SAGGI

ASSESSING THE JOB QUALITY OF «DIGITAL PROFESSIONS»: A CASE OF EXTREME WORK

INTRODUCTION

Existing research documents how an independent and freelance workforce is on the rise in various sectors of the knowledge economy, and hails it as the «new standard» for knowledge work (Cappelli - Keller 2013). These freelance and entrepreneurial occupations, firmly rooted in the growth of the digital economy and not regulated by registers or memberships, characterised by specific features and multi-functional sets of skills, are being increasingly connoted with a «professional» status. This article premises on the acknowledgment of the freelance and independent workforce within the job market of the knowledge economy as a somewhat new form of «digital professionalism», which finds specialised application in one or more specific sectors of the digital industry as of the singularity of the workers' expertise and the rapid diffusion of these occupations in a changing labour market. Digital professions as here conceived partly delink from current and most commonly accepted notions of professions and professionalism, coming to identify those occupations and jobs undertaken on a freelance and as-needed bases that are being popularised via new and original titles, such as community managers, social media managers, social media marketers, content managers, and similar ones, and that mainly consist in professional work that entails a managerial approach to activity on digital social network sites and platforms.

Indeed, this article is concerned not so much with defining these professions per se, as with documenting how these put significantly under stress current understandings of *job quality*. Being usually freelance and independent occupations, digital professions require workers to entertain different sorts of networking and manage their social capital to pursue a successful career in a rapidly changing job market (Randle et al. 2014; Lee 2011; Grugulis - Stoyanova 2011, 2012) in a context where individual success, entrepreneurialism and self-realization combine with well-known issues of anxiety, stress and precarity (Hesmondhalgh - Baker 2013; Neilson - Rossiter 2005). As these non-standard professions mainly operate in the digital arena, whereby social networking sites are bringing forward new conceptions of the professional self based on forms of networked branding of the individual (Gandini 2015b; Marwick 2013; Hearn 2008),

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these elements get remixed and become integral part of the professional status of these figures – thus affecting self-reported accounts of job satisfaction usually principled on documented notions of passion and symbolic recognition (Arvidsson et al. 2010).

This induces to put under enquiry these professions in terms of *job quality* (Kalleberg 2003, 2011; Kalleberg - Reskin - Hudson 2000). With the nature of digital knowledge work being nomadic and increasingly spent within shared environments such as coworking spaces (Gandini 2015a) or dedicated «digital marketplaces» (Leung 2014), it seems interesting to enquire what are the main features of these «new» professions in relation to the tradition of studies dealing with issues of job quality, job satisfaction and its main features. This article therefore offers an assessment of the conditions and practices of digital professional work in the knowledge economy in terms of job quality, based on an empirical research that combines a study of self-employed «digital» professionals in Milan and London, made of 80 semi-structured interviews, and an exploratory digital ethnographic enquiry of an online marketplace, Upwork, formerly known as Elance.

Data highlight the problematic and contradictory instances that lie below the surface of a context where job satisfaction finds roots in symbolic and social recognition, usually covering for normally bad working conditions, and show how we seem to be confronted to a peculiar case of *extreme work* (Hewitt - Luce 2006). The conditions documented in this study provide new insights on the evaluation (and devaluation) of skills and education titles, the centrality of networking and the peculiar kind of subjectivity of these workers. This consents to argue that it seems as though the «digital professionals» of the knowledge economy are somewhat abandoning a mainly precarious-oriented perspective to embrace an explicitly entrepreneurial one, that embodies the social media logic of their professional action by bringing forward the relevance of one's personal reputation as a symbolic machine that affects notions of job satisfaction, autonomy, control and rewards.

I - AN INITIAL DEFINITION OF «DIGITAL PROFESSIONS»

The knowledge economy, with its central importance of networking, is among the sectors whereby the integration of digital technologies and social media within the productive processes occurred most. Here, digital media are playing an increasingly central role in job seeking and working practices, allowing work a distance with lesser necessity of physical proximity. As such digital economy quickly becomes a powerful force in the economic structure of western countries, new jobs and professional figures, multi-functional and highly-skilled, currently unregulated and variously positioned in the job market, also emerge.

In this paper I identify with the term «digital professions» those new and non-standard occupations that are currently being popularised in the digital knowledge economy via new and original job titles, such as community managers, social media managers, social media marketers, content managers, and similar ones – and which represent an element of significant interest for the prospective diffusion of non-stand-

ard professional work. This definition of professionalism delinks from current understandings of professionalism based on regulatory bodies and memberships, and takes inspiration from the idea that newest conceptions of professional work imply a gradual displacement of traditional ideas of professionalism and their contamination with alternative logics of entrepreneurship and managerialism (Faulconbridge - Muzio 2008). In this sense, echoing the definition of «professionalism» given by Bledstein (1976), it may be argued that the new jobs emerging in the digital industry may be connoted of a «professional» status that is principled on the independent ethos of workers and their highly-skilled specialization based on multi-functional expertise (Bologna - Banfi 2011) within contexts where digital technologies are being integrated into productive and organizational processes, such as communications, marketing, public relations and advertising (Gandini 2015b; Marwick 2013; Schaefer 2012).

As shown by Frey - Osborne (2015), the digital economy is largely connoted by a growing trend in independent and self-employed conditions that is only partly the result of diffused unemployment and a resilient strategy against the crisis (EEOR 2010). Actually, this is an evolution seen with increasing favour by workers that tend to 'professionalise' on the job market with the aim of responding to the new and changing needs originating by the unprecedented availability of digital technologies. Research documents that in 2013, 53 million Americans have done some part of freelance and independent work (Horowitz - Rosati 2014); a similar rise in independent work is visible also in the UK (D'Arcy - Gardiner 2014), in Italy and in other parts of the western labour market (EEOR 2010; Arum - Muller 2004) and beyond (Moriset 2013).

Freelance and project-based arrangements have been widely diffused in various sectors of the knowledge economy for decades and especially those more at stake with notions of creativity (Dex et al. 2000; Christopherson 2002, 2008; Platman 2004; Lee 2011, Grugulis - Stoyanova 2011, 2012) as a result of a long period of neoliberal policies fostering «flexible accumulation» (Harvey 1990). This aimed at establishing looser employment relations mostly for budget-savvy reasons on the supply side, and combined with an increasingly disproportionate matching between demand and supply (Menger 1999). Since the late 1990s, firms in these sectors have substantially relied on temporary and self-employed workers on an as-needed basis. Over the last twenty years, before the 2007-08 recession, the knowledge economy became a paradoxically-dual context made of both rising employment and rising unemployment (Lingo - Tepper 2013) whereby the demand for low-budget production and a more flexible workforce caused a split between the core and the periphery of knowledge professions. Today we are witnessing a renewed diffusion of commonly non-standard forms of employment, brought to the forefront as those capable of responding to the needs of an industry that is being reshaped by digital technological innovations. Barley - Kunda (2001, 2006) envisaged how contract work and outsourcing were harbingers of new ways of working – yet underlined how this was scarcely made object of peculiar attention by research in the area (*ibidem*).

Nevertheless, digital work practices are founded upon a mandatory networking activity that involves social media (Gandini 2015b; Marwick 2013) and come

about in a context where low-paid, precarious and unpaid jobs foster insecurity and instability. These issues are widely documented in the literature and have often been described through notions of «freedom without security» (Neilson - Rossiter 2005). These new occupations have emerged out of a culture celebrating economic success and individual entrepreneurship via creativity and the suggestion of the rise of a «creative class» (Florida 2002). It is here, as witnessed by a vast literature, that a process of professionalization of these occupations has started out as a result of a tension towards labour autonomy and independence that crossed paths with the rise of the Internet, inducing individual workers into more or less voluntarily considering with rising interest the option of pursuing personal businesses and undertaking careers as independent professionals in a labour market that treats them as professional subjects although often in the absence of formal membership bodies and regulatory frameworks.

This article acknowledges that digital and freelance occupations in the knowledge economy are being culturally and socially connoted of a professional status by participants in this labour market, and takes this as the fundamental premise for the assessment of the job quality of a professional condition characterised by an underlying set of contradictory characteristics, with precarity and entrepreneurship increasingly and dangerously colliding.

II - JOB QUALITY AND DIGITAL PROFESSIONS

The concept of job quality is at the heart of a well-established literature that discusses which should be the characteristics that distinguish between good and bad jobs. For the purposes of this work, I will use the landmark contribution in the field offered by Arne Kalleberg (Kalleberg et al. 1997; Kalleberg - Reskin - Hudson 2000; Kalleberg 2003, 2011) as it focuses peculiarly on the study of job quality across nonstandard employment and, at the same time, is principled on the assumption that self-reports of job satisfaction by workers themselves are to be taken as largely unreliable instruments of evaluation due to the subjective bias these possess. This is crucial for the present work inasmuch as the literature on knowledge work stresses the connotation of «passion» as an element that severely affects job satisfaction self-reports and usually covers for unfair conditions (Arvidsson et al. 2010).

Kalleberg (2011) defines job quality as a multi-dimensional issue that can be addressed from different angles. Whilst economists generally focus on earnings, sociologists associate job quality with desirability, and psychologists pay attention to control and autonomy on the job, he suggests that new approaches in this area should pursue a more objective and rounded notion that takes into account a number of multiple instances, including compensations and rewards and the importance workers place on these instances, together with demographic factors and structural macro-factors of transformation at the organizational level. In doing so, he sustains that we should pay less attention to job satisfaction, which remains an important but partial aspect of the assessment, being often highly context-specific and therefore

unable to represent a reliable measure of job quality alone (Kalleberg 2011; Llorente - Macías 2005).

This occurs since the majority of job satisfaction indicators originate from the question «All in all, how satisfied would you say you are in your job?» whose results are essentially subjective (Kalleberg 2011: 10). Kalleberg's approach to job quality therefore elaborates on this assumption to devise a 'conceptual model' where a variety of dimensions are included, and which do not necessarily make part of a self-reported assessment. This consists of:

1) the workers' evaluation of overall job quality, which is made of a) assessment of the rewards provided by their job, and b) work values, i.e., the importance workers place on these rewards;

2) macro-factors, the stability or change in work structures at the organizational level;

3) demographic factors (gender, race, education) which affect the kind of jobs people choose (*ibi*: 3).

The key point that Kalleberg puts more emphasis on is the issue of rewards (Point 1 above), that include:

1) the workers' degree of control and autonomy, especially over tasks and schedules;

2) economic compensation (wages, earnings);

3) non-economic compensation, meaning a) job security and b) opportunities for advancement in the career (*ibidem*).

In the next section I will use Kalleberg's notion and model of job quality (2003, 2011) as a broad map of guidelines to assess the job quality of digital professions in the freelance knowledge economy. The adoption of a broad qualitative framework via the use of interviews as the main technique for data collection aims at catching in-depth attitudes and meanings of workers. This casts a light on a set of interesting elements that expand our knowledge of how 21st Century knowledge professions are changing in the integration of digital technologies in the productive processes, especially in terms of subjectivity.

III - RESEARCH METHODS

This paper discusses the results of an empirical research made of two main components. One is a study of freelance professional networks within the urban contexts of Milan and London, made of N = 80 semi-structured interviews (42 in Milan, 38 in London); this is complemented with an exploratory, digital ethnographic observation of Upwork, formerly known as Elance, an international digital marketplace for freelancers. The units of analysis in both components are independent professionals working in the digital media, communication, design and production industries. The professional figures encountered in both samples include digital PR practictioners,

journalists, designers, copywriters, videomakers and «new» digital occupations such as digital consultants, social media strategists and content producers.

Data collection in Milan and London was conducted through a comprehensively ethnographic approach and consisted in semi-structured interviews in the form of personal biographies. The structure of the interview is made of a loose set of questions pointing at enquiring about the networked cultures of work that permeate these environments, for a study that puts emphasis on the extent to which social relations relate to economic outcomes in a socio-cultural perspective. Snowball sampling was adopted for this purpose with the aim of immersing and following the patterns of social interactions among individuals throughout their own networks of contacts. Gatekeepers were selected to comply with the following criteria:

- being freelancers or independent professionals
- working with different professional statuses in the area of media and communications/PR/arts and culture/social media
- active in Milan/London
- gender balanced

In Milan, the sample is composed by 25 males and 17 females within the age range 23 - 63, with a vast majority of workers between 30 and 45 (19), 13 participants below 30 of age and 10 participants aged 45 or above. In London, the sample is perfectly gender-balanced with 19 males and 19 females ranging between 27 and 59 of age, with a vast majority of participants in the age range 30-45 (23), 9 participants ranging between 18 and 30 and 6 participants aged 46 or above.

The study of Upwork, formerly known as Elance, an international digital marketplace for independent professionals, was conducted with the aim of offering a different but analogous case study that remains in epistemological continuity with the urban contexts observed. For this reason, this part of the research was undertaken following the principles of «digital ethnography» (Caliandro 2014) an approach which draws from the emerging stream of research known as «digital methods» and principles on the motto «follow the medium» (Rogers 2009; Marres 2012) that indicates how data collection should follow the flow of information natively available on the digital platform studied (*ibidem*). With a natively digital approach, digital ethnography offers a qualitative, medium-oriented approach to collect data in a digital environment.

In this respect, data collection on Upwork was exerted natively, following the flow of information natively present on the platform and observing the activity of individual users. The digital ethnography mapped 59 profiles in the Design and Multimedia section, chosen as those that displayed visible information regarding their earnings on the platform. The first phase of data collection consisted in the access to the online field and the study of the functioning of the platform, which was complemented by the collection of individual data on members' profiles in an anonymous way. The second phase consisted in 5 pilot interviews to Upwork/Elance members, conducted via Skype (with only one exception, conducted via email). These aimed at a further and deeper exploration of attitudes and opinions regarding work on the platform so that, as such, these complement the data collected online

with an exploratory set of information obtained directly from platform users, otherwise unavailable.

IV - RESULTS: MILAN AND LONDON

4.1. *Job satisfaction and income*

Concerning job satisfaction self-reports, 25 over 42 interviewees in Milan declared to be fully satisfied (9) or moderately satisfied (17), and the rest of the participants declaring an average level of satisfaction. No interviewee declared to be moderately unsatisfied or totally unsatisfied. In London, a substantially similar situation emerges, with only 1 participant declaring to be moderately unsatisfied, 12 participants reporting an «average» satisfaction and the majority (25) declaring to be fully satisfied (6) or moderately satisfied (19). These data confirm what is a quite well-known picture of a job traditionally connoted by «passion» and desirability – therefore generally perceived as satisfactory for the social and symbolic recognition it brings.

Nevertheless, further evidence demonstrates the difficulty of such self-reports to adequately catch what stays below the surface of such a picture. One element that suggests this interpretation is the assessment of the average annual income of workers. In Milan, interviewees declare average gross annual earnings of 32487, euros which compare to an average 38257 pounds in London. Despite being almost equally distributed between age groups, in both cases and especially in Milan income is very much polarized, with a large number of people earning much less than the average amount in the sample, and just a few interviewees reporting considerably high earnings. Also, there are no significant differences in terms of earnings among individuals with different skills and educational categories; actually, it proves quite difficult to differentiate workers on the basis of such features, given that interviewees in both samples possess the same broad sets of skills and an academic degree that is related to the professional environment. In other words, it may be argued that having higher skills or educational attainments does not automatically imply being better off in this labour market.

Moreover, the general attitudes towards income in both contexts seem to show a trend by which revenues are not a significantly important element in relation to job satisfaction. The difficulty of being regularly paid is a widely reported issue. This happens, somewhat unexpectedly, not only in Milan, but also in London. Given that there are no fixed tariffs and prices firmly regulating the value of digital jobs, each payment is the result of an individual bargain between the contractor and the client, as exemplified by the words of this young London-based digital project manager:

> We generally do things, I wouldn't say for free, but in exchange, with projects that we like: it's not always about money, the less of the cases until now. It should be something that really has a value for us (Project manager, 28, London, female).

As a whole, the professional condition of these workers brings forward the element of 'independence' as a strong satisfactory aspect, especially among female inter-

viewees as it is perceived as a status that is able to better comply with work-life balance – in line with what documented by Craig et al. (2012):

You can easily find more women than men because freelancing is a dimension which allows to live family and maternity in a different way (Digital consultant, Milan, 42, female).

Given that these findings seem to be completely in line with the discourse on the passionate nature of knowledge work as it emerges for instance in the study of fashion workers in Milan (Arvidsson et al. 2010) and of cultural practictioners in London (McRobbie 2002, 2005), whereby the elements of «passion» and social recognition or «coolness» seem to fulfil a set of symbolic needs notwithstanding the conditions in which these jobs are usually accomplished, it may be hypothesized that the symbolic elements that connote these professions significantly affect job satisfaction self-reports. As this journalist and PR professional in London, tells:

I'm very happy, fortunate and privileged for my career, given the competition in the industry and having seen the career trajectory of dozens and dozens of people. On a day to day basis, I think if you do it right, you can do a lot of money. But it's a lot precarious (Journalist/Digital PR, 46, London, male).

In other words, there is room to suspect, as sustained by Kalleberg (2011), that limiting job quality to job satisfaction via economic compensation does not take the whole picture. The analysis that follows aims at going beyond the notion of passion to enquire further whether other elements lie below the surface of such passionate forms of work. Particularly, it is interesting to look at instances of autonomy on the job, as these seem to be distinctive elements for independent professionals given the tension towards independence and self-management that connotes this context.

4.2. *Control, autonomy and job security*

In both contexts, autonomy on the job is largely framed into a narrative of 'liberation' that puts emphasis on the release from the constraints that are typical of permanent office work. Digital professionals work with a high degree of autonomy, independence and self-organization, within a system of temporary job-by-job agreements continuously negotiated, usually detached from office presence and other traditionally fordist arrangements. Many participants underline this element as a very satisfactory one, due to the re-appropriation of one's own time, that is especially felt when the interviewee switches to freelancing after working as staff employee – something that happens more frequently in London rather than in Milan. This usually pairs up with a somehow neutral description of bad working conditions such as long hours of work and long series of working days without a day off – which are naturally perceived as part of the job:

The great advantage is that you work whenever you want to, maybe on a Sunday afternoon, or very early in the morning. The possibility to work in reverse trend in relation to office hours is fundamental. You can work at lunch breaks, or going to the gym when all others are closed in

their offices. The disadvantage is that sometimes you work for 12 hours a day. But the key is that you decide when and how (Digital consultant, 42, Milan, female).

This links up with the importance of networking that traditionally connotes the knowledge economy. There is a diffused acknowledgment that a successful career as an independent professional in the knowlegde industry largely depends on one's capacity to engage in networking and to leverage on recommendations and referrals within a substantially informal recruitment system that is summed up in London through the common sayings «It is all about who you know» and «you are as good as your last job» (Blair 2001). This is further expanded by the digital resources, which multiply the number of tools available for the management of social relations.

As a result, the possibility to bargain for autonomy and control across such continuously renegotiating relations over multiple contexts seems to be granted by the management of a personal reputation in the professional scene, which is also the most significant element for recruitment. These workers are in fact usually required to deliver a job the client is not able to accomplish via internal resources or personal competences. Their degree of autonomy on the job depends on the specific agreements taken individually with the client. Also, the delivery of a job comes as a mixture of a number of tasks provided by the client, who wants the job to be delivered in a certain manner, and the aesthetic taste, style and relational capacities of the individual worker.

Thus, the issues of control and autonomy for these professionals appear to be essentially linked to reliability and trustworthiness for the delivery of a high-quality job at a distance. Here enters the notion of reputation, a commonly strategic asset for freelance knowledge professionals generally retained to be the element through which trust can be established. The CV as traditionally conceived is therefore generally discarded as something that does not provide significantly rich information to potential hirers and employers in the industry:

By the end of last month I was called up by a freelancer who was director of an important PR agency here in Milan. She called me because she knew me, though I have never directly worked with her before. It happened we met once, actually, when I called her up to do agency work while I was working PR for other people. I believe the reputation you have in the sector is very important nowadays (Digital PR, 38, Milan, female).

This brings about the issue of job security. The independent and freelance status that largely connotes these digital occupations makes them by and large unstable and insecure. Interviewees put a significant stress on this matter, although their attitudes are often articulated in very different ways. In both cases, however, we are confronted to is a scenario where workers become hybrid professional figures swinging between a precarious and and entrepreneurial status.

4.3. *Precarious entrepreneurs*

In their accounts on job quality and satisfaction, digital professionals tend to describe their work life highlighting the entrepreneurial and innovative trait of their

working practices and routines, but at the same time considering their professional status to be highly precarious, often made of low income and long hours of work. This occurs notwithstanding seniority, affecting both junior as well as senior professionals. The element that brings towards a more positive account is social recognition, a good professional reputation and greater autonomy.

These attitudes are articulated through two partially overlapping narratives. A first one, that may be called «the enthusiast one», tends to emphasize the entrepreneurial nature of the profession; digital professionals are generally brought towards this pole not necessarily as a result of a highly lucrative job, but as a consequence of a high degree of autonomy and independence:

It's not a matter of money, it's the need of autonomy, I couldn't go into a «sausage factory», data in data out» and do the same process, on the same file, all the time (Marketing consultant, 48, London female).

A second narrative, that may be called «the frustrated one», on the other hand emphasizes the precarious status of these professions. Digital workers adhere to this negative pole of self-representation with considerable reluctance, and this often is principled not just on issues of low income and revenues but on a generalized difficulty in the achievement of a significant market position as well as a scarce social recognition:

We seem supercool but nobody upholds us. It's just a way for employers to pay less their employees. How come tax offices do not see that thousands of people like me send invoices to one client only? If you have the Partita IVA, 60% of your revenues go into taxes and expenses. The rest is for a living (Digital PR agent, 34, Milan, female).

This aspect opens up a more elaborate reflection on digital resources as an innovation that is significantly affecting one's professional subjectivity within this professional context. Digital professionals instrumentally use digital forms of interaction for recruitment purposes in interdependent relationship with physical and face-to-face interaction to an unprecedented extent. Moreover, the notion of reputation which affects recruitment, autonomy and job security becomes even stronger for digital professionals as this is visible and somewhat measurable over social networking sites (Hearn 2010; Arvidsson - Peitersen 2013) where one's work is often visible on pages which function as 24/7 portfolios. Thus, practices of *personal branding* (Hearn 2008; Marwick 2013) across social media platforms Twitter or LinkedIn are largely common and perceived as determinant to 'get known' and acquire a visibility in the professional environment, especially for younger professionals (Gandini 2015b). These insights consent to link up with the study of freelance working practices and arrangements on Upwork, as an example of purely-digital freelance employment.

V - DIGITAL PROFESSIONALISM ONLINE: WORKING ON UPWORK/ELANCE

Upwork, formerly known as Elance, is a world-leading online marketplace for independent professionals active since the early 2000s with the aim of fostering busi-

ness relationships at a distance among clients and professionals all over the world. An increasing amount of transactions are mediated by the platform in recent years, now worth a value of 1 billion dollars per year with 4 million registered clients and 3 million jobs posted annually on the platform.

The ethnographic account here reported is based on the observation of 59 Elance profiles from different countries, mostly the US but also South Africa, Central Europe and South-East Asia. Although gender is not a mandatory information that needs to be shared by the professionals subscribing to the platform, the profile picture delivers this information with a significant degree of certainty. Based on this inference, it can be said the sample consists of 34 males and 25 females. No information on age is available on each profile and may be found, if present, only within those profiles where participants post their CV – which is not common overall, as participants seem to favour the creation of a job history on the platform rather than the display of their curriculum vitae – for reasons that are explained below and refer to the central notion of algorithmic reputation on the platform and its direct relation with the capacity of getting jobs in.

Concerning income, the average earnings obtained from the activity on the platform emerge as quite low (13332 dollars). The number of jobs per freelancer in the last 12 months (46) and of clients in the same period (29) is on average considerably high and induces into thinking that we are confronted to a freelance business model that consists in a plurality of different jobs of low value, adding up on top of each other, instead of a small number of high value jobs. Though the average income is quite low, and the work-life on Upwork may be hypothesized as a quite intensive labour activity that is necessary to keep a continuous flow of new jobs and commissions, it is striking to note how interviewees show enthusiasm about working via the digital marketplace, and report high job satisfaction as a detachment from the traditional working arrangements:

> I started my own business when I was 23 years old, and I was of course living in South Africa. My work was going very well when three or four years ago the recession in SA was quite bad, so I lost a lot of my business. At the time I was only working for clients in SA. So I had to look to other ways through which I could earn money from graphic design, or else I would, you know, I would have failed. In that moment I went onto Elance. I think it was three or 4 years, I went online and gave it my best shot (Graphic designer, South Africa, 43, female).

Joining Upwork/Elance often seems to be a consequence of the recession, and exactly like in the cases of Milan and London, the positive elements seem to substantially overshadow the potentially negative traits – that are almost absent. Participants do not report issues of insecurity or pressure and clearly locate themselves on a «liberating» narrative that is similar to the one seen in cases of Milan and London:

> I really love it! I can work from any place in the world, I travel a lot and I just carry on working like I would at home… if I go out during the day I work at night, and the other way around (Designer, South Africa, 23, female).

Concerning professional skills, the multi-functional hypothesis and the supposed irrelevance of the CV that emerged in Milan and London finds here a strong confirma-

tion. The education title is almost never displayed by Upwork contractors on their profiles, with 29 over 59 members who do not release any information in this regard. The most important element on the platform seems to be the Online Reputation System (ORS), an algorithm that aggregates the feedbacks and review grades from the precedent performances of the contractors to elaborate a «reputation score» called Level. This is highly visible through a box on the contractor's profile page and functions as the landmark for the reliability of a contractor – thus becoming the main source of information about a professional working at a distance. It is fully acknowledged by these digital workers that the engineering of a high reputation score guarantees for success and income on this market, in a way that is similar to what happens between vendors and buyers on Amazon and eBay (Bolton et al. 2004):

> The review system is one of the most important things together with your portfolio. When you've got a bad review, the other clients will think about your credibility. And on Elance you need clients trust you. Because you know, we don't meet with the person (Web designer, Indonesia, 28, female).

Also, there is a diffused perception that the new modalities of working through digital platforms are not simply the outcome of a set of contingencies, rather the pioneering switch towards a new model for work and employment in the knowledge economy, connoted by a structural rise of professionalism within the industry:

> I believe the way of the future as a designer or in these kind of creative industries is that you got to work for yourself, you got to be a business owner (Graphic designer, South Africa, 43, female).

Whilst acknowledging the exploratory nature of the observation, it may be argued that findings in the Upwork/Elance case seem to clearly evidence a number of elements of contiguity with urban-based digital professionals. These chiefly concern the centrality of reputation for job search and professional success and the rewarding nature of job autonomy that fuels job satisfaction. More so, the role of the Online Reputation Systems, that operates a digitization of word-of-mouth across digital platforms and online marketplaces (Dellarocas 2003) puts reputation even more strongly at the very heart of the new professions as a key regulatory element of digital job markets in a larger perspective, not only as the centre of a purely platform-based dynamic of interaction driven by an algorithm, but as a comprehensive cultural conception of value for digital work and socio-economic interaction among clients and freelancers, that is shared by the participants in this marketplace.

VI - CONCLUSION

The study of those that today are commonly referred to as «digital professions» in Milan, London and online confirms the expectations of a substantially contradictory scenario. The assessment of job quality conducted via Kalleberg's model evidences how a number of symbolically rewarding elements that connote these jobs significantly

influences job satisfaction self-reports by diminishing the perception of unfriendly, context-specific working conditions that inhabit the daily lives of these workers. In terms of job satisfaction specifically, more than economic compensation it is the idea of 'liberation' from office constraints that is very much at the centre of the subjectivity of these professionals, sitting halfway between an entrepreneurial and a precarious ethos.

Nevertheless, this appears to be quite different from the mere narrative of precarious work and 'freedom without security' that traditionally connotes knowledge workers. Contemporary digital professionals are not simply nonstandard workers, working with high levels of pressure and stress, often precarious and low paid, sometimes even for free. The attention demonstrated towards reputation and symbolic rewards may be interpreted as a distinct professional ethics – as elsewhere suggested, enjoying «a very complicated version of freedom» (Hesmondhalgh - Baker 2010) based on ethos rather than on status and membership to specific bodies.

Yet, this narrative of liberation combines with a set of bad features that often result invisible to the workers. This arguably renders digital professions in the knowledge economy an example of bad jobs enthusiastically perceived. It may be argued that these professions should be seen as a kind of *extreme work*, as described by Hewitt - Luce (2006), whereby long hours of work combine with a number of other characteristics; among them, the unpredictability of the flow of work, tight deadlines, work-related events outside working time and a scope of responsibility for profit or loss that amounts to more than one job (*idibem*).

This definition is particularly useful since it stresses the element of affectivity that connotes extreme jobs, that goes beyond the mere notion of passion and drags digital and freelance knowledge work into a more managerial-oriented connotation that is connoted by a life-dedication to work. This regularly induces into accepting extreme working conditions that nevertheless provide a furthermore stimulating and challenging element to this kind of jobs, which are rewarding as of the possibility of entertaining relationships with high-quality colleagues – rendering economic compensation seemingly less central. Hewitt and Luce call this combination 'an extreme ethos' by which competitive, high-pressure jobs are not only more frequent, but also more attractive (Hewitt - Luce 2006). Digital professionals in the freelance knowledge economy seem to possess such significant traits of extremity.

Another striking element concerns the role played by skills and education title. The unproductive meeting of demand and supply in creative industries configures the existence of a fragmented job market that is unable to efficiently allocate the increasing number of highly-skilled graduates. In contrast with other accounts related to similar professional contexts (such as Lee 2011) the possession of a higher education qualification seems here to be a mere entry ticket for a labour market where specialization and success occur through practices of invisible labour and self-branding which represent as a sort of 'enduring investment' in one's career (Gandini 2015b). This determines what may be seen as a process of *deskilling via upskilling* of professional work, which seemingly takes the reading of Braverman's work on the progressive degradation of work (1974) under a new light. As argued by Gallie (2014), as post-recession work displays its features and shows how it has responded to the period of stress caused by the

shrinking of economic conditions across various sectors of the knowledge industries, various scenarios may apply in terms of quality of work. Building on Gallie's typology, it seems as though this picture of neo-professionalism arguably renders a picture where deteriorating working conditions combine with instances of polarization that underline the fracture between standard and entrepreneurial employment, and whereby only those with the capacity to innovate – which here translates in the capacity to engineer and manage a reputation on the job market – are capable of career advancement and professional success (Gallie 2014).

To conclude, this article has outlined the set of practices and conditions that connote contemporary digital professions in the knowledge industry, unveiling a context that swings perilously between entrepreneurship and precarity. These instances configure what may be seen as a transformation towards an organizational model that accomplishes network arrangements and modalities within the processes of value production – being the evolution of the network-based dynamics reported by Antcliff et al. (2007) expanded via the techno-social impact provided by the diffusion of digital resources. The mantra of flexibility and individual economic action in such a context enhanced a narrative of entrepreneurialization of labour which fostered outsourcing and contract work, such that now individual professionals embody a new version of the 'californian ideology' (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) for which 'strangers' are assessed in their reliability on the basis of their own reputation, sometimes through the functioning of an Online Reputation System on a digital platform.

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