

Get Up, Stand Up? Theorizing Mobilization in Creative Work

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Abstract

This article concerns individualism, collective awareness and organized resistance in the creative industries. It applies the lens of John Kelly’s mobilization theory (1998), usually used in a trade union context, to “TV WRAP,” a successful non-unionized campaign facilitated through an online community in the UK television (TV) industry in 2005, and finds that Kelly’s prerequisites to mobilization were all present. It explores previously unpublished questionnaire data from a 2011 survey of over 1,000 UK film and TV workers, which suggests that such prerequisites to mobilization are still present in the TV workforce. Finally it examines recent and ongoing mobilization by video game workers as a modern comparison, updating the relevance of Kelly’s theory to explore and consider potential models for a new politics of resistance in the digital age.

Keywords

mobilization, creative industries, television, trade union, resistance, Kelly, freelance

Introduction

Over the last forty years, British film and television industries have moved from a highly unionized labor market to one marked by a lack of workplace representation, insecure labor conditions, and precarity (Banks 2017; Lee 2018; Percival and Hesmondhalgh 2014; Saundry et al. 2007). Today, we see the dominance of so-called “mega indies” in television production, and a highly networked labor market riven by social inequality (Lee 2018).

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Labor in the sector is increasingly oriented around freelance project-based work, particularly in independent film production (89% freelance workers) and independent television production (52%) (Creative Skillset 2015). It is marked by a fragmented workforce, high levels of inequality in terms of access, a prevalence of unpaid work, and self-exploitation through sacrificial labor, with low levels of union membership (Percival and Hesmondhalgh 2014). Attitudes of workers have shifted along with this political economic change—with a marked turn toward highly individualized orientations toward work. In this sense “selfish” networks (Antcliff et al. 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011) reinforce individualized attitudes toward work, rather than collective solidarity.

Creative workers are disembedded from both workplace organizations and social institutions: “an intensification of individualisation, a more determined looking out for the self” (McRobbie 2002a, 528). This results in a lack of time, mechanisms or workplace in which any kind of effective labor organization can function—“Maybe there can be no workplace politics when there is no workplace” (McRobbie 2002a, 522). Networks, however, have provided the context for an increased instrumentalism and individualism—networks as a source of competitive advantage in a precarious labor market (Lee 2012), and the basis for a (re)socialization of labor through the building of a supportive online community, as well as for mobilization in lieu of high levels of union representation (Merkel 2015; Naudin 2015).

In 2005, a non-unionized lobby group called the TV Workers’ Rights Advocacy Petition (“TV WRAP”) succeeded in mobilizing freelance workers to demand an end to exploitative and illegal working practices in the British television industry. It did so largely through online “connective action” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), which raised awareness amongst workers and the public. This article applies the lens of John Kelly’s mobilization theory (1998), usually used in a trade union context, to the TV WRAP campaign and finds that Kelly’s prerequisites to mobilization were all present in this non-unionized campaign, despite the lack of a fixed workplace in which to organize. In this structurally challenging environment for a union to organize, we explore the role of online connective action as an alternative platform for the anonymous release of silenced voices and stories, and a “moment of indignation” which ignited the campaign.

The article then explores questionnaire data from a survey of over 1,000 film and TV workers, which suggests that such prerequisites to mobilization are still present in the UK TV workforce. We examine more recent campaigns and unionization by video game workers as a comparison to explore potential models for mobilization in the digital age. Here, the logic of connective action, and the vital importance of a “moment of indignation” (Castells 2012) is explored in relation to generating mobilization for “creative justice” (Banks 2017) through a new kind of unionization.

Finally we return to Kelly’s mobilization theory, arguing that despite its initial conception firmly within a context of union renewal and organizing, this theory and its five pre-requisites for worker mobilization have immense relevance today within scholarly discussions of both unionized and non-unionized activism in increasingly precarious sectors. In doing so we propose not only a rediscovery and re-application

of Kelly's theory to precarious modern settings, but also an opportunity for activists within and beyond trade unions to develop a toolkit for worker mobilization based on the evidence of Kelly's prerequisites at work, and the outcomes achieved, both in TV WRAP and in video game worker campaigns.

Networks and New Modes of Mobilization in Cultural Industries

A recent survey of "emerging labour politics" in the cultural industries provides a comprehensive global account of modes of resistance to exploitation in cultural work (de Peuter and Cohen 2015). The authors identify several forms that such resistance takes including grassroot groups, virtual campaigns, collaborations with unions, and so-called "alt labor" organizations for cultural workers who cannot access union protection. Such research demonstrates how resistance against exploitative conditions of labor in the cultural, creative, and digital industries has rapidly intensified in the last decade.

Some critics are pessimistic about the role of digital networks in generating collective action, with the charge of "slacktivism" never far from campaigns that do not progress beyond social media (Harlow and Guo 2014). Gladwell counters Aaker and Smith's (2010) notion that social media can increase motivation for activism by arguing that it may increase participation "by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires" (Gladwell 2010, 46). However, the high-risk activism required to generate social change is not increased by networked communication. Gerbaudo (2012) has challenged Castells' (2012) notion of leaderless networks, focusing on the use of technology by leaders to orchestrate action; while Murthy (2012), examining the role of social media in the Arab Spring, argues that offline, street activism is what drove the revolution in Egypt in 2010, with social media functioning as a useful secondary resource.

Others however see the role of online networks as pivotal in enabling disparate groups, across the globe, to mobilize against exploitation and insecurity. According to Castells (2012), both offline and online action are critical for successful social movements, but he is optimistic about the role that the internet plays in complementing offline activism. Examining a series of social movements between 2008 and 2011, including Egypt's Tahrir Square Protests, the Occupy movement and Iceland's Kitchenware Revolution, Castells demonstrates the importance of "multimodal networking" which involves online and offline networks. He claims that such social movements arise in moments of indignation and spread virally. Other writers optimistic about the power of networks to catalyze social movements have discussed the key role of networked communication to generate a rapid assembly around social issues. Clay Shirky, for example, writes about the three-rung ladder of collective action, "sharing, cooperation and collective action" (Shirky 2008), with each rung harder to reach than the last. However, social media brings the rungs closer together, making the ladder easier to climb. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) emphasize the role of technology

in enabling users to mobilize across large, horizontal networks through “connective action” without bureaucratic constraints, a mode of operation which we now explore in the case of TV WRAP.

TV WRAP

In 2005, a website called productionbase.co.uk was a key online recruitment platform within the UK TV industry. Employers advertised vacancies for freelancers and searched CVs of subscription-paying members. It hosted a discussion board, where several freelancers began to recognize the potential of the internet to address the isolation they felt. After initial discussion with BECTU (the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union) about setting up an online branch of the union faltered, two of these professionals decided to set up their own online community, and the site “TV Freelancers” was born at tvfreelancers.org.uk, hosting a simple discussion forum. The subsequent sustained release of anonymous accounts of exploitative labor conditions through this forum, and the industry attention it generated, led directly to the creation of the TV WRAP campaign.

In terms of organizing, the online tools available in a pre-social media age were relatively limited. The six TV WRAP activists used a Yahoo email group for their private discussions, the website discussion forum to allow anonymous posting by members, an email newsletter with 5,000 subscribers, and an online petition form. Press releases and letters written to industry publications generated coverage in the *MediaGuardian* and *Broadcast Magazine*.

Using these methods, campaigners publicized some of the worst experiences reported, threatened to “name and shame” abusive employers, presented a petition of over 3,000 signatures to Downing Street, and subsequently collated first-person accounts of abusive employment experiences to submit a “dossier” of evidence to PACT (Producers’ Association for Cinema and Television), the body which represented independent TV employers. The campaign dominated the pages of the industry press, and transformed awareness about employment rights and the illegality of unpaid work experience.

Responses came from across the sector, with reactions from Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell, former BBC Director-General Greg Dyke and BBC chairman Michael Grade, and changes in policy from producers including Granada and Endemol. In *Broadcast Magazine*’s survey one year later, a sixth of freelancers said the campaign had changed their working lives for the better (Strauss 2005). Most significantly, the DTI (Department of Trade and Industry) investigated the TV industry and issued new guidelines about work experience—a move which campaigners saw as a defining victory.

Traditionally, industrial relations literature is predicated on the assumption of a workplace within which a union can organize. The lens provided by mobilization theory, as put forward by John Kelly in his seminal work on the subject (1998), offers an insight into why this campaign gained the traction that it did, without such a workplace.

Mobilization Theory

Kelly's work presents five factors as essential prerequisites to collective mobilization action. Following Tilly's earlier work (1978), Kelly's own framework focuses on:

1. the perception of injustice as a necessary precursor to action,
2. a sense of collective identity and interest definition,
3. the definition of an opposing agency to mobilize against,
4. attribution of blame to that agency for the injustice felt, and
5. the role of leadership in facilitating all of the above.

Injustice

Kelly described the need for "a sense of injustice," the conviction that an event, action or situation is "wrong" or "illegitimate" (1998, 34). From early forum postings on the TV Freelancers website, disturbing first-person accounts of punishing working conditions had begun to emerge:

"I was paid £230 per week. A week was sometimes the full 7 days, and often I ended up working from 7am to midnight. . . it was obvious that we were all easily replaceable" (A 23-year old runner)

"I worked 18-hour days as a matter of course and averaged five hours' sleep. The demands on me and the team I worked in were at best ludicrous and yet any failure was punished daily by public humiliation" (A 24-year-old runner) (Percival 2005)

Several themes emerged: denial of holiday pay, very long working hours, and breaches of national minimum wage—all accompanied by a profound fear of speaking out. The anonymity of the TV Freelancers forum was enabling the first release of silenced freelancers' voices (Carter et al. 2003), offering consistent, albeit anecdotal, evidence of employment malpractice. These solidified a sense of injustice around specific issues which for the first time were attracting collective interest.

A key decision taken at this time was to focus a petition on definably **illegal** employment practices—as opposed to just **unpopular** ones. The law provided an objective baseline for complaint, and the three issues of (1) the National Minimum Wage, (2) illegally long hours, and (3) withheld holiday pay became the key issues in the campaign—using the law as a concrete "red line" benchmark.

Collective Identity

In the definition of collective identity and interests, Kelly presents mobilization theory as redirecting attention toward "social processes of industrial relations. . . these attributions and categories. . . will be reinforced, reworked or abandoned in the course of **workplace** social interaction." (1998, 38, our emphasis). In the case

of the TV WRAP campaign, however, the second factor specified by Kelly—a sense of collective identity—was provided not via face to face contact, but by a sense of community developed entirely online. This group of freelance workers had not previously existed as a discrete group with any clear form of identity; the internet provided that for the first time. If anything, paradoxically, the **lack** of a workplace and a shared sense of individual isolation were the very attributes that defined this group's shared interests.

McRobbie's (2002a, 522) comment that "Maybe there can be no workplace politics when there is no workplace" sums up the challenge in organizing TV freelancers who work on a short-term contract basis, often for small independent companies, and go to work wherever filming or post-production takes place; they move from one crew and one location to another often without ever meeting a union rep—in a tight-knit environment where "the emphasis on presentation of self is incompatible with a contestatory demeanor. It's not cool to be 'difficult'." (McRobbie 2002a). The TV Freelancers website described "a need to reduce the isolation felt by many workers" (tvfreelancers.org.uk 2005). "Most of the people active in the campaign who came along and offered to help, none of us would even know each other without the web. . . How they would ever have made contact otherwise I don't know" (Adamson 2009).

An online platform allowed workers to articulate dissent and share abusive experiences anonymously. Those leading the campaign were able to challenge the existing balance of power by (a) preserving their anonymity and circumventing the possibility of any direct individual counter-action, and (b) launching a campaign that was about collective media pressure and lobbying, rather than direct industrial action by individuals. It was through such media activity that the third of Kelly's key factors was realized.

Agency

The campaign received a boost on 11 April 2005, when the Guardian newspaper published a two-page article on TV WRAP (Silver 2005). The writer also spoke to John McVay, the chief executive of PACT. McVay (who has since stated he was quoted out of context) was reported as saying: "The problem with the TV WRAP paper is that there's lots of assertions, but I don't see lots of hard statistics and facts there. . . If there are serious issues which need to be addressed, the best way to address them is in a proper evidence-based manner." Inadvertently, McVay's words did more to mobilize the campaign than anything that had gone before. As Kelly puts it, "It is vital that aggrieved individuals blame an agency for their problems, rather than attributing them to uncontrollable forces or events. That agency can then become the target for collective organisation and action" (1998, 29).

As the following week's 'Letters' page demonstrated, many freelancers were angered by McVay's (alleged) suggestion that there was no evidence of malpractice—and PACT, as the industry body representing independent production companies, became the target agency required by Kelly. TV Freelancers appealed to its mailing list to submit their own evidence of abusive working conditions, and this moment of

indignation led to a further 80-page dossier of evidence being compiled and presented to PACT.

Simms and Dean (2015) use the lens of Kelly's theory to examine two other examples of groups of performing artists mobilizing to resist specific circumstances, at a similar time to TV WRAP. Looking at two case studies in the early to mid-2000s involving the chorus at the English National Opera, and the cast of the touring musical theatre production *Dancing in the Streets*, the researchers found that activists succeeded by re-defining and making visible the previously invisible lines that managers had crossed—likewise identifying specific agents as targets to mobilize a sense of injustice. They redirected attention from the impersonal challenges of the external environment (reductions in funding, decline in box office takings) to an argument that specific managerial choices were central—focus on an opponent was crucial.

Attribution

For TV WRAP, PACT and its member companies quickly became the focus of “attribution” for the abusive practices being described. Blame was laid externally and squarely at the doors of the indie production sector, and members of PACT in particular. Notably, however, the attribution was not directed at one employer, but a culture of perceived malpractice across an entire sector, which PACT came to represent. Kelly refers to the social stereotyping often found alongside attribution; the stereotyping in this case characterized not multiple individuals or a management class, but multiple independent employers as transgressors.

Leadership

Questions of leadership are important here, as Kelly's discussion of the attributes and importance of effective leaders has attracted significant comment. Fairbrother, for instance, commented that mobilization theory is “a celebration of a leader-led dichotomy, without any reference to participative forms of organisation and struggle in the context of workplace relations” (Fairbrother 2005, 259).

The TV WRAP campaign formed spontaneously as a result of online discussion—much closer to the participative model Fairbrother described. The petition was suggested in an online forum, and those who responded positively to the idea became the loose group of half a dozen organizers that formed the campaign's “leadership.” Online connectivity, in the absence of a workplace, made it possible for such a small number of people to mobilize such a large sector—since at the time, in the earliest pre-social media days of discussion boards, the TV Freelancers website was the only place where such voices were being heard.

The leadership skills Kelly describes, however, are highly relevant here. Leadership is needed to catalyze the other four factors. A leader needs to promote a sense of injustice, engender a sense of collective interests, talk to fellow workers, and defend their actions against counter-mobilizations. The TV WRAP organizers did all these things, without being aware of the leadership role they were adopting. Kelly refers to Oliver

& Marwell, describing how “the theory of collective action explains why most action comes from a relatively small number of participants who make such big contributions to the cause that they know (or think they know) they can ‘make a difference’” (Kelly 1998, 33; Oliver and Marwell 1988). Emails between the small group of half a dozen campaigners (several of whom never actually met) reflected firstly surprise, and then growing pleasure at this empowerment:

“Bloody fantastic is what it is. . . I wonder, after years of frustration. . . whether we might finally be able to make a difference. . . no-one can say ‘oh, that’s just the unions kicking up again’, because it’s just a bunch of people with a common cause. Very inspiring and very exciting” (campaigner private email, 20th January 2005)

Connective Action Versus Workplace Union Organizing

So far, then, all five components of Kelly’s framework were evidently at work in the campaign—with the medium of the workplace, however, largely replaced by online connective action. In this sense the campaign challenges Kelly’s workplace-based assumptions; it is an example of a grassroots mobilization that developed outside the structure of a union.

Gall suggests that union organizing strategies have continued to depend on a top-down approach rather than organic growth; this has “involved EUOs [employed union officers] bringing the ‘union’ as an outside body into workplaces” (Gall 2009, 4). In both Gall’s statement and that of Fairbrother earlier, and indeed throughout the organizing literature, the key word is “workplace.” As we have seen, however, the majority of TV freelance workers are extremely mobile, moving from crew to crew and location to location; so the workplace-dependent strategy of top-down organizing cannot function at all.

Cohen writes that the key to union renewal is a “workplace-based process of self-activity and mobilization” (Cohen 2009, 38), and as Terry has written elsewhere: “. . . any eventual renaissance of trade unionism in the private sectors of British industry will be placed on workplace-level activity, simply because it is difficult to conceive of any other” (Terry 2003, 461). The TV WRAP model suggested what this “other” might become, by demonstrating the functionality of the internet—a medium that facilitates some of the connectivity normally offered by a more conventional workplace, releases previously unheard voices, and can enable self-mobilization to take place even in the absence of union leadership. That is not to say that the internet itself replaces the crucial role of human actors; rather to state that without the horizontal reach of online networks across individualized workplace contexts, such mobilization would be far harder to achieve.

TV WRAP brings us back to another outcome: not mobilization that is brought about in a workplace by an existing organization that seeks to lead it, such as a union, but self-mobilization outside the workplace. By setting out goals relating to their personal employment conditions so clearly, the TV WRAP campaign offered a striking example of self-organizing—a response to crisis with the simple intention

of bettering personal working conditions by whatever means available (Simms and Holgate 2010). This dynamic “fundamentally poses a challenge to the institutionalised preoccupations and priorities of union leaders” (Cohen 2009, 42). TV WRAP shows that where there is no workplace (McRobbie 2002b)—or perhaps even **because** there is no workplace—new self-mobilization can just as easily take workers down a non-unionized route.

For all its impact on industry awareness and practice, however, TV WRAP for some critics demonstrated a key limitation of connective action. What it lacked, as an informal lobby group, was the institutional structure or collective mandate to sit down and negotiate with PACT or other employers, and convert the momentum acquired into a written agreement—an “institutional residue” (Heery et al. 2004). What it managed however was to create advantageous conditions to bring the more established union, BECTU, into play. At the peak of the campaign, PACT, who had been negatively targeted by activists, offered to renegotiate their freelance agreement with BECTU. Progress was slow, but more than two years later, a new agreement did emerge, which offered improved protection of a freelancer’s right to a forty-eight-hour week.

The relationship between TV WRAP and BECTU was a complex one. Martin Spence, Assistant General Secretary of BECTU with a remit for freelancers at the time, recalled the reaction from union officials when the TV WRAP campaign launched:

“. . . in terms of the two possible responses, one slightly bad-tempered and the other seeking a working relationship, it didn’t take very long and it wasn’t terribly hard fought for the second response to win out . . . (a) because we can bring more power to their elbow, but (b) because whatever comes out of this. . . if we’re not part of the solution here, then there won’t be a solution.” (Spence 2009)

Saundry et al, focusing on various types of social capital, suggest that networks such as TV WRAP take advantage of strong bonding links, but will still ultimately need to turn to a union, seeing its collective bargaining skills as a part of its servicing function (Saundry et al. 2012, 275). Diamond & Freeman warned that online organizations would challenge the place of unions in cyberspace (Diamond and Freeman 2002). Saundry et al have argued more optimistically that online networks have a role to play in not only complementing, but also extending union activity: “trade unions need to accept that they are not ‘the only show in town’ but part of a disparate range of institutions that workers will utilize to defend their interests in the workplace” (Saundry et al. 2007, 189).

Writing about the TV WRAP campaign, Saundry et al saw its inability to bargain as a defining shortcoming—making it “unable to translate increased consciousness into tangible improvements” (Saundry et al. 2012, 275). However, the campaign resulted in a new set of sector guidelines for work experience, the disappearance of advertisements for unpaid work, a change in work experience practices for a number of major employers, improvements felt by a sixth of freelancers, and a general change in culture across the sector. It also paved the way to the revised freelance agreement between PACT and BECTU. But this agreement took several years to negotiate, and even then

was voluntary on the part of employers; so it is perhaps not difficult to argue that the cultural changes brought about by the original campaign through connective action were at least as beneficial as those eventually effected by the union's revised institutional—and voluntary—agreement.

Kelly's Pre-Requisites—Still in Place?

In 2011, one of us (Percival) conducted a survey of over 1,000 workers in the UK film and TV sectors. Whilst findings concerning illegal employment practice have been discussed elsewhere (Percival and Hesmondhalgh 2014), responses relating to mobilization theory are explored here for the first time.

The survey was run online, hosted by Survey Monkey. It was promoted by email newsletters and online postings through a large number of industry online communities and networks in both film and TV sectors, including production guilds, screen agencies, and unions; a total of 1,099 respondents completed the survey. It set out principally to explore attitudes toward unpaid work, but also contained a set of questions specifically connected to the factors identified by Kelly as being necessary pre-requisites to workforce mobilization—in order to identify whether such factors were still present in the workforce.

Respondents were asked to rank their agreement with a number of statements about unpaid work, on a scale from 0 (complete disagreement) to 10 (complete agreement). In terms of a perception of injustice, responses showed an average of 7.5 out of 10 agreement with “I feel that unpaid work is a source of injustice in the industry”; and in terms of collective identity and interests, respondents also averaged 7.5 agreement with “I believe many other people in my industry share my views and interests.” With the statement “I believe that collective action can bring about change in working practices within the industry” there was again 7.5 out of 10 average agreement.

From this data, it would appear that the key factors leading to mobilization are still strongly present in the workforce, although the agency to mobilize against has not been clearly identified. Despite concerns about the individualization of cultural workers, seen as model enterprising subjects of neoliberalism (McRobbie 2016), the survey also showed significant evidence of collective sensibilities and values, especially among younger workers. Why, then, does there appear to be little current prospect of labor mobilization in the sector, of the kind that typified TV WRAP?

The attitudinal survey outlined above indicates a widespread awareness of unfairness in film and TV work; however, with the TV WRAP campaign, there was a key “moment of indignation” that turned this existing sense of injustice into action against an opposing agency. Moreover, despite Castells' argument about the shift to leaderless networks (2012), our research indicates the pivotal role that leaders play. Until a key “moment of indignation” triggers an impetus to grassroots leadership against an opposing target agency, a trigger which has been absent in the British audiovisual labor market, the chances for mobilization may be minimal—although post-COVID, an even more demanding labor market may well provide more suitable conditions for such a trigger.

In the TV WRAP campaign, as we have seen, the pivotal “moment of indignation” was in response to John McVay’s (alleged) dismissive response to the campaign in the press. Other similar moments can be seen to be present in recent successful examples of non-unionized labor mobilization. For example, the Intern Aware campaign in the early 2010s emerged partly because of a series of stories in the press about the offspring of famous, well connected individuals (often politicians) securing prestigious “internships” (Beckett 2011) fuelling a sense of injustice at the hypocrisies of specific individuals who espouse meritocracy while ensuring their own families’ success. It was also driven by the explosive investigative journalism of Ross Perlin in his book *Intern Nation* (2011), which chronicled the abuse and proliferation of the internship culture across the American economy. The injustices associated with internships became the background to policy reports such as the UK government’s report on social mobility (HM Government Great Britain 2011).

TV WRAP now took place more than fifteen years ago. Writing about TV WRAP in 2007, Saundry et al (2007) note that as a case study it showed the importance and also the difficulty for trade unions (in this case BECTU) to engage with and work alongside networked activity and online campaigns outside the formal union structures. While unions working in the creative and cultural sector have arguably been slow to catch up with these networked campaigns and their ways of working, it is clear that some are now adapting in order to harness the power of indignation and agency for precarious workers, amplifying that indignation across online networks in order to generate increased mobilization. Brett Caraway has examined the US case study of OUR Walmart (an online network using connective action with arms-length support from an established union) to show how technological innovations in communication, which have increased exponentially since the TV WRAP campaign, have enabled workers to engage in struggles to improve working conditions and raise wages, even in highly anti-union environments (Caraway 2016). Echoing Saundry et al., Caraway explores the central question “whether personal interactions and fluid social networks are capable of producing the sustained political participation necessary to achieve genuine social change.” While clearly seeing evidence of incremental change at Walmart as a result of workers’ connective action, later analysis more pessimistically suggests that “While personalised forms of communication may enable horizontal forms of organization and collective action, their impact may be restricted to their capacity to influence public opinion” (Caraway 2018).

Video Game Workers

With this in mind, how might labor mobilization for cultural workers take place effectively in future? Recent developments in the video game industry provide suggestions of new directions. Video game production is characterized by intense periods of “crunch” working and long hours, with a blurring of work/leisure boundaries (Weststar 2015). Union membership was (until very recently) almost non-existent, but it is a sector with a very strong collective sense of “occupational community.” For Salaman (1971), a group of workers has an occupational community when “their identities are

shaped by work, they share certain norms and values and their work/leisure boundaries are blurred” (Weststar 2015).

In her examination of this issue, Johanna Weststar explores how occupational community both hinders and helps the formation of a perceived injustice by employers. What the video game case suggests is that for years, issues of “crunch work” and unpaid labor had become a part of the community’s norms, and so dismissed as a “rite of passage,” an essential part of the sacrificial labor—ultimately a pre-requisite in the production of a high-quality game. This focus on the creation of great games created an environment where self-exploitation in the industry was naturalized—and normalized (Weststar 2012).

In recent years, however, there has been a split between management and workers in the games communities and a growing sense that managerial values (to make money) threaten the core goal of making “amazing, innovative and fun games.” It once again became possible for marginalized workers to establish a “them” and “us” dynamic. Ultimately, Legault and Weststar also challenge Kelly’s assumption that collective action necessarily means union action (Kelly 1998); in the project-based knowledge economy, “the conditions can be hospitable to collective action, but the usual enterprise-based union certification system is poorly suited to the structure of the industry and to workers’ most pressing problems. The primary effect of these structural changes is not to make collective action obsolete, but to make the traditional model of unionization less attractive” (Legault and Weststar 2015, 219). So while “crunch work” was an ever-present issue, attempts at organized resistance had faltered.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, when UK video game workers established their first union in December 2018—Game Workers Unite UK—they followed a model that was anything but traditional (Quinn 2018; Staton 2018)—but one that bears certain striking resemblances to TV WRAP, and also displays Kelly’s pre-requisites. As with the TV Freelancers network, online communities already existed which were developing collective interests and injustices around “crunch work” and lack of diversity. The trigger “moment of indignation” came at the 2018 US Game Developer Conference, when an attempt by a group of video game workers to raise pro-union voices in a panel discussion was suppressed by the conference organizers (Ruffino and Woodcock 2020). News of the confrontation spread rapidly across existing social media networks, quickly building an international profile for the new GWU, and also establishing an opponent agency in the process. As with TV Freelancers, use of an existing online community with anonymous posting (in the GWU’s case, the platform Discord, widely used for communication during gameplay) enabled recruitment and release of new voices without initially revealing identity. Unlike TV WRAP, the GWU did choose a unionization route—but interestingly, far from a conventional one. In the UK, the group did not find a favorable response in its approaches to the major established TUC-affiliated unions, but ultimately opted to form a branch of the Independent Workers’ Union of Great Britain (IWGB).

This collective formed in 2012 focusing specifically on mobile, casualized workers who have traditionally been extremely hard to organize—low paid migrant workers,

foster care workers, and outsourced workers in the so-called “gig economy” of Uber drivers and delivery riders (Flais 2018). The “fit” of a new kind of union for precarious workers has enabled video game professionals to learn how to be in a union from scratch; while “the interrelation between in-person meetings, video calls, instant messaging and shared online discussions has accelerated the development of both local chapters of GWU and the international network,” showing the value once again of online connective action in a precarious workforce (Woodcock 2020).

In October 2019, they launched legal action against a BAFTA-award winning games studio over the alleged unfair dismissal of a founding member of the union (Game Workers Unite 2019)—an action that draws on a strong sense of injustice, and targets a tangible agency to mobilize against; and they are working hard to redraw lines which have become invisible, in a culture which according to a founding member “for as long as I can remember. . . has been considered normal” (Staton 2018). As Woodcock comments—who himself was involved with the UK GWU from its inception—“Workers without previous experience of [trade unionism] are untrammelled by the defeats, sectionalism and bureaucratization of existing unions. This ‘fresh start’ organizing shows what workplace organizing can look like in these new sectors” (Woodcock 2020).

Conclusion

Kelly was writing about workplaces at a time when the internet had arrived, but online communities (of any sort) were still a thing of the future. Our research shows that Kelly’s thesis can still be reapplied in relation to mobilization in cultural and creative work today.

Exploring the campaigns we have touched on here, it’s evident that a tightly defined sense of collective identity and injustice is as vital as ever; as is the need to define, and focus attention on, the malfeasance of an opposing agency—even if union organizers, or other leaders, have to redraw and re-articulate the invisible line which the employer has crossed (Simms and Dean 2015). Kelly stands true here, since campaigns without this tight focus have not sustained; but we have also seen the importance of a “moment of indignation” as a call to action. Question marks persist concerning the link between connective action alone, and sustained institutional outcomes (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Caraway 2018). However, successful campaigns show us that leadership is more critical than ever—and the GWU’s turn to a new kind of union, combining off- and online activism, suggests a hybrid opportunity for “fresh start” unionizing in other creative sectors (Woodcock 2020) which is certainly a model to watch.

Perhaps the most significant person to have updated Kelly is Kelly himself. In 2018 he revisited his own thesis on mobilization theory, and reached conclusions that both bear out Weststar’s thoughts about games workers, and strikingly accommodate campaigns such as TV WRAP and the creation of the GWU (Kelly 2018). Wondering why political and ideological resistance has been so limited in the last twenty years, Kelly considers whether there is a lack of a sense of injustice about issues such as insecure employment “because these conditions are becoming normalized as inevitable

attributes of contemporary capitalism, soluble only by individual exit, not collective voice” (p. 706). Kelly also acknowledges that collective solutions are not absent, but don’t always take “the traditional forms mapped out by the mobilization and organizing literatures. . . the construction of temporary, online communities or networks, using a variety of digital platforms, has sometimes proved effective as a means of exerting leverage on employers through the reputation damage emanating from adverse publicity.” (p. 707).

Ultimately then, Kelly echoes the dangers seen by other writers—of normalization (Legault and Weststar 2015), and of individualization (Lee 2012; Percival and Hesmondhalgh 2014; McRobbie 2016), as key barriers to collective mobilization. It would appear that, especially for young people in creative industries, Kelly’s sense of collective identity becomes harder to achieve, as the need to compete as a disenfranchised individual becomes increasingly standard. A sense of injustice becomes harder to instil, where the need to self-exploit becomes the accepted price to pay for a creative vocation—especially when a collective memory of different standards of pay and employment security has begun to fade (or never existed).

But where an occupational community can be identified, and its values seen to be challenged; where an opposing agency can be identified, and ethical (and perhaps invisible) lines redrawn to create a sense of injustice; where existing solidarity between individuals and groups can be engendered by such injustice, and triggered into action by a moment of indignation, or even outrage; and where leaders can seize an opportunity to capitalize on such a moment, there is striking evidence that mobilization can still successfully take place. As Kelly recognizes, the threat of reputational damage may now be one of the most effective tools to adjust the market forces at play in a precarious workforce—perhaps even more so than an institutional agreement. Through connective action, such tools can be wielded just as effectively by maverick, noisy, fast-moving networks, and new forms of organization, as by established unions in stable workplaces—perhaps, in a post-COVID world, even more so.

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