

Comments on Annette Henninger and Karin Gottschall
“Freelancers in Germany’s Old and New Media Industry: Beyond Standard Patterns of Work and Life?”

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Although media workers have been the subject of intense scrutiny, there has been very little attention paid to national differences among these workers. To some extent this is a consequence of a stereotyped depiction of media workers as a ‘global’ workforce, transcending national boundaries and conventional employment patterns. This depiction was particularly true of ‘New Media,’ which was touted as something wholly different: as the first global occupation, unrestrained by geographical boundaries. Henninger and Gottschall demonstrate that a comparative perspective remains valuable and that institutions and norms still matter in interpreting new occupations. Their work is suggestive rather than definitive, for some of the reasons discussed below, but it raises the right questions. In particular, their work is significant because it acknowledges the integration of work and life and of social and economic policy.

The authors investigate two dimensions of the lives of media workers –the independent and flexible character of the work process, and the way in which this type of work intersects with gender relations and the gender division of labor. Their work contributes to a contextualized understanding of the social underpinnings of different varieties of capitalism and raises questions about the role of social norms in differentiating work patterns in what are presented as global industries and occupations. These questions are typically ignored in the current literature but are vital to understanding both the degree and pace of ‘convergence’ toward universal economic models. Their work demonstrates that global may not mean universal.

With respect to flexibility, Henninger and Gottschall's research attempts to answer the key question of whether flexibility in working hours and a task rather than standard time orientation creates the possibility for a better integration of work and private life. The existing research on this question is far from definitive and, in fact, contradictory on many points. Henninger and Gottschall add to this debate by rooting the question of work and life in a set of broader questions, about the degree of market risk faced by workers and about how they use social resources – networks and social mores – as well as collective bargaining power, to reduce those risks. They point to the fact that a comfortable integration of work and life requires more than an ability to allocate one's personal time. It requires institutions that provide a modicum of security.

Henninger and Gottschall's research raises the question of what is valuable and useful to compare. Again, the degree of market and personal risk is central. This paper focuses on journalists, designers and software developers, in part, because they are more likely to be independent workers and self-employed in Germany. This decision is understandable because they want to focus on industries in Germany where the end markets are particularly risky and unpredictable. This makes it difficult, however, to compare trends with those in countries such as the United States where all media occupations are high-risk occupations.

Their research supports the idea that, at least with respect to workforce policy, Germany holds a position between the highly flexible Anglo-Saxon regimes and the social democracies of Scandinavia. Independent self-employment is growing and is slow to unionize, but at the same time, social norms around standard employment contracts and expectations about the dividing line between work and private life are still compelling.

Their research on the gender roles underlying these new employment trends is particularly provocative because it raises questions about the relationship between social and economic policy and about (potentially changing) decisions by women about work and personal life.

Although it is hardly a new issue, Henninger and Gottschall's research suggests that social norms underlying the gender division of labor continue to be influenced by pragmatic calculations about taxes and household income.

At the same time, their findings regarding women and childless couples in these high-risk occupations are open to multiple interpretations. While it is conventional to suggest that women are being prevented from being parents by the nature of the work, it is also possible that at least some women entering these higher-risk and demanding occupations are among the increasing number who choose not to be parents. The question is still an open one. It is important because economic discrimination against women is rooted in assumptions about what value women place on different options regarding personal life.

This work can effectively lead us into a set of future research questions. Henninger and Gottschall's paper suggests that we need a clearer understanding of women workers in the fields emerging in the cultural economy – their motivations and life goals as well as their work patterns. We also need to have a clearer understanding about how social network based careers and industrial organization affect women. As this paper indicates, men tend to do better in self-employment and independent, 'flexible' occupations. They earn more and have more sustainable careers. This has important implications for how we study and understand the role of social networks in the rapidly expanding high-skilled jobs that make up the cultural or knowledge economy.

Finally, Henninger and Gottschall's work is a much-needed antidote to the narrow sphere of analysis of 'the varieties of capitalism.' It points to the significance of the institutions defining and sustaining the gender division of labor as critical to the paths toward or away from global convergence.