

Liquid Life, Convergence Culture, and Media Work

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Abstract

Life today has become analogous with work – and it increasingly displays all the contemporary characteristics of work in what has been described as the ‘new capitalism’: permanent flux, constant change, and structural indeterminacy. Zygmunt Bauman thus argues how we are all living a ‘liquid’ life, which is “*a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty.*” In liquid life, the modern categories of production (work) and consumption (life) have converged, which trend is particularly visible in our almost constant and concurrent immersion in media. According to Henry Jenkins, these are the conditions of an emerging convergence culture. In this paper these trends will be explored in detail, coupling insights from contemporary social theory, new media studies and popular culture to show how our modern conceptions of media, culture and society have modernized, and how the emerging media ecosystem can be illuminated by setting it against the ways in which those at the forefront of these cultural and technological changes negotiate their professional identity: the mediaworkers.

Liquid Life, Convergence Culture, and Media Work

In today's society, argues Zygmunt Bauman, "*work is the normal state of all humans; not working is abnormal*" (2005a: 5). Life has become analogous to work. Instead of developing a lifestyle, our everyday efforts and energy go into choosing a work-style: 'a way of working and a way of being at work', as one British professional coaching agency describes it. As work becomes a way of life, life increasingly displays all the characteristics of contemporary work, where we have to come to terms with the challenges and opportunities of contingent employment, precarious labour, and a structural sense of real or perceived job insecurity. Ulrich Beck (2000) points at the fundamentally ambivalent prospects of contemporary 'work-styles' at all levels of society as marked by uncertainty, paradox and risk. The conditions of work at the beginning of the 21st century are in a constant state of flux, brought about by all kinds of job destruction practices in the context of what Richard Sennett (1998) calls 'workforce flexibility'. This culture of contemporary capitalism manifests itself most directly in the notable change of one's career from a series of more or less predictable achievements within the context of a lifelong contract to a constant reshuffling of career bits and pieces in the 'portfolio worklife', as heralded by Charles Hand as early as 1989 (pp.183ff). In the portfolio lifestyle, careers are a sequence of stepping stones through life, where workers as individuals and organizations as collectives do not commit to each other for much more than the short-term goal, the project at hand, the talent needed now. The modern categories of life and work at the beginning of the 21st century are thus spilling over, into each other, making each of these key aspects of our human condition contingent on the characteristics of the other. Bauman shows how this increasing fluidity of the everyday, coupled with a prevalent sense of permanent flux, has created the conditions of contemporary 'liquid' life as "*a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty*" (2005b, p.2).

In this paper I will set the sketched developments and discussions on the centrality of work and the convergence of work and life in liquid modernity against a context of the pervasive and ubiquitous nature of media in our everyday lives. I will show how our almost constant and concurrent immersion in media can be seen as both a reflection as well as an amplification of the hybridization of life in culture of new capitalism. This perspective opens up different ways of looking at seemingly contradictory thus deeply unsettling trends in

today's lived experiences at home, at work, and at play. At the heart of this argument stands a selective reading of contemporary social theories on the changing nature of work by Richard Sennett, Zygmunt Bauman, and Ulrich Beck, coupled with the approaches to new media by Lev Manovich and Pierre Lévy, and popular culture by Henry Jenkins. By conceptually linking between the centrality of work in today's risk society, with the omnipresence of new media and the pervasiveness of the genres, discourses and uses of popular culture, we may open up exciting ways of looking at both historical and contemporary phenomena on the intersection between media, culture and society.

New Capitalism

The constant uncertainty of everyday liquid life today, as sketched by Zygmunt Bauman, is accelerated and amplified at work following the prevailing management mantras of new capitalism, where stability and solidity as one-time hallmarks of a healthy company now have become signs of weakness (Sennett, 2005: 41). The relationships of capital and labour, argues Manuel Castells, are increasingly individualized and organized around the network enterprise form of production, which integrates the work process globally through telecommunications, transportation and client-customer networks. Such worldwide integration introduces a fundamental aspect of unpredictability to the nature of work, as the success or failure of the local production process becomes almost completely contingent on the fluctuations in the global network – and vice versa, as *“any individual capital is submitted to the movements of the global automaton”* (Castells, 2000: 18). Here, adaptive behavior, permanent change, casualization of labor, and continual innovation are all expressed in the executive credo of ‘workforce flexibility’ which according to Bauman has turned from something to be avoided into a virtue to be learned and practised daily (2002: 24). This flexibility for many is synonymous with living in fear of real or perceived job insecurity. Sennett signals how even affluent and highly educated young professionals fear *“they are on the edge of losing control over their lives. This fear is built into their work histories”* (Sennett, 1998: 19). Society today, argues Sennett, uses the feverish development of flexible organisations against the ‘evils’ of routine. Unlike Handy, he sees little promise in this re-interpretation of uncertainty as the corporate strategy of choice: *“Revulsion against bureaucratic routine and pursuit of flexibility has produced new structures of power and control, rather than created the conditions which set us free”* (ibid., 47). This

flexibility stretches out into both work time and non-work time, which distinction has blurred for many, if not most, people. Adapting to changing management practices, new technologies, and cultivating creativity and talent cannot be necessarily tied to a nine-to-five working weekday, especially considering the general lack of corporate investment in employee training. With the slow demise of lifelong full-time employment, continuous searching for jobs, preparing for potential future jobs, as well as managing multiple careers more or less simultaneously have become core elements of everyday lifestyle for many. This inevitably must lead to a more inclusive understanding of work as taking place in differing socio-economic settings and as interconnected with many other, often non-work, relationships (Parry et al, 2005).

Work comes in many different shapes and sizes – paid and non-paid, voluntary and employed, professional and amateuristic – and we seem to be engulfed in it all of the time. Working increasingly includes (re-) schooling and training, unlearning ‘old’ skills while adapting to changing technologies and management demands, moving from project to project, and navigating one’s career through an at times bewildering sea of loose affiliations, temporary arrangements, and informal networks. This perception and experience of working has come to define life and modern society. Additionally our understanding of contemporary work-styles by definition includes structural uncertainty and risk, thus framing every aspect of our lives within that particular context.

Precarity

The key to understanding this ‘brave new world’ of work is its precariousness, characterized by endemic uncertainty and permanent change (Beck, 2000: 22-3). The nature of work is changing rapidly in our runaway world – some even foresee an end of work in the nearby future (Rifkin, 2004). However real or perceived the insecurities experiences in our everyday work-styles are, its *precarité* bleeds into every understanding we have of ourselves and who we are. As colorfully described on the Britain-based website Precarity.Info:

“WHAT IS PRECARITY? Precarity stretches beyond work. It includes housing, debt, general instability, the inability to make plans. We can talk about the subjugation of life under capital, not just the subjugation of labour under capital. Precarity is an instrument of control; it is enforced by those with power

*upon the powerless. We can't choose how we want to live. It engenders competition in social life. It forces us into a Darwinian "struggle for existence" on a social level. Precarity is the basic condition of individuals in capitalist society. It divides us, and limits opportunities to get together. People are disempowered and social relations break down."*¹

If work and life are increasingly indiscernable in the play of the everyday, the key institutions linking their practices to modernity – work (or: occupations) and the family – must also be seen as undergoing a fundamental shift. With the increasing precariousness of labor and the exponential entry of women into the workforce both ‘work’ and ‘family’ have not only changed; these core institutions of modern life have thus become integrated. Catherine Hakim (2003) signals a shift in preferences towards adaptive or work centered (instead of home centered) lifestyles that cannot be attributed to societies as a whole, but to particular groups within liquid modern societies – especially those who want to keep up with the demands of contemporary consumer culture. The family has become what Anthony Giddens (2003: 58-9) calls a ‘shell’ or, in the words of Beck, ‘zombie’ institution: people and policymakers alike still refer to the family as the primary unit in today’s society, even though in its traditional connotation of the nuclear family – two married parents and children at home – it has all but died. Instead, our families perhaps must be seen as transitory units similar to what Georges Benko describes as ‘non-places’ like shopping malls or airports. In such spaces existing for temporary convenience and the more or less anonymous exchange of goods, services and information, no one is really expected to stick around very long. The family as a traditionally celebrated safe haven from the uncertain world outside, seems to have turned itself against the values of domestication and ‘settling in’ – it has become the place and space for structural coupling and uncoupling (Bauman, 2003). With a divorce rate of roughly 50% in most capitalist economies, a growing recognition of the normalcy of gay and lesbian lifestyles, the exponential increase among city dwellers of predominantly childless peoples like recent immigrants, aging babyboomers, and empty nesters, and with singles forming 40% or more of the total population of countries in North America and Western Europe it must be clear that the meaning of ‘family’ as an institution, like work, has fundamentally changed.

In his assessment of the personal consequences of the changing nature of work in our past-paced capitalist economy, Richard Sennett (1998: 21) laments how no one becomes a

long-term witness to another person's life anymore. Indeed, most of us, rich and poor, are constantly on the move – either as economically and politically desperate migratory *sans-papiers* or as highly-skilled cultural entrepreneurs in an globally networked marketplace, where knowledge and information have become the primary form of capital (Drucker, 1993). We are not just on the move from parttime job to flexible contract, nor just from one city to the next country; in the particular urban settings of flexible capitalism we also move from from 'pink-slip party' to yet another social networking event, from rented apartment to leased living space, from fling to affair, and from single-size servings to disposable everything. Our only shared condition increasingly seems to be the lived experience of being “*permanently impermanent*” in the context of constant change, which in turn disables us to bear witness to anything other but our own plights, to be solely solved deploying our individual skills and personal resources (Bauman, 2002: 18; Bauman, 2000: 72; Bauman, 2005b: 33). In the beginning of the 21st century we are seemingly becoming blind to each other, which social fragmentation is exacerbated by the undeniable primacy yet deeply unsettling nature of work in everyday life.

Jonathan Gershuny (2000), after comparing time-use datasets from twenty different countries (including Australia, Finland, The Netherlands and the United States), summarizes the characteristics of modern industrial societies in terms of a continuous growth in the numbers of skilled workers as a proportion of all employment, and a growth of time allocated to the production and consumption of sophisticated products and services. Even though we tend to spend more time consuming products and services of the information age, and technologies increasingly augment and automate human labour, this does not mean we are spending less time working, as Jeremy Rifkin (2004) has argued. Quite the opposite: new forms of work organization in fact entail intensified demands on the work-time of both permanent and temporary employees (Smith, 1997). The trend towards flexible work started in the 1970s, and has accelerated in the late 1990s, coinciding with the rush of an increasingly information-based global economy to the World Wide Web. It is particularly in this sphere of information- and knowledge-based work where the culture of flexible capitalism has taken root as the dominant mode of labour organization – and where researchers have found both employers and employees in fact preferring a condition of so-called 'boundaryless' contingent employment (Marler et al, 2002). A boundaryless career reflects a career path that

goes beyond the boundaries of single employment settings, and involves a sequence of jobs between different companies and different segments of the labor market.

“As job security and promotional opportunities within larger organizations decline, individuals may view multiple employer experiences in a positive light because it supports skill development, increases marketability, shifts career control to the employee, and perhaps results in better matching career and family life-cycle demands. As such, boundarylessness represents a different conception of job security” (ibid., 430).

Whereas for most workers in traditional temporary and contingent settings their employment situation is far from ideal, many in the higher skilled knowledge-based areas of the labor market seem to prefer such precarious working conditions, associating this with greater individual autonomy, the acquisition of a wide variety of skills and experiences, and a reduced dependence on a single employer (Kalleberg, 2000). The portfolio work-style of the self-employed information or ‘cultural’ entrepreneur can thus be characterized by living in a state of constant anxiety, while at the same time seemingly enjoying a sense of control over one’s own career. Bauman warns against overtly optimistic readings of the relative freedom these prime beneficiaries of inevitably unequitable globalization claim to enjoy, as *“it is in a horrid and lamentable insecurity that their targeted or collateral victims suspect the major obstacle lies to becoming free”* (2005b: 38). Freedom and security, often seen as mutually exclusive, thus become ambiguous in the context of how different people from different walks of life deal with, and give meaning to, the consequences of not having either. It is perhaps the perfect paradox of contemporary liquid life: all the trends in today’s work-life quite clearly suggest a rapid destabilization of social bonds corresponding with increasingly disempowering effects of a frickle and uncertain global high-tech information economy, yet those workers caught in the epicenter of this bewildering shift express a sense of mastery over their lives, interpreting their professional identity in this context in terms of individual-level control and empowering agency (du Gay, 1996; Storey et al, 2005).

Conditions of real or perceived job insecurity thus do not necessarily mean the workers involved are suffering in silence – nor that the anxiety that comes with a boundaryless, largely contingent, and portfolio worklife necessarily must be seen as a blessing in disguise. The convergence of the time and effort we invest in both production (‘work’) and consumption (‘life’) as signaled by Gershuny does suggest that our most common solution to the increasingly anxious and sometimes exciting developments in society is an endless individual and professional mixing of the cultures of working and living, thus indefinitely

blurring the boundaries between them. Crucial to this understanding is the realization that not only are we spending more and more time producing – information, knowledge, products, ‘things’ – we are also increasingly engaging in acts of consumption. The rate of consumption in society has greatly accelerated over the last few decades. The values, ideals and practices of consumerism tend to be framed in an extremely negative light – focusing for example on the increasing infantilization, mainstreaming and materialism of contemporary consumer cultures. However, consumerism can also be embraced in terms of its transformative potential regarding elitist, top-down, and otherwise non-responsive social institutions such as the political system (cf. the emergence of the ‘citizen-consumer’), the economy (cf. the ‘conquest of cool’ and the marketing of resistance), and the media (Keum et al 2004; Thomas, 1997; Jenkins, 2006).

Indeed, the consumptive trend has been particularly visible in the sphere of knowledge and information-related leisure services provided by the cultural industries. We spend more and more time and money on entertainment experiences – which vary from acquiring consumer electronics to attending multimedia shows, from collecting technological toys to participating in social media online, and from navigating between ‘high’ cultural (cf. theater, museums, opera) to ‘low’ cultural (cf. reality TV, videogames, tabloids) forms of expression. Indeed, our collective quest towards increasingly compelling and diversified leisure like media-centric experiences has turned us into cultural omnivores: attending a play one day, renting a couple of Hollywood blockbuster movies the next; reading the latest installment in the *Harry Potter* (or the Russian *Tanya Grotter*) book series this week, spending the following weekend building a Website containing links to all the relevant information about global meteorological and ecological trends online. It certainly seems people have a lot of spare time on their hands if we add up all these activities. However, Gershuny found evidence of what he calls the ‘end of leisure’: “*each year we have to work harder in our free time to consume all those things that we have been working harder to produce in our work time*” (2000: 51). Status in society today thus comes with a price: time outside of work (whether at home, on the road or in the office) has become a scarce commodity, even though we seem to spend more of it all the time.

Media in Everyday Life

The paradox of more time spent simultaneously at production and consumption can be resolved if one takes into active consideration how both spheres of activity have converged in our increased reliance on media in all aspects of life, in turn facilitated by rapid advancements in information and communication technologies. Next to engaging in all kinds of leisure activities to compensate for strains or other drawbacks on occupational work, work and leisure can increasingly be seen as extensions of each other – especially for professionals in the knowledge and information sectors of the economy (Blekesaune, 2005). One particular effect this spillover effect has had on our everyday lived reality is the ongoing retreat of people into what can be called ‘personal information spaces’ at home and at work (which for a significant number of people occupy the same space), within which we only talk to and with ourselves. These spaces can be seen as particular physical environments such as turning parts of the house or apartment into a ‘home theater’ and ‘home office’ filled with all kinds of consumer electronics used to consume and produce media content (such as a desktop computer with internet access and a printer, one or more game consoles, a television set, digital video recorder, DVD-player, and anywhere between two to seven loudspeakers). Other examples of such personal information spaces include the ensemble of mobile media technologies we carry around us everywhere we go – devices that seem to socially isolate us while at the same time connecting us to the rest of the wired world (using a cellphone, laptop, Personal Digital Assistant, digital camera, walkman, and other more intricate forms of wearable computing that truly put the ‘personal’ in Personal Computer). Yet these spaces can also be experienced as disembodied – as in our ongoing immersion in persistent online environments varying from virtual workspaces (for example through videoconferencing capabilities and company intranets) to massively multiplayer computer games (*World of Warcraft*, *Everquest*, *Ultima Online*), virtual worlds (*Second Life*, *The Sims Online*, *Active Worlds*), and social networking services (*Friendster*, *Orkut*, *MySpace*). The various ways in which the ever-growing numbers of people both young and old engage with each other through these and other media is sometimes taken as new forms of community. Manuell Castells for example describes our intensifying interactions online as a new form of ‘hypersociability’, where the social consists of networked individualism “*enhancing the capacity of individuals to rebuild structures of sociability from the bottom up*” (2001: 131).

Sennett's act of witnessing (or perceived lack thereof) seems to have moved online, where people move in and out of interactive networked environments, managing their multiple virtual selves (cf. *avatars*) in persistent gaming, chatting, instant messaging and otherwise connective, digital, and online environments. Market research suggests the worldwide number of internet users surpassed one billion in 2005, most of whom access the global computer network from the United States, China, and Japan, with other large user groups in India, Germany, Brazil, Russia, and Spain.² Internet user penetration is now in the 65% to 75% range for the leading countries. We use internet overwhelmingly for interpersonal communication, whether it is in the context of play, love, or work. And yes, these distinct domains of everyday life dissolve in our interactions online. A prominent place for people to look for or advertise new jobs is *Monster.com*, a Website, which launched in 1994. The site, which has affiliates in 21 countries around the world, currently boasts a million+ resumes and has contracts with close to 150,000 companies. A growing number of singles – quickly becoming the dominant species in liquid modern societies – seeks and sometimes finds love online. A popular online matchmaking service, *Match.com*, launched in 1995, currently has more than 15 million members in more than 240 territories on six continents, and operates more than 30 online dating sites in 17 local languages.³ The free online classifieds community at *Craigslist.org* operates 90 sites in all 50 U.S. states, and 35 countries, reports three billion pageviews per month – the vast majority of which go to job listings.⁴ The most successful businesses on the internet – like *eBay*, *Yahoo*, *Google*, and *Amazon* – share one fundamental characteristic: the product these companies deliver is connectivity, bringing people together to trade, communicate, interact and exchange knowledge, information, goods, and services. However, not just businesses thrive on interaction and connectivity online. The most often used reference guide on the World Wide Web is *Wikipedia*, a multilingual free-content encyclopedia, which started in 2001. The encyclopedia is based on the so-called 'wiki--concept, which means it is written collaboratively by volunteers, allowing most articles to be changed by anyone with access to a web browser and an internet connection. *Wikipedia* contains close to four million articles appearing in over 200 language editions, and gets about one million visitors a day.⁵ Weblogs are another excellent example of how witnessing has become an increasingly virtual, yet also deeply personal act. Jill Walker provides the following definition:

*“A weblog, or *blog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first. Typically, weblogs are published by individuals and their style is personal and informal. Weblogs first appeared in the mid-1990s, becoming popular as simple and free publishing tools became available towards the turn of the century. Since anybody with a net connection can publish their own weblog, there is great variety in the quality, content, and ambition of weblogs, and a weblog may have anywhere from a handful to tens of thousands of daily readers.”*⁶

At current estimates, the total number of weblogs worldwide comes close to the 30 million mark, with more than 50.000 postings per hour, and over 70.000 new weblogs created each day.⁷ Indexing research by Susan Herring and colleagues shows how the vast majority (70%) of weblogs are highly personal vehicles for self-expression and empowerment, written almost exclusively by individuals (Herring et al, 2005). However, this kind of individualism in weblogs is in fact quite connective, as bloggers include comment and feedback options with their posts, put up their blogs for free syndication (cf. RSS-feeds), reference and link to other blogs when creating posts, and cut and paste all kinds of content – including moving and still images, text, and audiofiles – from all over the Web as well as their own original work onto their weblog. The area online where the convergence of connectivity, content, creativity, and commercialism reaches its pinnacle is in the realm of computer games. Worldwide, more than 5 million active subscribers participate in massively multiplayer online games.⁸ In a massively multiplayer computer game players connect to game servers via internet and interact in real time with other users worldwide. A significant part of this gaming experience consist of ‘meta-gaming’: in-game communication between gamers, using all kinds of devices such as headsets, chat commands, and in-game player signals. The playing of multiplayer games both reproduces and challenges everyday rules of social interaction, as the game environment can be seen both as an extension of real-world experiences and as strictly virtual space (Wright et al, 2002). Yet, meta-gaming is not just about the game: it includes any type of social interaction such as talking, loving, and trading. Ted Castranova (2005) for example has shown how we buy, sell and exchange goods and services in online games to the extent that such synthetic economies of scale have come to resemble those in ‘real’, offline worlds – if only because of their sheer size. All of these activities must be seen in terms of their concurrence, as we simultaneously engage in them through for example the windowing of computer screens: pressing ‘alt-tab’ gets you from your job resume on *Monster* to a post on a weblog, from browsing the information in a

Wikipedia entry for a presentation to contributing a book review to *Amazon*, from a purchase on *eBay* to an exchange in *World of Warcraft*. It is important to note how through these interactive, interconnected and networked devices and environments our work- and life-styles further converge, not only facilitating but rather accelerating the blurring of modern life's traditional boundaries. Contemporary changes in the economy, politics, society and technology thus get expressed in our increasing concurrent immersion in all kinds of media, which immersion in turn amplifies the convergence of the different spheres of activity in everyday life, blurring the lines between work and non-work, work and leisure, as well as between production and consumption.

New Media, Culture and Society

At the heart of most if not all of today's new media technologies saturating our work-life environments is their networked character, which interconnectivity has woven itself into the fabric of everyday existence among the majority of the population in European, Australasian, and North-American countries. Although this certainly suggests many people do not have access to such technologies, in the world of knowledge and information work the dominant presence of internet and other networked media cannot be ignored. In whatever shape or form, media bring the world to our doorstep – and we bring our world into media. No one is 'outside' anymore, whether by choice or necessity. This also means that the precarity of contemporary life through media extends to each and everyone of us, and cannot be said to be beholden to any particular group, race, class or gender – even though life's current precariousness means different things for different people in different settings. In this context it is both fascinating and indeed hopeful that what characterizes most of the ways we engage with worldwide-networked technologies is the extent to which we seem to be doing so through participatory cooperation. Whether it is the online collaboratively authored encyclopedia *Wikipedia* credible enough to challenge the *Britannica*, the open source software movement potent enough to ruffle the feathers of *Microsoft*, the citizen journalism of *Obmynews* powerful enough to influence presidential elections in South Korea, the search engine based on treating links as user recommendations *Google*, or the free-for-all online classifieds listings of *Craigslist* succesful enough to eat away the profits of corporate newspapers in the United States: the bottom line of all of these practices is collaboration, a

flourishing ‘collective intelligence’ particular of cyberculture (Lévy, 1997). When asked to explain the worldwide success of *Craigslist*, founder Craig Newmark hints at collaboration as the key value embedded in the way we use, design and give meaning to networked information and communication technologies: “*my experience has shown me that most people are essentially good and trustworthy, and want to help each other out. I have been reminded that the rule about treating others the way you want to be treated is a good one.*”⁹ Similarly, the founders of *Google*, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, base much of their company’s success on letting individual employees and users co-develop new and existing applications like *Google Scholar* or *Google Video*, which are made available in so-called ‘beta’ versions first to solicit suggestions.¹⁰

Considering the commonly voiced concerns of an increasingly fragmented society and a general decline in traditional social capital as defined by people’s trust and in politics, institutions such as church and state, and to some extent others, it may be counter-intuitive to claim that a more engaged and participatory culture is emerging (Putnam, 2004). Considering the interactive, globally networked and increasingly participatory nature of new media, it is inspiring to consider a different kind of social cohesion – a form of community that is not necessarily based on what Sennett (1992) has perceived as a purified absence of difference, but rather on Castells’ earlier mentioned notion of hypersociability particular of the network society. Interestingly, none of this participatory or otherwise collective nature of contemporary media is new. Ever since the mid-20th century so-called ‘alternative’ media have more or less successfully emerged next to, and sometimes in symbiotic relationships with other forms of community media (Atton, 2001). One could think of pirate radio stations, small-scale print magazines, local newspapers and community television stations in the 1960s and 1970s, community-based Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and *Usenet* newsgroups on Internet in the 1980s, and as from the 1990s a wide range of genres on the Web such as community portal sites, group weblogs, voluntary news services, and so on. The emerging new media ecosystem inspires and is inspired by networks of more or less collaborative end-users, creating what Eric von Hippel (2005) calls ‘user-innovation communities’, where people increasingly create and share their own products and services. Within the particular context of media organizations and cultural industries, much of this community-oriented and at times participatory content production takes place within the walls of commercial media conglomerates. Henry Jenkins’ (2006) work on the popular television and movie industries shows how media corporations at least in part must be seen

as co-conspirators in the emergence of a participatory media culture, from *Star Wars*' George Lucas encouraging the production and distribution of fan movies to the producers of reality television show *Survivor* actively participating in so-called 'spoiler' discussion forums online. This increasingly participatory media environment translates itself in the widespread proliferation of networked computers and Internet connections in the home (and increasingly to handheld mobile devices). Recognition of this culture of participatory authorship has come from software developers where they have introduced the concept of 'open' design. An advanced form of this type of design is the Open Source Movement, based on the principle of shared and collaborative access to and control over software, and using (or rather: tweaking) it to improve the product for global use. The videogame industry has – since the early 1990s – long acknowledged the necessity of viral marketing and user control in product development by pre-releasing game source code, offering games versions as shareware, and tapping customer communities for input (Bo Jeppesen & Molin, 2003). Participation, not in the least enabled by the real-time connectedness of Internet and however voluntarist, incoherent, and perhaps solely fuelled by private interests can be seen as a principal component of digital culture (Deuze, 2006). Our media environment has thus become a key site of how we give meaning to the changing context of how we live, work, and play.

Pierre Lévy and Jeremy Rifkin are among those who signal an emerging relational or social economy as a direct result from the mechanization, automation, or augmentation of agriculture, industry, and services. Central to this technodeterminist understanding of the global economy would be what Lévy calls 'the production of the social bond' through the ongoing development of sophisticated systems of networked intelligence. The centrality of using and making media in everyday life reveals our endless fascination with media – with any and all acts of mediation. In this context Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (1996) signal a double logic of remediation, embodied in the recombinant trends of media becoming immediate up to the point they disappear, while at the same becoming increasingly hypermediate, pervasive, and ubiquitous in all aspects of everyday life: "*Our culture wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying technologies of mediation.*" It is through our uses of media the complexities of contemporary culture get articulated, as media have come to dominate every aspect of life. What is relevant to our concerns here is the interrelationship between work-time, leisure-

time, and media-time, making the world certainly a much bigger place than it used to be, while at the same time reducing our lifeworld as we retreat dutifully in our personal information spaces and interact with everyone yet 'seeing' no one. It is especially through media that for most of us the world has become glocalized, as Roland Robertson (1995) would have it, where global products, peoples and ideas are re-appropriated locally and vice versa.

It must be clear that media have become central to our understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live. However, as David Croteau and William Hoynes argue, *"in the twenty-first century, we navigate through a vast mass media environment unprecedented in human history. Yet our intimate familiarity with the media often allows us to take them for granted"* (2003: 5). The enormous extent to which this is true can be exemplified by looking at how people from all walks of life talk about and give meaning to their media use. Contemporary media usage studies in wired countries like the United States, The Netherlands or Finland tend to reveal how people spend twice as much time with media than they think they do. In the United States for example, people spend on average twelve hours per day using media. Media have become such an integrated part of our lives that most of the time we are not even aware we are using media. American researchers describe this kind of almost constant immersion with media technologies and content from multiple sources simultaneously available through shared or shifting attention as 'concurrent media exposure', rather than popular industry-terms such as 'media multitasking' or 'simultaneous media usage', emphasizing how important it is to avoid implying that our engagement with media is necessarily deliberate or attentive (Papper et al, 2004).

We get up in the morning to the sound of the radio-alarm, switch on the television for breakfast, make our first calls using the hand-free set on our way to work, spend most of the day at our desks in front of a computer screen with fax and phone at hand, surf the Web for the latest news, blogposts and shopping deals during lunch hours, watch our favorite sitcoms and sometimes news shows over dinner, and spend the remainder of the day chatting, e-mailing and instant messaging online. All of this only consists of the kind of media we choose to use, ignoring advertising and marketing messages, simultaneously reading a magazine or newspaper when zapping or zipping past television channels or commercials, reading billboards along the highway, browsing the headlines of a free daily newspaper while in transit, thoughtlessly scanning through radio stations or songs on our walkman,

downloading, upgrading, tweaking, installing and uninstalling software, and so on, and so forth.

Liquid Life and Media Work

Contemporary life thus involves a complex dance between work, play, media, and life in the context of a rapid-changing 'glocal' context, the boundaries between which spaces, places and spheres of activity and perception have blurred. In short, the lifeworld today can perhaps best be seen as an ongoing remix of sorts, in terms a new language of how we understand and represent the visible world, our knowledge, human history, and fellow human beings: the language of new media, meta-media, and information culture (Manovich, 2005). As Lev Manovich states, *"today we are in the middle of a new media revolution - the shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication"* (2001: 19). The key to understanding our increasing opportunity, propensity or even necessity to more or less collaboratively remix our 'glocal' lived reality is to see this kind of behavior as a way for us to make sense of the growing complexity and uncertainty of the world around us (and in ourselves). Paraphrasing Bauman it is, in other words, a coping mechanism for dealing with the absurdity of life in today's liquid modernity.

"'Liquid modern' is a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines. Liquidity of life and that of society feed and reinvigorate each other. Liquid life, just like liquid modern society, cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long" (Bauman, 2005b: 1).

A liquid modern society is one where uncertainty, flux, change, conflict, and revolution are the permanent conditions of everyday life. Bauman makes a compelling argument how this situation is neither modern or post-modern, but rather explains how the categories of existence established and enabled by early, first, or solid modernity are disintegrating, overlapping, and remixing. It is not as if we cannot draw meaningful distinctions between global and local, between work and non-work, between public and private, between conservative and progressive, or between work and life anymore. It is just that these and other key organizing characteristics and categories of modern life have lost their (presumed or perceived) intrinsic, commonly held or consensual meaning.

The way we do and understand things is increasingly transformed through and implicated by the way we engage the media in our lives. This in turn makes the media as a business, as in those companies that work to create the content of our media, of central importance to any kind of meaningful analysis of contemporary life. Defining the media as cultural industries, Desmond Hesmondhalgh for example shows their prominence for understanding the human condition and our lived reality *“as those institutions (mainly profit-making companies, but also state organisations and non-profit organisations) which are most directly involved in the production of social meaning”* (2002: 11). If the media in the broadest possible sense are the sites of our struggle over meaning and symbolic exchange in society, it becomes essential to understand the working lives of the people within the cultural industries – if only to understand which values, ideas, circumstances and social contexts define those primarily engaged in the production of the resources and materials all of use use to give meaning to our lives. It is in this context that Bauman discusses the typical characteristics of these professional ‘culture creators’, *“who carry the main burden of the transgressive proclivity of culture and make it their consciously embraced vocation, practising critique and transgression as their own mode of being”* (2005b: 54-5). Bauman implicitly addresses the missing link between the particularities of the human condition in the beginning of the 21st century, our seemingly constant immersion in media, and the centrality of work as the defining principle of contemporary lived reality. The missing link is the changing nature of media work in today’s digital, global and deeply uncertain age, where media workers must be seen as the directors as well as reflectors of liquid modern life, in which life media have become ubiquitous, pervasive, personalized – as well as interactive, participatory, and networked.

Media are both the harbingers of change as well as the self-proclaimed guardians of social order as in the case of for example parliamentary journalists and tabloid reporters: documenting and thus contributing to the maintenance of the status quo while at the same time signaling the disruptive changes wreaking havoc on it from all sides. Indeed, the popular reality of the media gives rise to what Beck has described as the ongoing modernization of modernity, by emphasizing its core characteristics of risk, uncertainty, and paradox. And it is precisely this risk-taking, adventurous yet deeply self-contradictory nature that has come to define the nature of media work, where *“senses of risk are constitutive and often pivotal to the whole economic and social basis of cultural entrepreneurship – risk being central to choices made not only in business but in the lifeworld more generally”* (Banks et al, 2000: 453). Mediaworkers are

not only interesting in terms of their contribution to the way we give meaning to our shared reality; who they are, what they do and how they give meaning to their work can also be seen as an indicator of how an increasingly significant part of the global economy organizes itself. Media industries are indeed one of the prime accelerators of a global economy, both in terms of its glocalization and its increased immersion in networked information and communication technologies. Media professionals – those employed in journalism, marketing communications, advertising, public relations, game design, television and the movie industry - embody in their work-styles all the themes of social change in liquid modern times as expressed in this essay, as Simon Cottle for example describes how “*a growing army of media professionals, producers and others work in this expanding sector of the economy, many of them in freelance, temporary, subcontracted and underpaid (and sometimes unpaid) positions [...] They are also often at the forefront of processes of organisational change including new flexible work regimes, reflexive corporate cultures, and the introduction of digital technologies, multimedia production and multiskilled practices*” (2003: 3). Indeed, Scott Lash and John Urry (1994) have signaled earlier how the cultural industries have always been post-Fordist *avant la lettre*, contributing to the culturalization of economic life through a structuring mix of commercially viable yet generic, and innovative, flexible and highly creative production processes. This unique blend of what Bryan Turner (2003: 138) describes as the dialectical process of linearity and liquidity in contemporary consumer cultures turns the media as an industry into the core culprit responsible for cookiecutter-style McDonaldization, as well as the main agent in affecting social, technological and economical change.

Convergence Culture

In today’s increasingly digital culture, mediawork can be seen as a stomping ground for the forces of increasingly differentiated production and innovation processes, and the complex interaction and integration between work, life, and play, all of which get expressed in, and are facilitated by, the rapid development of new information and communication technologies. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000: 291) correspondingly argue how “*the computer and communication revolution of production has transformed laboring practices in such a way that they all tend toward the model of information and communication technologies [...] the anthropology of cyberspace is really a recognition of the new human condition.*” The new human condition, when seen

through the lens of those in the forefront of changes in the way work and life are implicated in our increasingly participatory media production and consumption, is convergent. This convergence is not just a technological process, where different types of media forms – audio, video, text – and channels – print, radio, television – are integrated into the computer. Following the work of Henry Jenkins (2004), media convergence must also be seen as having a cultural logic of its own, blurring the lines between production and consumption, between making media and using media, and between active or passive spectatorship of mediated culture:

“Convergence is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottomup consumer-driven process. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other users. They are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture, to control the flow of media in their lives and to talk back to mass market content. Sometimes, these two forces reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding, relations between media producers and consumers” (Jenkins, 2004: 37).

Pertinent to our concerns here is the ways in which mediaworkers are implicated by this convergence culture so typical of today’s media. If convergence is a cultural logic that at its core integrates all of us in the process of producing mediated experiences, how do the professionals involved give meaning to their productivity, creative autonomy, and professional identity? One way of looking at this focuses on the political economy of increasingly conglomerated, transnational media corporations, emphasizing their role in rationalizing and routinizing production for the (glocal) masses:

“Conglomerates have invested heavily in developing synergistic relationships between their various media holdings, integrating their production processes into “convergence” systems that yield content for different outlets, “crosspromoting” programs in different media, and establishing lines of vertical and horizontal integration in production and distribution” (Klinenberg & Benzecry, 2005: 10).

A second approach acknowledges the goals and ideals of contemporary ‘corporate management of global enterprises, but draws our attention more specifically to those people directly involved in the process: the mediaworkers.

“Being environmentally conscious, showing a social conscience and being a good corporate citizen are viewed in modern management theory as benefiting the bottom line. But this management-speak hides the growing focus in the media professions—the cultural boundary spanners—on genuine links between modern

organizations and the different individuals and groups in society that deal with them" (Balnaves et al, 2004: 193).

Discussion

Considering the dominant trends towards cultural convergence of production and consumption both in the way people run their everyday work-lives, and in the way media professionals do their work, it becomes increasingly interesting to observe and understand which values, ideas and ideals get embedded in the globally emerging system of user-producer co-creation. Granted, *"the media business is unusually fluid and superficial"* (Sennett, 1998: 80). But as I have shown in this essay, so are life, work, and play. And all of those activities are expressed in the way we use, co-create, and give meaning to media in our everyday lives. The suggested superficiality and invisibility of the media perhaps belittles the valuable, hypersociable and deeply participatory nature of our interactions within and between them. Indeed, the continuous glocal 'remix' of liquid modernity's working and living conditions can be connected to the way we understand the media. The nature of work within an increasingly liquid, collaborative and convergent culture gets meaning in the media industry through product differentiation, workforce flexibilization, and cross-media integration. Yet it also gets expressed in the various ways in which people use and make media all over the world – through 'prosuming' (Toffler, 1980) or 'produsing' (Bruns, 2004) practices, open source-type applications, wiki-based user co-creation, and other examples of convergence culture. I accept the notion that for most of us, life in liquid modernity is fraught with risk, uncertainty, anxiety and flux. However, I feel that our analyses should take the next step, and acknowledge how people give meaning to this new human condition: through cultural convergence, participation, and new forms of sociability. It is too simple to argue that the media industries, which are so instrumental in all of these contingencies, either reproduce passive spectators or facilitate active, albeit superficial, engagement. The ways we use and give meaning to media, both as professionals and amateurs, show signs of a more complex, or in the words of Jenkins, 'kludgy' culture emerging, one that is built on the core elements of the global risk society and thrives on Bauman's liquid life. I call for further investigation of and among those who bear the brunt of this emergence: the mediaworkers.

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Endnotes

¹ URL: <http://ourmayday.revolt.org/precarity.info/info.htm> (date accessed: 2-12-6).

² See URL: <http://www.c-i-a.com/pr0106.htm>.

³ See URL: http://corp.match.com/index/newscenter_press_glance.asp.

⁴ See URL: <http://www.craigslist.com/about/pr/factsheet.html>.

⁵ See URL: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia>.

⁶ See URL: http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog_theorising/final_version_of_weblog_definition.html.

⁷ See URL: <http://technorati.com/weblog/2006/02/83.html>.

⁸ See URL: <http://www.mmogchart.com>.

⁹ Phone interview with Craig Newmark, 1 December 2005.

¹⁰ See for example the company profile at CBS '60 Minutes' at URL:
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/12/30/60minutes/main664063.shtml>.