even though work itself does not belong to the public world of appearances. Work can be associated with craft, with the mastery of skills that can turn a pre-conceived notion into a finished object, 'an independent entity [..] added to the human artifice' (Arendt 1958, 143). Therefore, in contrast with the cyclical nature of labour, work is characterised by a linear process. This involves applying given means to a pre-conceived end, and because of this Arendt is keen to point out the instrumental character of work:

> 'man, in so far as he is *homo faber*, instrumentalises, and his instrumentalisation implies a degradation of all things into means, their loss of intrinsic and independent value, so that eventually not only objects of fabrication but also "the earth in general and all forces of nature" [quoting Marx, Capital vol III] which clearly came into being without the help of man and have an existence independent of the human world, lose their "value because [they] do not present the reification which comes from work"'. (*ibid.*, 156)

But within work's ideal of usefulness also lies a central contradiction, which Arendt calls 'perplexity'. Namely, much of the justification of work resides in its later use to serve as a tool or half-product for further construction of things. The permanency that characterises the finished product of work is then only ever conditional, in case the object at hand converts to further means for the ends of the work process. As such, the activity of work then only carries the meaning of the end to which it is applied in terms of the logic of utility, and this meaning ceases when the task in question is accomplished (*ibid*., 154). It is for this reason that Arendt argues that work

tends towards meaninglessness, and it is exactly at this point that work is reliant on action (*ibid*., 236).

Work and labour have strongly differing relationships to the public nature of life. In their capacity as labourers, people may occupy the public realm, but rather than being truly public these are 'private activities displayed in the open' (*ibid*., 134). Work, on the other hand, does have a definite connection with public life.

> 'Unlike the *animal laborans*, whose social life is worldless and herdlike and who therefore is incapable of building or inhabiting a public, worldly realm, *homo faber* is fully capable of having a public realm of his own, even though it may not be a political realm, properly speaking. His public realm is the exchange market, where he can show the products of his hand and receive the esteem which is due him.' (*ibid.*, 160)

However, this public role of the activity of work is circumscribed by the narrow rules of the market and the instrumentality of work itself. It is instead the realm of action that for Arendt embodies the most important aspects of sociality.

The third and final of the *vita activa* of action holds a special status for Arendt to work and labour, in that it describes the most quintessentially human of endeavours. Its natural expression is in the public sphere, within the *polis,* which 'is not the city-state in its physical location: it is the organisation of people as it arises out of acting and speaking together' (*ibid*., 198). Action describes the social relations that enable and reproduce human exchange, and the collective engagement in sense making. As dissenting views are aired, countered and debated, a process of inclusive meaning-making is underway. Out of the *vita activa*, action is the one that can generate truly new phenomena (*ibid*., 9). Labour is bound by its cyclicality and work by its linearity, but action has the capacity for *natality*, giving birth to new forms of life. It is also the realm in which

human beings can generate a sense of being together, outside of the binding strictures of consumption or production, given that what defines action is its abandonment of utilitarianism in favour of a search for meaning. Henning (2011) provides a very useful extension of Arendtian theory by pointing to the concept of 'habit'. Whereas habit embodies human endeavour that is repeated and sedimented into regular behaviour patterns, *action* points to those activities that embody natality, extend the horizon of possibility and that build a basis for collectivity. In this sense, sociality itself is not necessarily of the realm of *action*, but only when it succeeds in moving beyond the ontic to glimpse the ontological.

By analysing the meaning that these activities had for the philosophers of ancient Greece, Arendt is able to contrast them with their manifestation in her own historical timeframe. She concludes these enduring human activities are influenced substantially by the political and economic context in which they take place. Ultimately, this is a critique of how people work and live in Fordist capitalism. She takes aim at the individualism and commodification as they emerged in what she calls (typical of the period) mass culture. Rather than a sphere of human action, mass culture for Arendt is a short-circuit of alienated labour and meaningless consumerism (Swift 2009, 64-66). On employment, Arendt argues that work in modernity tends to turn into an alienated mode of production in which skill-based craft is degraded into mere subsistence labour, severing the link to the end of fabrication (of useful objects):

> '[M]ost work in the modern world is performed in the mode of labor, so that the worker, even if he wanted to, could not "labor for his work rather than for himself", and frequently is instrumental in the production of objects of whose ultimate shape he has not the slightest notion.' (Arendt 1958, 140-141)

In Fordism then, *labour* comes to supplant both *work* and *action.* For Arendt, this reduces the working life of people to the base reproduction of labour power. Her concepts of *labour, work*

and *action* are formulated to capture what is enduring to being human within productive society. As such, these categories can further help us to trace the implications of the shift from Fordist employment to post-Fordist working life. Contemporary employment has greatly diversified, and self-employment, precariousness and flexibilisation are increasingly important. Reading freelance workers' experiences through an Arendtian lens provides specific insight into how emergent work patterns rely on the creation and maintenance of professional tools and objects (through the concept of *work)*, as well as the embeddedness in specific social relations (through the concept of *action)*.

To understand the specificity of the lived experience of freelance work, we have to look beyond notions such as the employment relationship, work organisation and control strategies. In freelancing, work manifests itself as a market transaction rather than an employment relationship. However, such market encounters rely on complex social arrangements and relations which require social labour. The demands of work are also experienced in far more individualised ways, and equally work will be structured along the needs and the abilities of the individual.

Existing literature draws attention to the ways in which freelance work is linked with precariousness, a desire for autonomy, the centrality of social production and the blurring of work-life boundaries, among other things. To assess how freelancers experience such issues, negotiate them and how their working lives are structured to accommodate them, we need a concept of how precariousness is accommodated, how market reputations are built and maintained, and how social relations are developed and relied upon by freelancers. Arendt's concepts of *labour, work* and *action* help us to make sense of the ways in which ends of subsistence, fabrication and community respectively are woven into the fabric of working life.

To this end, I will use Arendt's *vita activa* as way of analysing everyday accounts of freelance working. Below, I will discuss the data collection and analysis that preceded this case study.

Methodology and data analysis

Data collection

Empirical material for this paper was collected in 2014, in a qualitative study aimed at the nature, context and experience of freelance work. Research took place in three countries: the UK, Germany and the Netherlands. To gain preliminary insight into specific contextual factors such as housing costs and prevalent industry sectors, contrasting research sites were used. The scale of this study is not sufficient for comparative research design, and was not part of the analysis.

30 interviews were done in total with initial contacts collected through networks, and snowball sampling used for generating further research participants. In order to access freelancers rather than portfolio workers, contractors or entrepreneurs (Stanworth and Stanworth, 1995), all those who were interviewed were working in a self-employed capacity, selling their labour to three or more clients. 22 can be considered to work in the cultural industries and 8 are outside of these. Cultural industry sectors were comprised by advertising, fashion, music, film, publishing and graphic design. Other interviewees worked in the building trade, IT, healthcare, childcare and education. There were 18 female interviewees and 12 male interviewees. The majority of participants were in the age range of 30-45. 3 participants were in their 20s, one in his 50s and two in their 60s. Interviews were 45 minutes to an hour in length and manually analysed in terms of their content. The interviews were aimed at letting participants voice an account of their

typical working day. Accounts included daily activities, acquisition of work, networks and contacts, ambitions, portfolio (past work) and challenges, allowing participants to unpack experiential and material aspects of everyday work routines.

Thematic data analysis

Initial analysis involved coding prevalent narrative elements and tracing how answers were structured. The subsequent analysis was structured around three dominant themes taken from prevalent literature on self-employment, as discussed above. These three themes of networking, market presentation and co-working were used as a coding heuristic to allow the data analysis to develop a direct contribution to existing literature.

Networking, market presentation, and co-working can be seen as necessary aspects of freelancing that allow for continuity and stability in work flow and income. While these aspects can be considered constitutive to freelance labour power, we need to understand their effect on practitioners' lived experience. To achieve this, interviews were then coded based on Arendt's categories. As argued in the previous section, Arendt's framework comprises a socio-historical analysis of the phenomenology of work, and it argues that what we commonly call work consists of various activities that tend towards different life goals: subsistence, fabrication and community.

In analysing the empirical material through Arendt's categories, this study is able to trace how enduring meanings and ends are recombined into typical freelance work activities, and how these meanings and ends are refracted into distinctive features of freelance work experience. By doing so, this study elaborates on and extends widely acknowledged features of freelance working,

such as networking, co-working and self-presentation within the marketplace, by revealing complex dynamics, tensions and contradictions in the lived experience of freelancers. In order to operationalise Arendt's categories, interviews were coded for relevant symbolism and narratives to categorise specific elements of everyday work experience into the *vita activa.* These symbolic and narrative aspects appear in the right-most column of Table 1, showing how parts of interview accounts were linked to Arendt's categories of human activity.

**** insert Table 1 here *******

Case study analysis: understanding the experience of freelance working

In this section, I explore prominent themes within freelancers' interview accounts: networking, market representation, and co-working. To further interpret their significance, I will read these through Arendt's notions of *labour*, *work* and *action*[1], and thereby to conceptualise what is distinctive about the lived experience of freelance work.

Networking

It is important not to overlook the efforts that precede paid freelance jobs. A prominent aspect of freelancers' activity is building a social and professional network, to generate opportunities for further paid work, among other things. We can regard such networking as 'work-for-labour' (Standing 2011), where substantial effort goes into finding opportunities for paid work. But for freelancers networking is also a way of establishing their place within a community of practice. Such a community of peers often has an implicit hierarchy (Arvidsson 2007; Hesmondhalgh and

Baker 2012; Barley and Kunda 2006), providing access to different tiers of commissioned jobs. Networks might also regulate one's share in community resources. Apart from a pragmatic economic rationale, it might also affects the social imagination, one's sense of self and relating to others. Examining networking activity through the lens of Arendt's *vita activa* help us to contextualise its role within freelance experience.

In this research, freelancers demonstrated a strong internalised pressure for continuous interaction with existing and new clients, and wider social engagement within their field. Often this manifested itself through social events and shared social circles. A freelance illustrator and designer expressed the pressure she feels to network with her peers and potential new clients.

> 'I feel I really should always be networking, just like I am supposed to be doing that with other illustrators, I should be doing it with new clients, and also maintaining [existing ones]. It's not my favourite thing to do!'

In this quote, the interviewee expresses a strongly felt imperative to maintain a social profile among potential clients and peers, which can be seen in 'I really should always be networking' and 'I am supposed to…'. This is typical for many of the interviewees. Often this involved going to industry social events, gallery openings, conferences, media events, launches, etc. Interviewees also indicated that specific public places (restaurants, bars) could be good venues to network due to the likelihood of running into fellow professionals.

For many of those working in non-standard work arrangements, the boundaries between work and non-work are being blurred (Virno, 1995; McRobbie, 1998). With respect to the lived experience of freelancers, this can be read through Arendt's notion of *work,* highlighting how logics of linearity and means-end optimisation pervade activities aimed at fabrication of a professional presence. Here, we can see how such *work*-based instrumentality seeps into

socialising and peer connections through an internalised demand to be seen to be professional, available and eager to build professional networks.

This also extends to online social activity. Interviewees talked about how an online presence on social media or a work blog can assist this process. Here is a designer speaking:

> '[A blog] works well because clients can see that you are keeping busy, and that there is a real person behind the work. I am not the kind of person who is networking at every chance I get, going to all the after-work drinks. It's a bit of a risk not to be showing your face at such things. You definitely get more opportunities if they know you personally. There is also a chance it can go against you, but mostly personal contact really works in your favour. And I don't…, I am not that good at that. So in that sense, I think it's a good thing to have a blog on the side.'

This quote again indicates how networking is a deeply experienced expectation for freelancers, evident here from how she describes it as a risk to not engage in it sufficiently. We see this interviewee express what she sees as a deficiency in herself ('not very good at it'). To be personally recognised is important here, then – and this interview argues that social media and blogs can play a role in this. While interviewees stress the professional importance of networking, this mostly relies on making a genuine social connection. Freelancers need to build social bonds with peers that are experienced by both parties as meaningful. The imperative to network then embodies both *work* and *action*, activities traditionally purged from the Fordist labour process. Here, they appear as a vital pre-condition for procuring paid jobs as a freelancer.

The notion of personal networks as something that connects one to the wider marketplace is further supported by the theme of exchange that comes up in relation to it. A lighting engineer for TV and film talks below about how his network provides ongoing work for him.

'People find me through my network. You know, you start somewhere. A favour to a friend will get you in. 'he's a good guy, he'll put his best foot forward, here's his number.' The next time you'll get a bit more money, then some more, then some more still, and before you know it, it's running. As long as it's running and you put the effort in, it'll keep running. Unless you have a lie-in a couple of times or you shoot your mouth off.'

Within this account, the interviewee emphasises how social and professional ties rely on the exchange of favours. Between peers, jobs can be exchanged as favours later to be returned, and offering these reinforces personal relationships, mutual recognition of craft, and trustworthiness. In such gestures, sociality becomes deeply entwined with instrumentality. Read through Arendt's concepts of *work* and *action,* this dynamic of favour exchange reflects how the logics of instrumental fabrication and social community-building intersect within the lived experience of freelance workers.

Not all freelancers interviewed for this research experienced networking as a deliberate activity. In the quote below, a designer for fashion and sports companies describes how he has found himself in a 'world of hook-ups'.

'What I see now, at this age, [..] that many skateboarders I know from my early days all ended up in creative professions. You know. You've still got that connection from skating, and a shared attitude, but everyone is also older and more sensible, more balanced and they've got their shit together. And then suddenly you've got a network around you made up of cool people who make cool things that you can do things with. And then, without having thought about making contacts with this or that person, to achieve this or that, suddenly the moment is there. You find yourself in a world of hook-ups.'

Within this quote, the term 'network' implies interconnectivity and exchange, while the term 'cool' carries connotations of peer evaluation and professional hierarchies among fellow practitioners. The interviewee intimates that networking for him is not planned, but relies on

swapping mutual favours and opportunities. The term 'cool' is significant as it introduces to the notion of exchange a sense of ranking the quality, desirability of the output and reputation of people one connects with. While emphasising the non-intentionality of his own approach, the interviewee's account nevertheless stresses the crucial usefulness of a network, and also suggests very significant overlap between the personal and professional. This further emphasises how social bonds may be instrumentalised within freelance work experience.

In Arendt's theory, the activity of associating with others and establishing durable relations belongs to the realm of action, since organising is not inherent in work organisation but always the province of *action* (1958, 123). In interviewees' accounts of networking, activity that would have traditionally belonged to the realm of *action* becomes subject to a means-end rationality that enlists it in the fabrication of professional networks and the optimisation of one's reputation. A network of human relations is pursued, built and maintained in a way that cannot be separated strictly from the instrumental linearity of *work*, which tends towards reducing matters to a means-ends relation. The exchange-based nature of such networking extends the logic of *work* into a realm that is traditionally more closely associated with *action*, and makes this entanglement a key part of freelance experience. *Work,* in the form of repeated and reliable generation of paid jobs, here builds upon deeper social bonds that are embodied within professional communities, and meaningful social interaction that allows mutual trust and professional recognition to emerge. Arendt's categories of *work* and *action* therefore allow us to see freelancers' networking activity as a key site of the blurring of the boundary between work and non-work for many contemporary workers (Virno 2004; Hardt and Negri 2001). This is visually represented in figure 1.

--------Insert figure 1 about here---

Figure 1 shows how we can understand the distinctive aspects of freelance working experience when understood through Arendt's notions of *work* and *action.* How does this change our existing understanding of freelance work? While research shows that networking is central to the realities of freelance working, this study demonstrates how networking is a key site of the blurring of the work/life boundary, and how this impacts on the lived reality of working. The isolation of freelance work ensures that networking serves a real social need in terms of socialising and for obtaining recognition of peers. However, such deep social bonds are inflected with logics of exchange and instrumentalism through their role in the need to build up a functioning artifice of repeat business, and the exchange of favours key to maintaining contact with peers. Arendt's framework allows us to see how social activity becomes instrumentalised. But this interrelation between *work* and *action* in the activity of networking also has a parallel implication: for networking to be effective, it relies on a meaningful social connection and a network built on sincerity and collegial recognition.

Market representation

In the previous section, we saw how social networking for freelancers can become infused with instrumental concerns over one's position, and generating more paid jobs. Arendt's categories of *work* and *action* show how social activity not only forms a key part of the fabric of working life within freelancers' experience, but also how such networks come to be a precondition of the productiveness of freelance working itself. Through Arendt, we see why for networks to be productive in generating work, a social connection needs to be perceived as sincere.

We can extend this insight by noting that for freelance workers the distinctiveness of one's professional profile is a crucial concern. How a freelancer's labour power is represented in the market involves a great deal of socially and symbolically skilled effort. A key part of this market representation is the portfolio, which most of the interviewees brought up. Freelancers face the need to build up a body of work that represents them to potential clients. Viewed through the Arendtian concept of *work,* a portfolio is a carefully constructed artifice that reflects the quality and aesthetics of performed work, but it is often also meant to represent that worker's specific approach, skills or image. In this sense, a portfolio is a profoundly embodied document, which reflects the deep investment of the individual in their output.

In close conjunction to the notion of the portfolio, then, is the question of reputation within the marketplace for freelancers. In the interviews, we can see that various freelance workers are looking for ways to articulate and exhibit aspects of their personal market presence with reference to their work. In response to a question on whether she was making an adequate living in her career, a film and video editor said the following:

> 'it's difficult. But there are people who are much better at selling themselves. Before, I never used to introduce myself as a filmmaker, but now I do do that. That's to do with your concept of yourself, how you conceive of yourself. I guess I am a late bloomer in that sense, you know.'

In this quote we see a very striking use of the phrase 'selling themselves'. Rather than selling their work or asking after client needs, the interviewee here presents the performativity of her professional self as an important precondition to developing a successful career as a freelancer. She references the notion of self-concept in this, styling this to resonate with those being addressed. This is also reflected in the statement by another freelancer (DJ/decorator/stage designer), who stated that '[y]ou have to really present yourself very clearly and convincingly to

other people. If you can't do that, nothing will happen.' Such self-presentation also has to adapt to the changeable conditions that freelancers work in, and use a deep knowledge of market context, client communication and product demand. Viewed through Arendt's notion of *work,* this shows how for freelancers, one's carefully crafted reputation and portfolio represents an artifice of work that curates, historicises and narrates previous professional endeavours and links it to a corresponding presentation of the self. This reflects the instrumental and market-oriented logics of *work.* Below, I focus on the ways in freelancers go beyond this dimension of *work* within their market presentation. Viewed through the concept of *action,* we can see how the effective construction of reputation and portfolio relies on a deep investment in one's work that transcends the instrumentality of *work* and the bare reproduction of life of *labour*. Combining different types of professional tasks takes planning and strategising with respect to how portfolio and reputation are presented, when, and to whom. This draws out the performative aspects of the self, and how they matter in generating opportunities for paid jobs.

There were instances where freelancers went beyond an externalised sense of self-presentation, and gave an account of themselves as deeply invested in their professional endeavours. The following quote came from the fashion and sports illustrator already cited above.

'Q: Do you have clients where you are happy to work for less because of the nature of the job you are being offered?

A: That happens – and sometimes it is also the case that as a freelancer you don't have the luxury of turning it down. Because every 100 euro you can make, is just that, another 100 euros. Sure, I could say 'I am not going to make you a design for 100 euro', but if I don't have any work at that time, I'd just be sitting in front of my computer, without anything to do. In that timeframe I could just be doing that job, it is fun to do, so it would be a productive way of making do with the situation. It works both ways. The way I see it, my work is simply what I do. It's not even just my work – I would be drawing anyway. It's what I would be doing

anyway on an everyday basis. I just want to make t-shirt designs, and skateboard designs, that's what I want to do. So I was going to be doing it anyway [laughs]. But, I would be waiting for an excuse, and that's [what] the commission [is].'

In this quote, the notion of work as something that one identifies deeply with comes across strongly. The interviewee argues that he 'would be drawing anyway' even when not commissioned to do so, even if it were not his living. He casts it as a central activity in his life: 'it's what I want to do', what 'I was going to do be doing anyway'. At the same time, this comes up by way of justifying why he does not turn down low paid work, which he '[doesn't] have the luxury of turning […] down'. There are two notable themes here: firstly, an assertion of the deep personal investment in one's craft, and secondly, that of subsistence and necessity (evoking *labour*). The latter is justified by means of the former – the pressing need of accepting underpaid work is reframed as a side-benefit of this illustrator's self-professed deep investment in his work, which he presents as 'not even just my work' – but an authentic form of self-expression. Freelancing is cast, here and in other interviews, as beyond the instrumentality of portfolio and reputation (*work)* and not driven by the need to make a basic living (*labour).* The implicit notion of authenticity here is closer to the realm of *action* because it invokes a notion of human activity as a form of self-realisation, based in aesthetic and social value. This interrelated articulation of autonomy, self-marketing and subsistence also appears in other interviews.

Below, a book cover designer articulates the difficulty in realising the promise of autonomy within freelance working.

'[Books] are a nice meeting point of what I like in terms of aesthetics. But I am really wanting to branch out into other areas. My work has been quite quiet the last month and a half. And I was really seriously thinking about going back into fulltime employment again. Looking on the job websites, you know, just to see. But I keep thinking, there is so much that I want to do, creatively, that I wouldn't be able to do if I was not freelance.

And being freelance is a bit of a… a bit of a deceptive career, because you think you will have more time, you know, to do X, Y and Z, but actually much of the time is caught up with earning a living, and trying to bring the money in, you know, and marketing yourself, and all that stuff that keeps you [busy]. So the idea of doing other things, and building up to other things can often seem like a faraway dream, but it is the dream that keeps you going in a sense. Well, for me, personally.'

On the surface, the interviewee here describes the professional autonomy within freelance working as more of an aspirational goal than a reality. He presents this autonomy as a 'faraway dream', a remote ideal that draws people into a freelance career. But throughout, he wavers between defending this ideal and the pragmatic realities.

Within the existing literature on freelance work, there is little acknowledgement of such ambivalence over freelance working. While there are useful reflections on the complexity of autonomy in an institutional sense (Banks, 2010), the decision to freelance is often slotted into one of several categories (Fraser and Gold, 2001). What we encounter in the quote above is real ambivalence in the way freelancing is experienced and enacted in everyday life. Arendt's framework here allows us to explore enduring categories of human activity within this account of ambivalence, and this helps us to shed light on unique challenges and distinguishing features of freelance working.

In the narrative, themes of *labour* are reflected in terms of 'earning a living, and trying to bring the money in', emphasising the basic reproduction of labour power. But this interviewee presents this need for subsistence as something that actually curtails (rather than being a trade-off) professional autonomy and creative expression. At the same time, he acknowledges that the ideal is something that sustains everyday practice: 'it is the dream that keeps you going'. And by

referencing 'building up to things' the interviewee here touches on creating professional recognition and connections, which relate to *work* but rely on *action*.

Even when precarity throws up worries of finding adequately paid work, freelancers may equally be concerned with using jobs to further build their work profile, portfolio and reputation. Here, issues such as the unpredictability of the job market and fee/wage levels, reflecting *labour*, were de-emphasised by interviewees in order to foreground the autonomy inherent in freelancing, and the passion they have for their craft. This shows how concerns of economic security, subsistence and precariousness can be experienced by freelancers as private issues, unproductive to one's self-marketing at best, and at worst harmful.

Within market presentation, we can see how *labour, work* and *action* represent different efforts, and strive for different ends – *work* towards legacy and fabrication, *action* towards politics and encountering the new, while *labour* strives for comfort and abundance. Arendt's framework illuminates how these different elements of freelance working are recombined differently in freelancing to traditional employment. In using Arendt's concepts, this section shows how the individual market presentation of freelance workers can be understood to deeply impact their experience: by focusing their efforts on an artifice of work in which previous output and one's professional image are reflected, by stimulating a deep personal investment in their work, and by fostering an ambivalent response to the precarious realities of making a living (Figure 2).

-------Insert figure 2 about here--

Figure 2 shows how the lens of Arendt's categories leads us to discern different aspects of the experience of freelance work. To present their labour power in the marketplace, freelance workers rely on having and maintaining both a strong portfolio and a good reputation. To obtain these, they navigate different fundamental human activities with contrasting underlying ends. Presenting oneself clearly in the market involves deeper underlying ends of subsistence, fabrication and community. The ways in which *labour, work* and *action* intersect in concrete working activities provides important insight into the distinguishing characteristics of the experience of freelance working. Viewed through the prism of market representation, and using Arendt's categories, freelancers' accounts demonstrate how freelancers may mask the precarious reality of their working life with the need for building an attractive portfolio, and a celebration of the autonomy and authenticity of their professional life.

Above, we saw how a freelancer explained away the necessity of taking underpaid jobs by professing his passion for his chosen profession, and downplaying the precariousness of his career. In this way, the harsher realities were masked by an account of pursuing his true calling as an illustrator. In another interviewee's account, we saw ambivalence about the autonomy inherent in freelance working, the interviewee arguing on one hand that autonomy is something he strives for, but on the other hand that the constant need for asserting a market presence limits the freedom he would expect to have.

In Arendt's terms, market representation most obviously aligns with the notion of *work*, because it relies an artifice of completed efforts. This thing-like body of work is what stands in for identity within the marketplace – it is what represents the individual. The *work* artifice comes to stand in for the subject in the marketplace. Identity at work here is not a montage of intimate and public personae, but an embodied display of past professional efforts. But in freelancers' responses, we can see a real desire to complement this artifice with self-expression. Here, the interplay between

notions of authenticity and notions of precarity is striking. Beyond the psychological ambivalence in everyday life, this has real effects in terms of market presentation: to be precarious in not to be in demand. And the themes of authenticity and autonomy provide an agential narrative that embellish the body of *work* that represents the freelancer in the marketplace.

Co-working

A striking thing about freelance workers is their desire for communal working, despite their professed autonomy. In traditional employment, allegiances, affect and identities can be crafted within interpersonal and group relations. Freelancers do not usually benefit from such arrangements, either spatially or institutionally. While some of them work 'on-site', most will either work from home or share a dedicated workspace with others. Given that Arendt's main critique of employment under modernity is its isolation from sociality and politics, the specific social space freelancers work in is worth examining.

Most freelancers in this study worked in co-working spaces with other self-employed people. These generally resembled open plan offices, with personalised units and some specialist working equipment like additional monitors, drawing tables or specialist printers. Freelancers argued that it is 'important to feel that you have colleagues'. Working solitarily was expressed as 'unsociable' by another interviewee. An advertising freelancer expressed that 'when you have an in-house job, you suddenly notice how nice it is to have colleagues'. Prompted to suggest key aspects of freelancing, another interviewee expressed the importance of being around other working people, whom she could exchange views and sometimes tasks with, and who motivated her to stay focused.

'Yes, maybe it is interesting to talk about what kind of workspace people have, whether you are sharing or something. How you work, you know. I really appreciate having a shared workspace, to have the idea that I am going to work each morning. I also find it motivating to have other people around me who are working. And that I can just ask my neighbour, hey what would you do with this invoice, or how would you handle such and such a client. Not necessarily things to do with illustration, but stuff like client contact and admin, things like invoices. In the past I have also asked someone in my studio to help me with a piece of text, which is something I am not very good at. So when I had to give a presentation, well present my work to a client, I asked someone to write an accompanying text on the basis of an interview with me. That was an important realisation for me, that you don't have to do everything yourself.'

Here, we see the interviewee, a designer and illustrator, express a common view of co-working spaces, as a spatially separate place where 'work' happens. Being present among others is considered important, in two senses. Firstly, the interviewee expresses the need to be passively among others who are also involved in the activity of working. But secondly, there is also a more active sense of encountering others, through knowledge sharing and through more involved collaborations. This quote suggests quite clearly how co-working spaces create potential for collective endeavour and weaving a social fabric. In doing so, co-working spaces enable the social production of shared community and imagination that Arendt refers to as *action*.

But shared social space was not necessarily confined to co-working spaces. For example, a freelance nanny described how she regularly met with other nannies, allowing her to discuss and reflect on work issues:

'I'd say we… I do meet up with other nannies every day. And we organise play groups, or go to music groups together. So we sort of talk then, and exchange our experiences, and answer each other's questions as to what's acceptable and what isn't, and what our job entices [*sic*]'.

Here, the interviewee indicates that she very regularly reflects on her work with others who do the same. While their work is individual to them, they create shared social spaces to speak to colleagues, make sense of daily working life, and negotiate boundaries and standards. In doing so, they co-construct understandings of their own conduct and that of clients. While such encounters would not be out of the ordinary in organisations, here they are developed between independent contractors to develop a shared basis for of one's *work* and *labour*, and to create a network of peers that transcends professional courtesy or exchange of favours.

I did not encounter the intercompetition between freelancers or the self-branding on the basis of co-working spaces that Gandini (2015) signals as potentially problematic. In this research, Merkel's (2015) notion of co-working spaces as sites of socialisation and organisation is more representative. Co-working spaces played a central role of freelance experience as hubs where crucial socialisation and organising happened. Viewed through the *vita activa*, such socialisation and organisation reflect the realm of *action.* Whilst freelance working is often painted as independent and solitary, interviewees considered co-working and collaboration central to sustaining its practice. This is reflected in the following quote, where a film lighting engineer explains how the collective production process, with varying conditions and personnel, is a major draw for him.

> 'But the people who do this work, they will generally keep doing it. Because in the end, it's a lot of fun. You're not really making money; you are making a product together. That's the most important thing to me. The gear is interesting to me, as is providing good lighting, but every day is different because you are never in the same location with the same people. Every day has variables that will put you on edge, like a difficult balcony that doesn't allow for placement of the lights, or dealing with residents on location who now have to deal with a generator in front of their house. These are challenges that keep you engaged.'

This quote shows how *work* as a process of fabrication ('good lighting') and its attendant craft and skills are valued alongside a form of collectivity. The interviewee's account of communicating with residents shows how that he values navigating social complexity in his work, as well as the collective nature of producing *work's* end result ('making a product together'). We can also see here how the emergence of unexpected or novel experiences is something that people value about co-working and collaboration. We can relate this to Arendt's notions of natality, a central condition of the realm of *action.*

For freelancers, co-working is not just a way of facilitating *action*. Through the natality and plurality that come with such social *action*, freelancers are able to occupy the public sphere in ways that transcend the instrumentality and transactionality of the marketplace, of competing for work and self-branding to advertise their services. The sociality captured under co-working allows freelancers to act on what Henning (2011: 292) understands as habit, and unsettle and reinvent social patterns in collective ways that embody *action* (figure 3). Henning's notion of habit here refers to a set of recurring practices that establish social relationships and structure, but at the same time provide a collective basis for the emergence of genuine *action* that reinvents such sociality, or creates new surfaces for collaboration and possibility.

-------Insert figure 3 about here---

Figure 3 reflects the way Arendt's concept of *action* allows us to understand how freelancers' participation in co-working is not just mere socialising to break up the isolation of individualised practice, but represents the renewal and reinvention of social patterns. This has implications for how *work* and *labour* unfold, and must be seen as more than an immediate sociality. It also

concerns the social basis for the productivity of freelance labour as such. Arendt's notion of *action* allows us to see how co-working practices create a social fabric among individual freelancers, a platform of collective sensemaking of experiences and negotiation of professional standards and boundaries, and in specific cases also the opening up of possibilities for collective *work.* Figure 3 shows how in this way, we can recognise in the practice of co-working attempts at renewal and reinvention of social habit.

Discussion

Above, I explored freelancers' accounts using Arendt's *vita activa* to conceptualise key features of the freelance working experience. This study highlights how freelance workers experience the pursuit of their professional efforts in ways that differ substantially from traditional salaried employment. The findings are summed up in figure 4, with insights from each empirical sub-section displayed. Arendt's concepts here show us how common and frequently essential freelance activities (in the left-hand column) have specific implications in terms of the experience of freelance working (right hand column). The colour scheme used shows how Arendt's enduring phenomenological categories of human activity allow us to discern distinctive features of freelance experience. Viewed through this lens, freelancers' typical activities engender diverse and at times contradictory features of experience, involving social and spatial connectedness to peers and potential clients, meaningful sociality, the fabrication of a 'work artifice', self-investment in one's output, and co-working to build and reinvent freelancers' social embeddedness.

-------Insert figure 4 about here---

Examining the typical freelance activity of networking provided very useful insights that underline the central place of 'work-for-labour' (Standing, 2011). Looked at through Arendt's notion of *work,* we can understand this as consciously crafting an artifice of previous works as a key piece of 'design' that is necessary in the freelance job market. Developing this artifice is as important as carrying out one's primary work tasks. Networking, while it carries the appearance of social activity, is focused on the reproduction and acquisition of one's paid jobs.

Through Arendt's concept of *action*, we can see that building such an artifice of previous works also relies on creating a sincere and meaningful connection with others. Such sensitive and highly skilled social labour is essential for freelancers in ways that differ sharply from conventional employment. This work takes place alongside overtly instrumental concerns of generating further paid work opportunities. The uneasy co-existence of opposite underlying ends of fabrication and community has the potential for ambiguity and contradiction in freelancers' lived experience, and this represents one of the key challenges in freelance working.

There is a further tension that we can see in the analysis, one between acknowledgement of precariousness and maintenance of a narrative of autonomous self-actualisation. Previous research has sought to understand how, given the flexibilisation and casualisation of work, individuals are affected by issues such as the contingency of work frequency and the attendant cash flow problems (Barley and Kunda 2006), the reliance on path-dependent networks (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2012; Blair 2001) or the receding support of local communities (Sennett 1998). To make sense of how freelancers experience precariousness, it is important to understand the uniqueness of their predicament.

Many freelancers in this study seem hesitant to identify as precarious, treating the need to survive economically as a private concern rather than a structural problem. Arendt's categories help us to analyse this. Her notion of *labour* historicises how specific human efforts can become styled as private concerns, which explains how in freelancers' experiences, issues around subsistence and economic security come to be pushed towards the private sphere. This also suggests that the potential of precarity as a political rallying point may be limited in certain cases.

'Precariousness as a private problem' may be exacerbated by a deep personal investment in one's work output. The data analysis showed how this can lead to a short circuit, where seeing oneself as precarious is to admit to not being in demand. In this way, rhetoric of autonomy and authenticity creates an agential narrative that exists to animate and amplify one's portfolio for the benefit of generating paid jobs. Arendt's categories here help us to trace how daily activities relate to deeper levels of experience, and shows how they may be aimed at opposing ends, generating conflicting meanings and outcomes.

This study more generally shows how everyday activities undertaken by freelancers are vital to positioning their labour in the market. Arendt's notion of *work* shows how selling one's labour power in the market requires a distinctive character from other commodities, which is also reliant on the self-presentation of the worker (see also Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2012). The analysis also suggests that in order to generate new work, freelancers need to read social situations and convincingly enact this personal/professional interpretive repertoire. Through Arendt's notion of *work*, we can see how market presentation is bound up with fabricating a representation of one's work through reputation, a portfolio of past work, and a carefully crafted persona (such as on social media). At the same time, such fabrications may sit alongside the private nature of precarious working life, compared above to the notion of *labour*. The concepts of *work, action* and *labour* here make it possible to understand the ambivalent position that freelancers have

towards precariousness. They experience its effects, but the importance of networks and a clear professional image mean that they favour self-presentation that downplays hardship in favour of agency, passionate attachment to work, and enterprise.

The tension between strategic self-presentation and the privations of precariousness can be linked to recent research on identity and subjectivity in management and organisation studies (Kenny and Fotaki 2014; Ekman 2013), drawing on concepts of desire and affect in understanding identification, disidentification and the structuring role of language and images. Such research posits that ideal images within dominant discourse can serve to mask a fractured or imperfect reality. In this study, through careful curation of portfolios and the performative presentation of their reputation, freelancers construct idealised images of their work practice. In interview accounts, freelancers appeared to short-circuit specific issues around insecurity and precarity by referring back to the potential, if not the reality, of high professional autonomy and freedom within their chosen career path. What Arendt adds to this is a clear account of how imperatives of necessity, fabrication and community can structure different elements of freelance work experience, and what its unique pitfalls and challenges are.

Freelancers strive to assert ownership, identity and autonomy through their work, and that this can be seen as a major part of its appeal, in spite of its many drawbacks in terms of precariousness and insecurity. Within a wider sense, this reflects communicative and affective labour as part of communicative capitalism (Mumby 2016), where we can see freelancers' self-presentation as a way of creating a *durable legacy* closely tied a specific self-image, which allows them to position their labour power within the marketplace. In a more immediate social sense, freelancers practice co-working to allow for collaboration, social interaction, mutual support and resource sharing. The natality and plurality afforded by such collective practice allows workers not only to do their

work in a more sustained and dedicated way, but it can also allow for important bonds and a shared narrative to be shaped within a chaotic, dispersed and often harsh marketplace.

In such a way, this study also connects with debates on the appropriation of the social within contemporary capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2001; Harvey 2013; Virno 2004; Lazzarato 1996; Mumby 2016). As capital seeks to appropriate immaterial value, the affective and symbolic skills that people develop in everyday life become integrated into the capitalist labour process, and valuable commons created in communities, groups and spaces become increasingly privatised. This study shows how parts of social life can become instrumentalised (as we saw in the case of networking) but we also see a re-building of social commons elsewhere, such as through co-working (Merkel 2015). There are also indications in the analysis that the desire to tie one's self-concept to work output could be understood as a way of resisting capitalist appropriation of work in ways that go beyond this 'social factory' argument. Here, Arendt's notion of *action* provides a notion of sociality that also encapsulates politics (Van Diest and Dankbaar 2008), and how it relies on public space. Henning 's (2011) notion of habit is instructive here. *Action* can be read into specific efforts that freelancers undertake, but that are at times routinised and instrumentalised as part of their work process. As such, freelancers through their collective praxis are manufacturing possibilities for changes in social habit, thereby widening and evolving the social basis upon which production occurs in their daily *labour.*

Some studies have overstated the individual freedom of self-employed workers in a kind of free market optimism that Barley and Kunda (2006) have called 'free agent' thinking (e.g. Gold and Fraser 2002). This study highlights how the working life of freelancers provides intersubjective, collective possibilities for what Henning (2011) following Arendt (1958) calls freedom, although there is a constant pressure for such *action* to be enlisted repeatedly and instrumentally within everyday work activity. This can be seen in the way social encounters with peers can become

overt attempts at networking, co-working spaces can become vehicles for generating further jobs, and self-developmental projects can be overtaken by self-branding for the purpose of one's portfolio or CV. This paper has posited a number of distinguishing features of freelance work experience, showing how its social embedding, productive capacity and subjective impact are markedly different from conventional employment. Our understanding of the wider effects of these distinguishing features will benefit from further study of lived experience. Understanding the challenges, appeal and potential of self-employment will be key in years to come, as we can expect to see its prevalence growing further.

References

Arendt, H. 1958. *The Human Condition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Arvidsson, A. 2007. Creative class or administrative class? On advertising and the 'underground'. *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* 7(1): 8-23.

Banks, M. 2010. Autonomy guaranteed? Cultural work and the 'art-commerce relation'. Journal for Cultural Research 14(3): 251-70.

Barley, S. and G. Kunda. 2006. Contracting: A new Form of professional practice. Academy of Management Perspectives February: 45-66.

Bell, E. and S.J. Vachhani. 2020. Relational encounters and vital materiality in the practice of craft work. Organization Studies 41(5): 681–701

Berardi, F. 2009. The soul at work. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).

Blair, H. 2001. 'You're only as good as your last job': The labour process and labour market in the British film industry. *Work, Employment and Society* 15(1): 149-169.

Bowring, F. 2011. *Hannah Arendt: A critical introduction*. London: Pluto Press.

Cohen, L. and M. Mallon. 1999. The transition from organisational employment to portfolio working: Perceptions of 'boundarylessness'. *Work, Employment and Society* 13(2): 329-52.

Collinson, D. 2003. Identities and insecurities: selves at work. *Organization* 10(3): 527-47.

D'Amours, M. and M.J. Legault. 2013. Highly skilled workers and employment risks: role of institutions. *Labor Studies Journal* 38(2): 89–109.

De Peuter, G. 2014. Beyond the Model Worker. *Culture Unbound* 6: 263–284.

DuGay, P. 1996. *Consumption and identity at work.* London: Sage.

Ekman, S. 2013. Fantasies about work as limitless potential – how managers and employees seduce each other through dynamics of mutual recognition. *Human Relations* 66(9): 1159-1181.

Ertel, M., E. Pech, P. Ullsperger, O. Von Dem Knesebeck, and J. Siegrist. 2005. Adverse psychosocial working conditions and subjective health in freelance media workers. *Work & Stress* 19(3): 293-299.

Fleming, P. 2017. The Human capital hoax: Work, debt and insecurity in the era of Uberization. *Organization Studies* 38(5): 691–709.

Fraser, N. and M. Gold. 2001. 'Portfolio Workers': Autonomy and control amongst freelance translators. *Work, Employment and Society* 15(4): 679-97.

Gandini, A. 2015. The rise of coworking: a literature review. *ephemera: theory and politics in organisation* 15(1): 193-205.

Gold, M. and J. Fraser. 2002. Managing self-management: Successful transition to portfolio careers. Work, Employment and Society 16(4): 579-97.

Gregg, M. 2011. *Work's intimacies*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Grugulis, I. and D. Stoyanova. 2012. Social capital and networks in film and TV: Jobs for the boys? Organization Studies 33(2): 1311-22.

Hardt, M. and A. Negri. 2001. *Empire.* Cambridge: Harvard.

Harvey, D. 2013. *Rebel Cities.* London: Verso.

Henning, G.K. 2011. Corporation and polis. *Journal of Business Ethics* 103(2): 289-303.

Hesmondhalgh D. and S. Baker. 2012. *Creative labour: Media work in three cultural industries*. London: Routledge.

Lazzarato, M. 1996. Immaterial labour. In *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics,* 133-50. London: Polity.

Loacker, B. 2013. Becoming culturpreneur: how the neoliberal 'regime of truth' affects and redefines artistic subject positions. *Culture and Organization* 19(2): 124-145.

McRobbie, A. 1998. *British fashion design; Rag trade or image industry?* London: Routledge.

Merkel. J. 2015. Coworking in the city. *Ephemera: theory and politics in organization* 15(1): 121-139.

Mumby, D. 2016. Organizing beyond organization: Branding, discourse, and communicative capitalism. *Organization* 23(6).

Paulsen, R. 2018. In the mood for obedience: Despair, cynicism, and seduction among employment service employees. *Culture and Organization*. 24(5): 365-382.

Randle. K., C. Forson and M. Calveley. 2015. Towards a Bourdieusian analysis of the social composition of the UK film and television workforce. *Work, Employment and Society* 29(4): 590–606.

Rose, N. 1999. *Governing the soul: Shaping of the private self.* London: Free Association Books.

Ross, A. 2009. *Nice work if you can get it: Life and labor in precarious times.* New York: NYU.

Sennett, R. 1998. *The corrosion of character: The personal consequences of work in the New Capitalism*. New York: Norton.

Spinuzzi, C. 2012. Working alone together: Coworking as emergent collaborative activity. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 26(4): 399-441.

Spoelstra, S. 2010. Business miracles. *Culture and Organization* 16(1): 87-101.

Standing, G. 2011. *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury.

Stanworth, C. and J. Stanworth. 1995. The self-employed without employees: Autonomous or atypical? *Industrial Relations Journal* 26(3): 221-39.

Storey, J., G. Salaman and K. Platman. 2005. Living with enterprise in an enterprise economy: Freelance and contract workers in the media. *Human Relations* 58(8): 1033–54.

Swift, S. 2009. *Hannah Arendt.* London: Routledge.

Vallas, S. P. and E. R. Cummins. 2015. Personal branding and identity norms in the popular business press: Enterprise culture in an age of precarity. *Organization Studies* 36(1): 293–319.

Van Diest, H. and B. Dankbaar. 2008. Managing freely acting people: Hannah Arendt's theory of action and modern management and organizational behaviour. *Philosophy of Management* 6.

Virno, P. 2004. *Grammar of the multitude*. New York: Semiotexte.

Warhurst, C. and P. Thompson. 1998. Hands hearts and minds: Changing Work and workers at the end of the century. In *Work Places of the Future*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Zukin, S. 2010. *The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places.* Oxford: OUP.

---

[1] From this point, whenever the terms labour, work or action are used in Arendt's sense, they will be italicised.