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Citation: Bennett, T. (2020). Towards 'Embedded Non-creative Work'? Administration, digitisation and the recorded music industry. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 26(2), pp. 223-238. doi: 10.1080/10286632.2018.1479399

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Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2018.1479399>

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International Journal of Cultural Policy:**

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/10286632.2018.1479399>

2018. Towards “Embedded Non-creative Work”? Administration, Digitisation and the
Recorded Music Industry

7996 Words

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Towards “Embedded Non-creative Work”? Administration, Digitisation and the Recorded Music Industry

For contemporary cultural policy, “non-creative” work continues to form a conceptual blindspot: a foil to define and value creativity against. This paper develops existing categories to augment the task-focused notion of “embedded creativity” with a more situated view of work’s cultural and institutional embedding. It first interrogates this “embeddedness”, taking a “cultural economy” approach to intermediation and administrative support. Drawing on observations from an in-depth qualitative study of employees in major record labels, the second part articulates the heightened importance of “admin” to recorded music industries, after “digital disruption”. Routine bureaucratic labour presents an atypical example, revealing much about the hidden relational and identity work that goes into constructing “creative industries” as such. The intention is not to show that “embedded non-creative workers” are in fact “creative” but, on the contrary, to articulate the distinct contributions and value of support work in this context, questioning a persistent reliance on creative/non-creative dualisms. Policy research would benefit from enriched understanding of culture’s assembly in marketable objects, reorienting understandings of “cultural” labour markets and careers, and reimagining the role of traditional cultural “administration” in the contemporary “creative economy”.

Keywords: administration; cultural intermediaries; Creative Trident; digitisation; embeddedness; music industries.

Introduction

Locating and understanding who and what counts (or should count) in analyses of cultural production – for what purposes, according to which objects, processes and relations – has been a long-running concern of policy research, not least within this journal (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Bilton, 2015; Coles, 2016; Galloway and Dunlop, 2007; Garnham, 2005; Pratt, 2005; Wilson, 2010). The task of conceptualising

and measuring work in creative industries continues to evolve. The ascendant Creative Trident methodology encourages statisticians to recognise that ‘a defining feature of the creative industries is its workforce’ (Bakhshi et al., 2013: 14), after having long been sidelined (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009). Mapping industrial against occupational classifications, it distinguishes between ‘specialist’, ‘support’ and ‘embedded creative’ workers (Higgs et al., 2008; c.f. Cunningham, 2011; DCMS, 2015). This re-articulation directs attention towards the last category, ‘embedded creatives’ (working in areas like health, manufacturing and banking), offering new opportunities to intervene in the unevenness and plurality of educational routes, labour markets and career paths (Ashton, 2015; Bridgstock and Cunningham, 2016; Hearn et al., 2014). “Support” work is present in official statistics, yet hardly receives the same sustained and granular attention as “creative” equivalents. Its status and value remains uncertain – likely because these ‘humdrum’ workers are generally understood to be unmoved by non-economic incentives, or where or how their job takes place (Caves, 2000).

Meanwhile, calls have been made to disaggregate “cultural” from “creative” industries and the information technology sector (Bakhshi and Cunningham, 2016; Galloway and Dunlop, 2007; Garnham, 2005; Miller, 2009). Viewing actors and organisations, instead, as “cultural” insofar as they are concerned with the creation, circulation and interpretation of texts and shared values (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). This approach, commonly conceptualising cultural goods as the outcome of collective processes and situated practical knowledge and blurring formal and informal processes (Oakley and O’Connor, 2015; Pratt, 2005), implicitly, ‘acknowledges that many jobs in the cultural industries are primarily administrative, technical, logistical or manual rather than creative’ (Coles, 2016: 459). It poses a challenge to neoclassical economic perspectives that conceptualises work as tasks, enabled by “skills” to realise “innovation”, encoded

in intellectual property rights (IPR) (O'Connor, 2016; Pratt, 2012). Hence this paper questions received wisdom, exploring the value of *administration* over creative *enterprise*: concentrating on commercial corporations, rather than individual talent; and stressing the “back office” specifically. I suggest more research is required on this “embedded non-creative work” – a distinct form of “support work” within cultural contexts.

The paper proceeds in two parts. The first questions the “embeddedness” of “embedded creativity”, taking a “cultural economy” approach to intermediation – the relations and processes between producers and consumers that maintain meaningful cultural fields in institutional formations – and administration. Drawing on observations from an in-depth qualitative study of employees in major record labels, the second part articulates the heightened importance of “admin” to recorded music industries, after “digital disruption”. Routine labour in bureaucratic institutions presents an atypical example, revealing much about the hidden relational and identity work that goes into constructing “creative industries” as such. The intention is not to show that “embedded non-creative workers” are *in fact* “creative” but, on the contrary, to articulate the distinct contributions and value of admin in this context, questioning a persistent reliance on creative/non-creative dualisms. My aim is exhortatory: to provide some justification and stimulus to take non-creative work more seriously in its own right. This perspective seeks to enrich understanding of the processes by which culture is assembled as marketable objects; challenge presumptions that “support” work is passive, subservient, and peripheral; instead reorienting understandings of “cultural” labour markets and careers, as well as the role of traditional cultural “administration” in the contemporary “creative economy”.

Embedding cultural work

The Creative Trident's emphasis on institutional embedding, while welcome, remains superficial. In its Polanyian sense (Granovetter and Swedberg, 1992), 'embeddedness' describes how economic activity (markets, debt, investment, work) is constituted as and through social relations, institutional frameworks, normative values and practices (Beckert, 2003; Granovetter, 1973; Krippner and Alvarez, 2007). This strand of economic sociology finds expression in a "cultural economy" approach, especially one indebted to science and technology studies (Entwistle and Slater, 2014), that interrogates how both "culture" and "economy" are constructed and stabilised as a hybrid assemblage (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Prince, 2015). It is in this sense that major record companies help us understand support roles within cultural industries as *embedded* non-creative work. Music presents a fascinating case of cultural policy transformations from a commercial perspective (Cloonan, 2007); my use of these particular institutions follows Keith Negus' earlier study. As he argues, while 'industry produces culture', equally 'culture produces an industry': institutional "context" is not, he writes, 'primarily economic or governed by an organizational logic or structure', as commonly presumed in managerial theory, and work is not wholly explained by 'technical and routine processes and institutionalized practices' (Negus, 1999: 20). Meaningful social and interpretive experience – differences of genre or cultural form, for example – pattern companies and professions: in workforce composition, employee relations and motivations, as well as aesthetic judgments and commercial decisions. Here I go further: rather than economic activity simply being "embedded" in a (separate) cultural sphere (Beckert, 2003; Callon, 1998a), aesthetic goods also have *economic* properties structuring the whole production process, beyond particular "creatives".

It is not, therefore, enough to say that particular tastes and dispositions inflect the interests and motivations of those intermediaries who occupy corporate *culture*. Production is regulated and integrated through organisational devices (amongst them recording contracts, product schedules, marketing campaigns, distribution infrastructures), themselves sensitive to the assemblage of artists, consumers, and market behaviour through which recorded music is commodified, valorised and sold. Nor is it enough to critique top-down management abstractions that view work in terms of tasks, processes, logics or systems (which are essential). More precisely, these abstractions pass over empirical reality, reducing it to mechanistic and obfuscatory imagery. The notion of “embedded creativity” usefully acknowledges the importance of institutional contexts, for instance in guarding against precarity conditions (Cunningham, 2014) – yet it eschews matters of aesthetic, social, moral or political context which are to a great extent *constitutive of* cultural and creative activity (Oakley and O’Connor, 2013: 7). The categories of policy orthodoxy effectively *disembed* the creative economy.

Intermediation and administration

In the broad creative industries literature, what is called “support work” in cultural production is variously described, with a growing vocabulary, as ‘humdrum’ (Caves, 2000), ‘below-the-line’ (Mayer, 2011), ‘uncreative’ (Bilton, 2015) or ‘routine’ (Siciliano, 2016). Such work is commonly raised only to be dismissed as peripheral (e.g. Banks, 2007: 190n, on non-creative workers in cultural production; Tunstall, 2000: 22, on ‘white collar’ and ‘unskilled’ work in media occupations). Hesmondhalgh’s (2013: 258-265) useful taxonomy of creative labour distinguishes between the artistic practice of ‘symbol creators’; the studio craft of ‘technical workers’; the commercial and marketing expertise of ‘creative managers’; and the more routinized practices of

“unskilled” and semi-skilled’ workers. This last tends to escape the scholarly gaze: we still know ‘little about the conditions of such [non-creative] workers and this could be a significant topic for future research, if theorised well’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 259).

Without advancing a new theorisation here, I contend that the increasing centrality of bureaucratic administration to cultural intermediation in the digitising music economy renders it a particularly conspicuous and revealing absence (c.f. Fairchild, 2014).

The “cultural intermediary” concept remains ‘good to think with’, usefully mobilising different critical frameworks to sensitise researchers to both the content (tasks and processes) and the contexts (scenes, identities, institutional and market structures) of work (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2012: 551). It is not, however, a good policy tool. A central problem is imprecision over vastly different roles and activities taking place within similar fields (Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Nixon and Du Gay, 2002). Negus (2002) highlighted significant but neglected “non-creative” areas of the music industry to argue that the standard repertoire of scholarship has been too narrow. His exemplars – business affairs and warehouse operations – are not the “typical” cultural intermediaries, despite their essential contributions. These roles are kept at a distance by both “creatives” and scholars alike, he argues, largely because they do not make aesthetic decisions. This neglect should be challenged but internal category distinctions remain important. There are clear disparities (of task, pay, contract, location, identity and status) between these professions and it makes little sense to describe both under the same homogenous banner (Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 227). Negus’ examples which unhelpfully reinforce instituted distinctions, in literature and in reality, between high-status knowledge work (signing and allocating resources to “talent”) and low-status manual labour (the manufacture and distribution of cultural goods). The role highlighted

here, the administrator, sits illegitimately in the middle. More positive descriptions of such work are needed.

In contrast with creativity, bureaucracy remains negatively coded (Bilton, 2015; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Du Gay, 2004). The classic Adornian critique of culture *as* industry directed attention toward the violent standardisation of cultural *experience* – usefully continued in contemporary accounts of those *subjected* to systemic exclusion and enforced conformity through administrative rationalisation (Graeber, 2015; Huws, 2016; Spade, 2015). The present account, however, is situated on the side of production (*qua* Weber, 1978), where a further distinction is key, between public and private-sector bureaucracy (c.f. Hodson et al., 2013): that is, between traditional subsidised arts policy and market-oriented cultural industries. In the former, “administration” brings to mind institutional heads balancing high-powered strategic problems of finance, political positioning and public accountability with a duty to preserve spaces of aesthetic freedom and quality (for a classic account see Glaser, 2003). In this paper, the normative tone is different: in the vernacular contraction, “admins” dutifully implement managers’ orders, in line with pre-established legal and technical protocol – *execution* is divorced from *conception* (Braverman, 1998).

If cultural industries remain irreducibly marked by ‘the art-commerce relation’, according to Banks (2007: 6-7), they are also cut through with an understudied enterprise-administration relation, even if both are performed and maintained (through individuals, institutions and social relations), rather than fixed *a priori* (Du Gay, 2004; Law, 1994: 75-79). A turn to bureaucracy – and the logistical coordination of material objects and structures through which culture is maintained and transmitted as various media forms – usefully questions the heroic networked individualism of creative enterprise (Rossiter, 2016). Much attention has been paid to how IP is created, protected

and perceived, for instance, but not its mundane enactment. So: recording contracts appear in the economic imagination as the document defining specific art-commerce relations within the constraints of IP law (see, *inter alia*, Caves, 2000; Greenfield and Osborn, 2004; Stahl, 2013). Or, in the popular imagination, at exceptional moments: champagne-popping signing ceremonies and courtroom appearances. After fading from view, contracts become devices mandating specific administrative functions (Callon, 1998b: 253-255; Du Gay, 2004: 39-40); ‘scripts’ that constitute roles, ‘prescribing’ certain actions and decisions, and ‘proscribing’ others, within an organisational frame (Akrich, 1992). Yet, although contractual terms preside, their enactment is open to interpretation and renegotiation (particularly if an artist is experiencing commercial success). In the major label, as the following discussion elaborates, action responds to institutional embedding, in the course of which even lowly cultural industries functionaries experience a vocational balancing act comparable to that of creative counterparts.

Methods and approach

The remainder of the paper thus presents examples of major label admin as an ideal-type of “embedded non-creative work”, informed by a broader study of music industry work after digital crisis. Twenty-three interviews took place between 2013 and 2015 with individuals working in support roles in or around the three majors: Sony Music, Universal Music, Warner Music. Four are present here: two – Database Administrator Nathan; Legal Assistant Sophie – are expressly administrative; and two – Catalogue

Director Andrew; Rights Manager Gavin – offer managerial perspectives.¹ Their roles at the time of interview speak to the administrative heterogeneity – data entry and filing, personal assistance and secretarial support, (middle-)management (Francke and Jardine, 2017: 24n) – across different business functions, but all reflect on relatively long industry careers (ten years or more). These are supplemented with my own voice, in an (auto-)ethnographic reflection on two periods in “the field”: summer of 2013, in participant-observer mode, as a “temp” worker within a licensing department in the London headquarters of a major record company, agreeing secondary rights for the exploitation of the recorded music catalogue; informed by earlier full-time employment, from 2007-2012 (pre-research).² The latter, “auto-”, aspect of this ethnography thus informs an ‘analytic’ (rather than ‘evocative’) appraisal of ‘full membership’ in the community (Anderson, 2006), akin to the strategic ‘industrial self-theorisation’ common within media production cultures (Caldwell, 2008).

Descriptions of major labels repeatedly draw on at least three overlapping ‘modes of ordering’ (Law, 1994: 20-21). Outlining these will aid the discussion. First, an organisational division exists between central *commercial operations*, encompassing facilities management, HR, procurement, royalty processing and so on; and satellite *labels* that acquire, develop and promote artistic “talent”. Second, within labels, marketing logic divides *frontline*, or “current”, typically “Top 40”-oriented, artists and their repertoire; from *catalogue*, which continues to “exploit” artists and repertoire after

¹ Pseudonyms are used, preserving anonymity in line with interviewees’ requests; job titles are adjusted but retain a sense of role and seniority.

² Starting as an entry-level admin, later advancing through promotion to take on aspects of contract manipulation, deal negotiation, client account relations and line management.

fading from market prominence (given promotional imperatives, all repertoire effectively becomes “catalogue” roughly eighteen months after initial release). Finally, a functional division separates the client-facing *front office*, comprising A&R staff, marketers and so on; from a more technical-administrative *back office*. This way of ordering the company is not eternal or unchanging.³ Nonetheless, it is common enough across majors to have solidified into ‘institutional logics’ (Thornton et al., 2015), suggesting path-dependence as firms (and the broader sector) have matured and professionalised (for a comparable case in publishing see Thornton, 2002). That is, layers of admin are “built in” to the company.

The interview and fieldwork material articulates some of the experience of non-creative work embedded in such institutional orders – experience that continues to be obscured in policy discourse, in the voluminous literature on cultural production and intermediation, as well as in these companies’ self-presentation as “creative industries”. The argument proceeds in three sections. The first briefly outlines the back-office effects of the “digital revolution”. The second underlines that this is hardly creative work: clear both from the institution’s systematised bureaucracy and the routine nature of the tasks. But, third, admin cannot be fully divorced from, nor properly understood outside, its embeddedness in professional identities and institutional contexts shaped by commercial music markets. This last and most substantive section emphasises the

³ For instance, majors increasingly offer ‘label services’, fragmenting the administrative, promotional and distribution functions of traditional record deals into smaller piecemeal packages (Homewood, 2018); while Spotify’s Will Page (2017) has recently mounted an internal critique of the ‘18 month catalogue “rule”’.

‘relational work’ of making and breaking simultaneously social and economic ties (Alacovska, 2018; Zelizer, 2012) at various career points, from recruitment to workplace relations and redundancy anxieties. Presented through a three-fold lens of ‘getting in’, ‘getting on’ and ‘getting out’ (giving particular space to the second of these), this structure reveals parallels to, and important differences from, more flexible or ‘precarious’ forms of creative work (Wing-Fai et al., 2015).

Major label admin: non-creative – but “cultural”

Introducing the back office

Since the millennium, the record industry has seen a ‘revolution’ in ‘back-office administrative functions’ (Wald, 2011: 232) – the production, management and coordination of rights and recordings. Reflecting on this period, Sophie identified 2003-2006 as a period of great change for her team, involving the consolidation of labels and teams in a new building, several waves of redundancy and the introduction of new computer systems. Simultaneously, workload began to increase substantially – in part, she says, because ‘there are just so many more deals now: I was looking at a roster from 2002 compared to a roster now, it’s like three times as many acts! [laughing] I mean it’s ridiculous’. Consequently, after an initial contraction, her team then expanded: first, using *ad hoc* work experience and internships ‘to help with the admin side of things, the filing and scanning’; later becoming, she said, ‘*totally* reliant’ on computer systems, to the point that you ‘can’t really do anything in business affairs without them in place’.

Sophie counted seven different systems as central:

I’ve got a couple of systems that I look after [...] I’ve got another colleague that’s taken over, there’s a new system called [X]... So he’s taken on those, making sure they’re administered. It just means everyone has something that they’re responsible for. (Sophie)

The adoption of integrated proprietary systems has reduced the considerable volume of physical paperwork and increased corporate accountability, bringing companies in line with global business standards.⁴ Their gradual expansion and upgrade have also, as Sophie's experience articulates, reorganised the labour process, leading to an increased functional specialisation amongst team members, now rendered as systems users.

The effects of digitisation and "disruptive innovation" are typically understood at the macro-level (see Leyshon, 2014; Rogers, 2013; Williamson and Cloonan, 2013).

Employees like Sophie situate them firmly in the workplace, tracing how these changes have 'increased, rather than decreased, processes and patterns of intermediation' (Negus, 2014: 121). Corporate mergers and acquisitions beget the integration and divestment of teams, repertoire and data. The growth of nonstandard contract ('deal') types to exploit a range of associated rights (Marshall, 2013) increases workload, as does the raw number of signings for new acts – part of an intensified need for strategic risk management (maintaining a diverse investment portfolio, c.f. Negus, 1999: 47-50). Physical files are scanned into databases while changing product formats, including the "unbundling" of tracks from albums, require new, more complex systems, accounting procedures and cross-industry infrastructures (Wald, 2011). Due to the scale of integration across the supply chain, from consumer-facing services through to artist

⁴ The adoption of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software helped major labels manage risk and reduce costs by linking the company directly to suppliers, distributors and customers. See the account given by Dave Cornine, VP of Global Financial Systems for Sony, in a webcast for the ERP service SAP: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMBgFyvY8QI>. So central is ERP to modern 'supply chain capitalism' that, in some accounts (e.g. Rossiter, 2016), it is distinguished as the key signifier for globalisation as a whole.

payments, precise data management is now critical. The core database that Nathan's team maintains 'drives everything in the business [...] if we don't have the product in this system it doesn't go anywhere'. Metadata management – arranging, linking and maintaining information on writers, performers, rights-owners, dates, locations, track lengths, product standards and so on – poses fiendish technical and political problems of recognition, remuneration and strategy for the sector as a whole. Admins' reflections invite us to view such logistical and back-office transformations, beyond problems of supply-chain management, both conditioning and conditioned by the experience of work itself.

Workplace and labour process

This institutional context is more redolent of bureaucratic firms than creative industries, especially in terms of contractual relations, task content and managerial control (c.f. Smith and McKinlay, 2009). All major label employees are bound by similar employment terms, with contracts encoding the expectation of conventional duties and rewards. Full-time employees are entitled to standard rights and benefits (including healthcare and employer pension contributions) as well as some "perks" (free music, tickets or merchandise – although the dwindling of the latter forms a common source of complaint). For those on internships, or temporary positions assigned by employment agencies, the aspiration is usually to be taken on full-time (Frenette, 2013). Much organisational life consists of gaining sign-offs, approvals and agreements from various parties or assembling product in accordance with system checks and marketing campaign schedules. Workforce dynamics are managed through task specialisation, promotional pathways and regular performance appraisals (Colbourne, 2011). Nevertheless, the level of routine varies widely depending on position and seniority within the institutional order.

Admin work, even more so than most positions, is predominantly routinised, permanent, waged, and governed by employment contracts based on a fixed spatial and temporal order. So: employment is typically ongoing rather than project-based, covering office duties carried out Monday-to-Friday, 9am to 6pm (even if overtime is common). The difference is particularly clear at task level. While executives' days are littered with meetings and mobile communication, admins spend more time than most seated at a desktop computer. Systems are engaged through the software's user interface: admins do not require the technical expertise needed to manage the "back-end" (although they are often involved with system upgrades through consultation and testing). Through these they are tasked with the administration of digital assets (for example, IPRs, audio and video owned by the company), contractual terms or accounts in databases, based on which further processes can be enacted (such as the assignment of rights or financial transactions). Facilitating flows of information, office admins embody the ideal-typical bureaucrat, responsive but impersonal, within the institutional division of labour.

Inexorably harnessed to a pervasive technical architecture, it is difficult to describe admin work as "skilled". The bulk of Sophie's workload involves ensuring contracts are executed and payments processed. Preparing and issuing paperwork, she gains signatures from superiors, then duplicates, files and logs all documents in physical and digital archives – these forming the basis of her responses colleagues' or artists' queries or company audits. Nathan's remit involves 'making sure the repertoire that we own is registered [...] based on artists that we've signed, territories that we sign them for, and the contractual rights', such that it can be 'fed externally to the likes of Millward

Brown, the Official Charts Company, MCPS, PPL'.⁵ He thus explained his team's workload in terms of 'data input' for old and new repertoire:

We get historic data from our archive, the physical archive. We still have label copy from the seventies, paper copy, that has to be entered in the system because it's never been released in that system before. [...] A lot of the data that's in the system is not, as I like to call it, "2015 compliant"! So, if we're re-releasing a product, we have to make sure it's as accurate today as it can be. Because the data that was five, ten years ago, it's completely changed now [...] so we're doing a lot of retrospective clean-ups. That's how I spend most of my time actually, doing that.
(Nathan)

The company relies on people like Nathan to conduct routine data (and metadata) entry, ensuring they accord with cross-industry codes of compliance. Although current 'frontline' artists are, he said, the company's 'bread and butter', it is nonetheless 'catalogue' that absorbs most time, since it involves a more labour-intensive process of data 'clean-ups'.⁶

Sophie and Nathan are charged with enacting the terms set out in legal documents by entering information into systems, gaining official approvals and maintaining digital files. They both described their duties as the antithesis of creative work, as indeed much of the literature presumes. The following fieldwork extract, from my own work routine, strengthens this description. Using a proprietary software application, I am processing

⁵ Millward Brown and Official Charts Company are market research and sales tracking firms, maintaining various crucial rankings charts. MCPS (part of PRS for Music) and PPL are Collective Management Organisations that administer the payment of royalties to rights owners.

⁶ A term extending parallels between administrative and domestic workers (c.f. Francke and Jardine, 2017).

incoming requests for licenses related to company-owned repertoire. The routine and repetitive nature of admin is clear here – but there is more at play:

I find myself quickly locating keyboard shortcuts in order to cut down mouse movement. My left hand curls into a claw – thumb beneath palm, fourth finger extended – as I quickly type and switch display windows using alt+tab. The list grows continuously as new requests come in, with no sense of completion. I listen to music, using headphones to envelop me in sound, helping me withdraw from the office, so that I can focus on the hands that I'm now watching, as if from a distance, execute cyclical motions. I abandon the mouse entirely, fluently moving between spreadsheet and application. Involuntarily, and oddly, I recall times spent at the piano as a teenager. For a moment, my pace is virtuosic. (Research diary, 2013)

While not an exhaustive description of the full role, this extract captures the mundane routine of a substantial portion, making two further characteristics particularly apparent. First, admin is *manual labour*. This embodied informational work relies on the repeated motions and energies of particular people using particular tools in particular spaces. Movements are pre-set by established industrial standards and system design, controlled in ways that are familiar from traditional factory and white-collar work (Braverman, 1998; Korczynski, 2004). But second, despite this, music still figures into the experience of work, engaging and distracting me in equal measure. More obliquely perhaps, the involuntary memory signals a lingering trace of my former musical self (as a pianist), disrupting a purely administrative persona – indeed, I approach the immersive ‘flow’- or ‘zone’-like state associated with nominally “creative” tasks (Banks, 2014). Music remains constitutive of this work: used as a tool to manage not just the tedium of the tasks but also a sense of labouring identity (Leidner, 2006).

Embedding admin

Getting in

Routes into entry-level work are not formalised but majors commonly employ specialist music or media (rather than generic office) recruitment agencies. The workforce is increasingly equipped with a formal, often sector-specific, degree – but accreditation

and professionalisation appears to be resisted by established professionals (Bennett, 2015). Thus, the recruitment pool is mixed – “creative” and “non-creative” access-points are not sharply distinguished – and intangible notions of “talent” and “drive” (c.f. Banks, 2017) continue to shape selection of corporate admin. While managers professed to value candidates’ cultural-administrative hybridity, they struggled to express this in positive terms, making sense of it by deferring to their own experiences. Gavin, for instance, explicitly sought ‘people who aren’t massively wanting to be in marketing or A&R’ and remained ‘not bothered by degrees or graduates – I’m not a graduate’. Having fielded many applicants ‘who’ve done a specific course in the industry that’s *absolutely* invalid when it comes to actually working’, as he put it, his main criteria remained a rather vague sense of ‘character’. A loose cultural habitus and “fit” was valued more than specific technical or bureaucratic expertise. Andrew felt strongly that ‘it’s not about just being set up to do tasks’, instead underlining an appropriate consumer disposition. ‘You don’t need to have a degree in music, in terms of composition and orchestration, to know what a good tune sounds like’, he said, although ‘it might benefit to have spent a few hours in a record store, and a few years listening to good records, and to be surrounded by people that know good music’. Hence, the musical analogy continued by drawing direct parallels with the search for artistic talent: ‘If you’re in music, what’s gonna sell? If you’re in the music business, who’s gonna work? It’s all the same thing’.

These managers preferred informal selection processes for non-creative roles, based on professional networks and sociability (such as when attending gigs) – something which corporate protocol obstructs. Andrew resented reducing candidate selection to the sterile desk-based practice of reading applications, only begrudgingly accepting that CVs were

‘the chosen form of communication’. Nonetheless, he was eloquent in emphasising the need to follow his refined aesthetic judgment, reading for form as much as content:

The typeface they choose, the way in which it’s articulated on the page, and each sentence relates to their work experience. You can tell whether that individual is... cut from the right stone. [...] You can just pick it up [from the CV]. A turn of phrase, a reference to an experience, the way something looks, erm... It might sound woolly but it feels anything but woolly. It feels like a very very acute sense of what and who is going to work in a particular environment. (Andrew)

We should emphasise that Andrew is looking for new recruits who would be, in his own words, ‘going through long-form license agreements and contracts’, while resisting a need for candidates with professional training in favour of those who are ‘cut from the right stone’. If his reflections tell us something about admin workers, doubtless they say more about Andrew’s own self-image, and the identity work *he* is performing (just as I did) in counterbalancing a will to exercise critical judgment against the constraints of bureaucratic standardisation. They are indicative of the conflicted process by which those who control access even to non-creative jobs are moved to produce (and reproduce) familiar cultural relations, rather than strict organisational efficiency. Moreover, while the ‘acute sense’ of aesthetic signalling that Andrew professes to find within candidates’ CVs seems a rather unlikely, or ‘woolly’, method, the makeup and atmosphere of the workplace appears nonetheless to validate it.

Getting on

Major labels’ cultural status muddies the creative/non-creative binary. Admins are fans with deep investments in particular artists, scenes and genres, whose ‘passion for music’ melds personal pleasure with ethical concern (author: date). I have suggested that their routine labour processes enrol the “full subject” (beyond a disembodied pair of hands) – perhaps even workers’ capacity for expressive and aesthetic fulfilment (Siciliano, 2016). Clearly, industry-scale technical, legal and financial processes demand

repetition. Admins are conscious that their jobs resemble those in non-creative companies. ‘At the end of the day, we could do what we do anywhere’, Nathan admitted. The point, however, is that he does not: ‘I like working here, I like what we do’. An offer of secure employment in music might be enough to reconcile many to the tedium of their role. An unspoken dictum might be inferred: “those who can, do; those who can’t, do admin”. Yet, far from justifying their career in such terms, they tended to view it as a successful *escape* from the dreary routine of white-collar work. Thus Sophie, whose law degree taught her that she ‘didn’t want to be a solicitor’, explained: although ‘I deal with solicitors, I deal with contracts [...], I don’t feel it’s quite the same as working within a law firm, thankfully’.

This ‘no-collar’ corporate world is, textured, multimodally, with a playful sensitivity to style, taste and (a little) glamour (Johnston, 2014; Ross, 2003). Back-office walls are adorned with screens, murals and speakers (c.f. Negus, 1999); the open-plan layout preferred across all companies deliberately fosters flow between creative and non-creative employees – and the occasional visiting star. Here, the timeworn division between ‘suits’ and ‘creatives’ (Nixon and Crewe, 2004) is not one of role but seniority: only C-Suite executives can justifiably be counted among the former, whereas sartorial expression is as common in the back office as the front. Similarly, offices share an air of familial domesticity – somewhere to chat, eat breakfast, apply make-up, or visibly recover from a hangover. Music is abstract within admin tasks (in the form of contracts and product codes) but heard almost constantly, rarely as unconsidered backdrop. The office stereo gives an opportunity to perform taste, enthusiasm and camaraderie, demonstrating workers’ insider status. A tolerance for loud and conflicting music while working is required: ‘You have to be happy having three or four different types of music blaring when you’re trying to draft and negotiate with another lawyer on the

telephone’, Sophie explained: ‘if you’re not that type of a person, you just wouldn’t really fit’. Music helps colleagues to socialise across departments, blurring work-life boundaries as they move on to gigs – perhaps first convening at the office bar: ‘we have drinks in the cafe, they have a bar open on Thursdays and Fridays’, noted Nathan; ‘the bosses understand that there is a need to get us together’.

It is in major labels’ interests to present themselves as cultural institutions, especially in their efforts to refute a longstanding predatory capitalist image. Corporate branding and public relations initiatives blend artist histories with those of the company (evading the more difficult moments of mergers and buyouts); official websites and social media channels display non-creatives’ tastes and passions, liberating the value otherwise locked into their expressive identities. This internal and external performance is not always successful. The following example evidences the delicate balance required.

Recognising that rights ownership had become central to the business by 2011, a frontline management team was imported to the catalogue department, installing two key changes: a newly integrated cross-team workflow; and a “culturalisation” of the largely administrative floor, to better communicate “music industry” aesthetics to any artists, clients or guests who might circulate. A “classic album”-themed redecoration ensued, followed by a directive stating that music must be played at all times. Staff were bemused, considering themselves particularly active listeners who sometimes preferred to “zone out” using headphones. The instruction, reiterated rather sternly several times on quiet afternoons, resulted in a contrived soundtrack of compilations playing constantly in the background – unheard by staff, who retreated into headphones even

more frequently.⁷ The shift of affective atmosphere across the floor replaced enthusiasm with anxiety and farce, inadvertently revealing how management valued admins' "passion" and "creativity" primarily as a means to 'manage the feel of work' (Siciliano, 2016: 688), enjoining them to facilitate alignments between "corporate culture" and "music culture". This 'identity regulation' strategy (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002) made explicit the rift between cultivated professional identity and non-creative task-flow.

Efforts to produce admin work as *cultural work* by massaging a "buzzy" office atmosphere (open-plan design, after-work drinks) cannot erase instituted divisions. Who receives free invitations to which gigs, or to play in whose employee football team, often mirrors departmental structures. After twenty years, Gavin viewed the major label as a persistently 'cliquey' institution – 'promotions hung out with the cool people in promotion and marketing, A&R with various people' – against which he had internalised a sense of being 'an outsider within the business'. The spatial organisation of open-plan offices only partially mitigates this. Nathan surveyed the cluster of central functions – 'the IT support teams and some of the digital teams [...] royalties, finance [...] operations and business affairs' – amongst which he was located: 'when you work on a label', he conceded, 'you don't necessarily care about what happens in the so-called back office'. Contrastingly, seated in a frontline label, 'slap-bang in the middle of the A&R department', Sophie enjoyed informally advising colleagues, who might 'just walk in and say, "can I just ask you if this is a good idea for a deal...?"' Yet she complained that her work was frequent mischaracterised as 'just filing or photocopying

⁷ The example is informed by reflection on a transitional moment in my earlier employment.

The directive was later abandoned.

[...] just putting together documents’. Nathan indicated how systems reinscribe admins in subordinate relations by, for example, maintaining a database which creative colleagues only access as end-users, “magically” browsing and selecting content from virtual audio-visual archives. Like Sophie, he resented ‘the perception that we’re the police [...] here to stop their creative flow’:

they think *we* are the ones that are stopping the process when we say, ‘sorry, we can’t do that’. ‘Why can’t you do that? You can just press a button and change it!’ And this is what we’re trying to get them to understand. It’s not as simple as pressing a button and just magic everything away. It’s not as simple as that. (Nathan)

Nathan’s discontent towards a lack of institutional recognition was palpable. ‘If it wasn’t for the so-called back office, there would be no front office’, he argued – incapable of referring to the ‘back office’ without the qualifier ‘so-called’ – ‘there’s no point signing an artist if you cannot deliver a product’.

Importantly, Nathan reported a professional duty to correct misperceptions, to ‘build the relationship’ with frontline contacts, to communicate clearly, and to ‘do it orally’ (face-to-face rather than by email). Communication is, I suggest, at the heart of admins’ expertise. Initially, this appears limited and transparent: admins relay the progress of particular tasks to colleagues and “refer up” decisions superiors. Yet routine correspondence with both colleagues and clients produces a practical familiarity with a range of creative and business disciplines. A hybrid professional identity might be manifested in a capacity to translate between normative “cultural” discourse and a language of technical procedure or legalese; an ethical sensitivity to context and why the work matters; or the thick-skinned resilience to withstand the forthright views and outspoken assumptions of colleagues. Consider the following fieldwork reflection:

I am in constant conversation. ‘This conflicts with our campaign’. ‘Push this one please, it’s very important locally’. Phones ring, emails are sent, meetings arranged. ‘If we clear this for [x], they’ve said they’ll give us [y]’. ‘Are you joking, why the fuck would I want to be on this?’

Internally, I speak with legal teams, marketers, product managers, label heads, archive assistants; externally, with artists, their managers, their lawyers, other administrators – logging conversations for an unknown future benefit. The weekly project meeting, where calculations are made and decisions taken, offers an education. I have gained a feel for the urgency and viability of various projects, and am beginning to infer from their outset (the money at stake, the artist involved, the executive nurturing a valuable relationship) which will be forced through and which quietly dropped. (Research diary, 2013)

Developing an understanding of the larger assemblage of decisions and interactions, admins acquire situated expertise. Filed records of previous negotiations and agreements become repertoires for engagement, helping them recognise competing discourses and value claims, and judiciously ‘push’ (or prioritise) certain projects.

Initiates demonstrated their lack of skill: one, wrongly classifying and filing information as if it were a personal music collection (that is, by artist instead of rights ownership); another, too “technical”, irritating A&R staff with references to arcane system processes. Disputes, sometimes belligerent ones, illustrate how good relationships matter, opening space for debate, compromise and partiality across the chain of command.

It is not that informal interactions take place *instead* of fastidious protocol, but *in order to do so*. I do not wish to overstate the case: information must be stored precisely; rules must be followed (even as they are open to change). Yet both humans and machines pose challenges. Computer systems are unreliable, or ‘clunky’ as Sophie said, so admins might judge it necessary to ‘go outside the system to get things done’. Similarly, people can be capricious or forgetful. Here, systems afford certain powers – such as permissions set only to grant admins access, giving them a certain jurisdiction over ‘itchy fingers elsewhere that could manipulate the data to suit their needs’ (Nathan). Sophie hinted at the challenges of her position: for example, taking the blame for a superior ‘[who’s] just not in the mood’ (as she euphemistically put it) to give a written sign-off; ‘it’s just pressure, you know?’ Here, systems provide accountability, durability

and security: ‘a lot of the artists and their managers and their accountants don’t like the system so much’, whereas ‘from my point of view it’s great, it protects me a lot’.

Hence, despite the cultural context, all does not melt into culture. To be an admin is not merely to be an appendage of the system architecture but, ultimately, to at least partially identify with it.

Getting out?

Precarity remains a defining feature of creative work for some, disputed in appeals to institutional embedding (Cunningham, 2014). In music, where a majority depart within five years (CC Skills, 2011: 18), major labels offer relative employment security; however, they exist in ‘a continual state of restructuring’, shedding and acquiring talent, rights catalogues and staff in cycles (Williamson and Cloonan, 2013: 16-19).⁸ In the wake of purchasing the EMI label, Universal’s CEO cited a need to focus ‘job losses [...] in the areas of duplication’ in order ‘to expand the creative parts of the company’ (‘Lucian Grainge on the Record’, 2012) – legitimating views of back-office uncreativity as unfortunate shackle on creativity or blockage in the innovation pipeline (Bilton, 2015). In the field and in interviews, employers’ need to exercise financial stringency amid broader sectoral uncertainty were much-discussed topics, often set against the spectre of anticipated redundancy. A feeling of generalised and pervasive *insecurity* can be inferred from many comments. Sometimes these were offhand and flippant. Andrew wondered aloud whether he had ‘transferable skills’ for ‘when I get

⁸ Universal Music Group’s global headcount dropped rapidly from 2007 (8114) to 2012 (6422); after acquiring EMI in 2013 it almost regained its 2007 peak (7649), again since diminishing more steadily (Ingham, 2017).

sacked from this job'. Gavin spoke more gravely of a difficult restructuring process portending a potential compulsory exit: 'My long-term future? I don't know' – a long silence – 'I think if definitely if I, if I was out tomorrow, I wouldn't be coming back into the business'. These managerial anxieties, around becoming unemployable through institutionalisation, suggest they are less able to draw on the "options" and mobility' of project-sensitised creative professionals (Cunningham 2014: 42; c.f. Lee, 2012: 489-490) – likely amplified by concerns about being replaced by a younger (and cheaper) generation. From her frontline, back-office perspective, Sophie made this explicit:

[You] get to your, use-by, sell-by, whatever date? It's just inevitable. [...] You know, you see people that I thought were gonna be at the label forever – and then you see them walking out in tears and being told that they don't have a job any more. And I just think that's part-and-parcel of working in an ever-younger, cooler, moving... You know. [...] I think there will come a time where, yeah... [clicks tongue] But you know, I could be wrong... (Sophie)

No-one is indispensable; redundancies are 'inevitable', escaped only by chance or voluntary exit. This existential certainty, that the end is coming without warning, stamps employees with a 'use-by' date: a predetermined future point at which their "product" – their youthful authenticity and 'cool' identity, rather than their bureaucratic expertise – will have "expired". Nonetheless, this dynamic climate of workforce renewal appears *culturally* legitimate to Sophie. Ultimately, for both the admin and the CEO, redundancy presents a means of preserving the value of popular music and of "creatives" themselves.

Discussion and implications

In policy orthodoxy, measurements define creative occupations in terms of tasks involving a high degree of originality, which are (somewhat tautologically) less at risk of automation (Bakhshi et al., 2013: 8). The notion of "support" work suggests a modality of passive response: non-creatives mechanistically servicing the need of

creatives within a binary relationship. But to reduce work to occupational task gives an impoverished view; less dualistic conceptions are needed. The back-office work discussed here is predominantly routine, repetitive, sedentary and mundane. Major label admins negotiate this work, and managers understand their value, primarily as *music* workers; specific skills – beyond an “eye for detail”, “passion”, and implicit cultural affinities – were difficult to express. But these employees are ‘mediators’ (not just ‘intermediaries’), working equally between systems and humans to *transform*, not only *transport*, information (Latour, 2005: 39); they hold the ‘motley crew’ – of heterogeneous, often strong-minded and eccentric, actors in creative projects (Caves, 2000) – together in socio-technical assemblage. That is, they actively maintain the infrastructural and cultural environment that makes this work both possible and meaningful.

Identities (personal aesthetics, tastes and personalities) form sources of motivation and socialisation (Leidner, 2006), and a central (unspoken) source of value to employers (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002), rendering admins disposable once “used up”. This ‘identity work’ is a ‘labour of division’ (Adkins and Lury, 1999), legitimating boundaries (creative/non creative; manual labour/expert knowledge) – these are then bridged in the ‘relational work’ of ‘establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming and terminating interpersonal relations’, bringing personal and economic life into dialogue (Zelizer, 2012: 149). Beyond merely exploiting ‘weak ties’ for employment opportunities (Granovetter, 1973), this ongoing effort of attunement and adjustment to surroundings and co-workers produces personal fulfilment, indignation towards misrepresentation, and anxieties about not keeping up. Admins’ experiences within corporate hierarchies thus resemble those of “creatives” leading more nomadic,

informal and entrepreneurial careers (Alacovska, 2018; Lee, 2012; Wing-Fai et al., 2015) – suggesting that cultural work’s qualitative characteristics are distinct to the assemblage of certain goods, rather than task performance. The need for such a focus is occasioned here by recent digitisation and convergence processes, which have expanded rather than diminished the scope and complexity of intermediation and coordination across the recorded music sector. But the intensified divisions of labour within large organisations mirror studies of ‘entrepreneurial’ individual musicians who, by choice or necessity, and enabled by mobile technologies, increasingly take responsibility for (or outsource) non-creative tasks (Haynes and Marshall, 2017; Hracs, 2012). If ‘culture produces industry’ while ‘industry produces culture’ (Negus, 1999: 14), it is incumbent on researchers to explore how all workers are embedded, to different extents and in different ways, in cultural-technical assemblages of all kinds.

There are good reasons to keep the discussion live. Empirically, we need better descriptions of the value and experiences of “embedded non-creative” work. The “embedded creativity” concept has expanded the scope of the sector, alongside our knowledge of career trajectories. Likewise, careful attention to non-creative occupations – in which aspiring creative professionals commonly find a (first) home (Ashton, 2015; Bennett and Bridgstock, 2015) – may provide critical nuance. As Bilton (2015: 163) argues, echoing interviewees’ calls for institutional recognition, policy would (still) benefit from evaluating the contribution of ‘uncreative’ structures and intermediaries as generative limits on creativity. Descriptions of this work *in its own right* would enrich our knowledge of the systems and processes that maintain cultural and creative fields and enlarge our view of cultural labour markets: the forms of education and training required, recruitment and promotion practices, and their social patterning.

Normatively, we need to identify and describe the value of non-creative work as part of cultural policy's moral project, tempering sometimes fanatical appeals to "talent" (Banks, 2017). There is an implicit sense that "creative" graduates making careers in "support" roles have somehow "failed", for instance, reflecting supposed skills "mismatches" between educational provision and industry requirements (Bridgstock and Cunningham, 2016; CC Skills, 2011). Critics might object that admin presents an impoverished view of "cultural" work – an extreme case of workers 'seduced' by 'creative industry discourse' (Banks and Hesmondhagh, 2009: 418), lacking even the expressive autonomy and flexibility typically associated with creative work. This would be to undermine agency and overplay a corporate monopoly on meaning. Appeals to identity clearly present opportunities for cynical exploitation – managerial control (harnessing enthusiasm to reconcile admins to repetitive routine, stagnant pay and anxiety over job security, without necessarily increasing productivity); corporate brand positioning (putting their passions on display as company ambassadors). These workers are certainly institutionally constrained. But classification also 'shapes the day-to-day realities of work', notes O'Brien (2014: 78-79), where what counts as "good" or "bad" work is often predicated on forms of labour being 'rejected as inappropriate or lesser when they are associated with being not creative, even though they too may be directly bound up in the diffusion of cultural economy in consumer society'. "Giving voice" to such work, representing and supporting those who undertake it, suggests an alternative vision of the creative economy (Coles, 2016).

It is necessary, finally, to articulate non-creative values. Admins' (counter-)cultural, often anti-corporate, commitment to popular music (Klein et al., 2017) blends into positive identification with aspects of technical infrastructure. Stressing occupational humility (especially in deference to artists) within a cultural community united by a

common project, if not shared practice, they simultaneously exhibit strong defences of bureaucracy (duty, due process, accountability) often sparked by indignation towards “creative” colleagues’ romanticised misperceptions. Conceivably then, commercial music admin holds within it an emergent and situated ‘ethics of office’ (Du Gay, 2017) – a more prudent, public-oriented vocation than is commonly mythologised in industry lore – perhaps more consistent with the traditional cultural policy frame. Reciprocally, dominant strategic-managerial visions of cultural “administration”, whether in Glaser’s classic formulation or the contemporary “policy entrepreneur”, might fruitfully learn from “admin”. Alongside expert intermediation (Prince, 2015), routine maintenance is surely as central to a proliferating audit culture amongst recipients of public money, large and small (Belfiore, 2004). As cultural policy under (neo-)liberal governance blends with, and reimagines, media policy and industrial strategy (Garnham, 2005; O’Brien, 2014; Pratt, 2012), admin offers an intriguing point of convergence for future research.

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