

Chapter 4: Anonymous Workbloggers in Greater Manchester and Lancashire

Introduction

This chapter is divided into two sections, both of which delve into the lives of anonymous workbloggers from the UK's northwest region, through virtual ethnographic research conducted between 2005 and 2007. **Part One** is a close look at an individual anonymous workblogger called "Tim," who writes the blog *A Free Man in Preston*. Unlike the celebrity fired bloggers mentioned in the previous chapter, Tim has managed to stay under his employer's radar and, as such, he is an "ordinary" anonymous workblogger who has not received the kind of media attention that others have gained by losing their jobs. This first section looks closely at Tim's blog and its relation to his creative and working life, drawing both on the writings contained in *A Free Man in Preston* and on interview testimony from email and phone interviews conducted in December 2005 and June 2006, respectively. **Part Two** introduces a small group of bloggers, all of whom are loosely connected to Tim via the Manchester blogging community. Exploring the common themes contained in these blogs and how these connect to the ambitions and values of the bloggers, this piece reflects on the practice of anonymous workblogging in relation to some of the existing scholarly work on the labor process reviewed in Chapter One. Looking at the complex interplay between bloggers' politics, their art, and their paid employment, this chapter challenges existing research on blogs (Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Richards, 2007) that treats creative writing and resistance as mutually exclusive and mistakenly conflates ambivalent and apolitical orientations to the labor process. The methodology for this chapter is explained in-depth in Chapter Two.

Part One: Profile of an Anonymous Workblogger: A Free Man in Preston

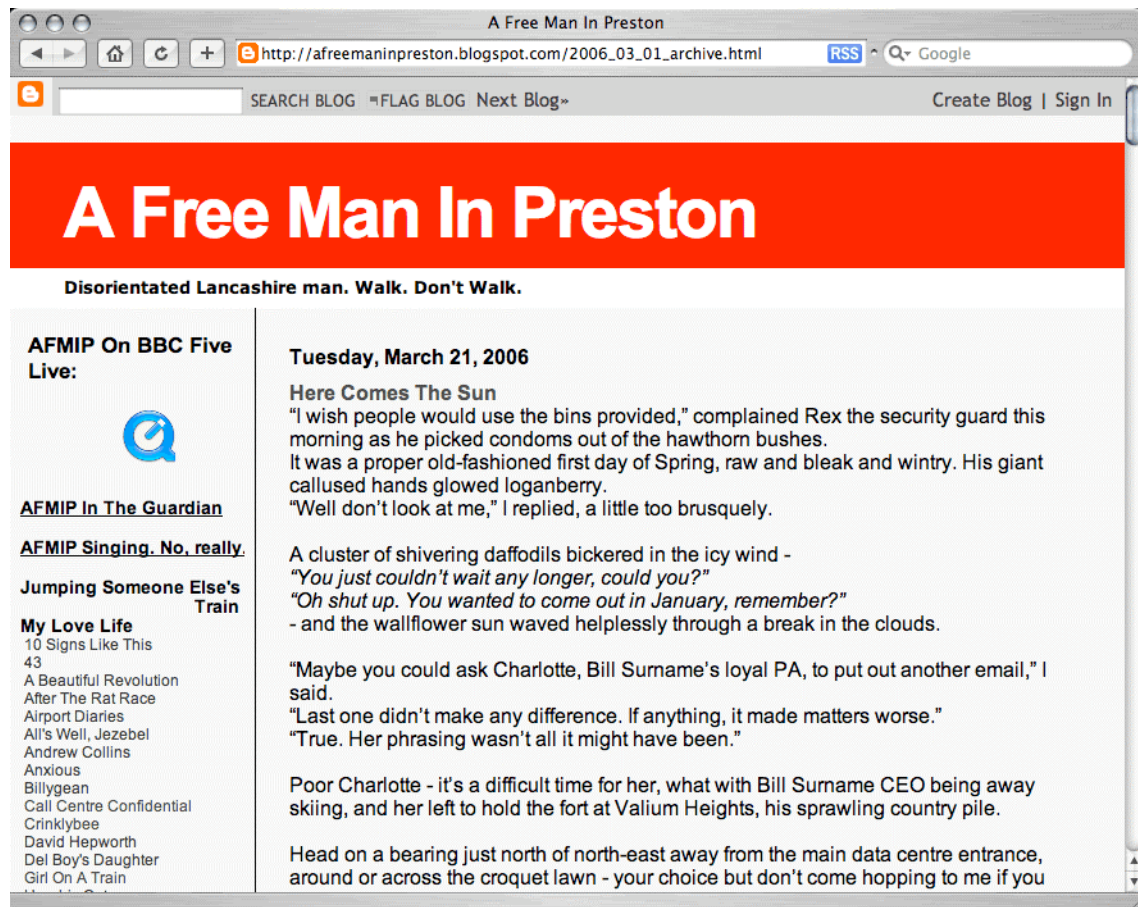


Figure 7: *A Free Man in Preston* (image captured 10 July 2007)

Introduction

A Free Man in Preston (AFMIP) is the creation of "Tim," an anonymous IT worker in the northwest of England who started his blog in March 2004 after reading about blogging in *The Guardian* newspaper. Updated two to three times a week, AFMIP features anecdotes from Tim's office life interspersed with more general writings about his life outside of work. As far as blogs go, it is quite a popular read – according to the blog's sitemeter (a free service provided by Google that is linked to the main page of

Tim's blog), it has received 92,346¹ visitors since its inception, with regular visits from readers outside the UK, in the United States, Australia, and other locations worldwide. In July 2005, Tim's blog was mentioned in *The Guardian Guide* and he was interviewed, in his capacity as an anonymous workblogger, by BBC Radio 5. Although he was flattered by this media attention, he says that his main goal in writing the blog is not so much to cultivate celebrity status as, "to create good pieces of writing just for its own sake" (personal communication, 14 December 2005).

I initially came across Tim's blog while conducting a broad survey of workblogs from the UK and US, using Internet searches, newspaper articles, and recommendations from blogger friends as a starting point, then somewhat randomly following links from one blog to another, as described in the methodology section above. I have since read and indexed all the archived material from *AFMIP* (March 2004 – August 2006), conducted telephone and email interviews with Tim, tracked comments and other visitor statistics, and observed Tim's ongoing participation in the blogging community. All testimony about Tim's workplace is based on interview and blog testimony, not on direct workplace observation. Informed by the testimony I have gathered and the virtual ethnographic method, I make the assumption that Tim's blog is based loosely on reality and that his interview testimony about, for example, the degree of commitment he feels to his job, is reliable.

¹ Figures based on July 2, 2007 statistics from the publicly accessible Google Sitemeter (<http://www.sitemeter.com/stats.asp?site=sm3fr33maninpreston>) on Tim's blog based on a start date of March 13, 2004 (The first posting is actually March 11, 2004).

Becoming a Blogger

In 2003, *Guardian Unlimited*, the online version of the UK newspaper *The Guardian*, ran a series of articles covering the blogging phenomenon. Reading an article about the newspaper's annual awards for the best of British blogging (Waldman, 2003), Tim followed links to some of the most notable and popular blogs of the day. Among the blogs he discovered were two influential anonymous workblogs: *Call Centre Confidential* and *Belle de Jour*. *Call Centre Confidential*, which Tim calls "the Daddy of all work blogs" (personal communication 19 December 2005) is the diary of a call center manager in the Greater Manchester area and is studied in greater depth in Part Two of this chapter. *Belle de Jour*, as mentioned earlier, is the diary of a London call girl that has since been taken down and marketed as a novel by Phoenix Press. Taking the lead from these bloggers and assuming that pseudonymous and somewhat professionally risky writing was the norm, Tim quickly tried his hand at creating his own anonymous workblog under a concealed identity, using Google's user-friendly Blogger software.

The name of Tim's blog is a humorous take on the Joni Mitchell song, *Free Man in Paris*, in which Mitchell contrasts the responsibilities of work with the desire for unfettered freedom:

I do my best
And I do good business
There's a lot of people asking for my time
They're trying to get ahead
They're trying to be a good friend of mine
I was a free man in Paris
I felt unfettered and alive
There was nobody calling me up for favors
And no one's future to decide
You know I'd go back there tomorrow
But for the work I've taken on
(Mitchell, 1974)

Writing short anecdotes and dialogs, Tim began to chronicle his daily office life in the data center in the form of an irreverent and witty journal imbued with the spirit of Mitchell's lyrics. In *A Free Man in Preston* he could give free rein to his creative urges and reflect openly on his relationship to a job that he claims to enjoy yet is also troubled by. The results were quickly rewarding. In little over a week, Tim's blog had caught the attention of his blogging hero, Wrapstar, the author of *Call Centre Confidential*, who recommended *A Free Man in Preston* to his readers and created a link from his blog to Tim's. Tim giddily told his readers how flattered he was that Wrapstar had acknowledged his existence: "I ought to drop him a line to say hi, but I'm feeling a bit star struck. I'm not sure if I'm in a fit state to drive home just yet"(Tim, 2004h).

Satisfying Creative Urges

Tim says that the goal of creating good pieces of writing far transcends the need to make any kind of point in his blog. He comments, "I feel under pressure from myself to create something worthwhile and lasting" (personal communication, 14 December 2005), and has found that writing a blog partially satisfies this need for a creative legacy. He chooses to write about work because it is the place where he spends a great deal of his time, and it provides him with raw material — characters and snippets of dialogue — on which to base his postings. Although it deals with employment issues, Tim sees his blog primarily as an "art project" (personal communication, 22 June 2006) — he acknowledges that blogs are a powerful communication tool but he does not see his own blog as having a social change agenda, preferring to think of it as a humorous personal diary that offers people a "sneaky look" into his world. His blog entries, which are all written at home to prevent detection by his company's surveillance software, are usually

short (10-20 lines), but they are carefully composed and time-consuming to produce, reflecting Tim's commitment to the craft of writing.

Tim's characterization of his blogging activity as creative writing and not as a political platform is consistent with Richards' (2007) study, which finds that anonymous workbloggers do not generally see themselves as engaged in an act of defiance and with Lenhart and Fox's (2006) survey of bloggers, which finds that creative self-expression is overwhelmingly the most popular motivation for blogging. However, looking in detail at Tim as a writer embedded in the workplace, and reflecting on how his creative process is linked to his values (which include a tendency not to take himself too seriously), it becomes difficult to dismiss his writing as "purely" creative.

AFMIP is a composite of fact and fiction with a distinctly literary quality. Tim exaggerates real life events to create an improbable but humorous effect, and inserts unlikely phrases and pop culture references into ordinary office conversations and business communications. A minor disruption in the office is related as an all-out brawl ending with blood spattered over the flat-screen monitors (Tim, 2005b). Email messages from the CEO or passages from a technical manual become peppered with song lyrics and snippets of inner monologue (Tim, 2004d, 2004f). In Tim's blog, the data center itself has become embedded in a pastoral setting where a green-fingered security guard milks the company goat and tends his sweet peas, offering advice on apple crumble and winter frosts. At times, the rural fantasy and hi-tech reality blur together, as in this post about apples infiltrating the office (the underlines signify links to photos):

A good crop - Cox's Orange Pippins, Cornish Gilliflowers, and of course, Bramleys, from up by the old henhouse, next to the potting shed where helpdesk staff go to enjoy relations during their lunch hours, returning to their desks red faced, elbows and fingernails black with John Innes No. 3. There are apples

everywhere, racked up in cardboard crates in reception, free for anybody who wants them... Apples spill onto the floor, rolling around like ball bearings. Unsuspecting visitors trip on them, sending them and themselves scattershot. They wend their way onto every floor of the building, into every crevice, riding the lift all day, playing hide and seek in cupboards and filing cabinets, leaping out of the coffee machine - Boo! - when you least expect and bugging up the photocopier (Tim, 2005a).

Tim frequently makes his writing process explicit, telling readers that he is about to relate the "blog version" of events rather than the milder real life version, and reflecting in his postings on the "blogger's license" he employs to protect his anonymity and to make things more interesting.

The writing style itself is diverse, with postings varying from straightforward prose and short dialogs to surreal word collages and short plays. He introduces imaginary friends with whom he reflects on the quality of and inspiration for his posts, and sometimes invites other bloggers to "guest blog" while he is away on holiday. In addition to plain text and hyperlinks, his postings are often accompanied by Castposts² of music (sometimes his own songs, which he records in a small home studio), and he sometimes includes links to photos he has taken on his travels, creating a multimedia-enhanced presentation.

Workplace Realities and Blog Fictions

Tim says that his work is fairly well-remunerated and that his hours are reasonable. He puts in 37.5 hours a week and has 21 days of annual leave, excluding public holidays (personal communication, 14 December 2005), an amount that is usual by UK standards, where Working Time regulations stipulate that full-time workers must

² Castpost (<http://www.castpost.com/>), a free service, allows users to create streamed broadcasts of audio or video files. Castposts can be easily integrated into blog postings.

have four weeks paid annual leave. Although there are busy periods when the job becomes hectic, he doesn't usually feel overworked or stressed out, and the busy times are balanced by periods when the machines appear to look after themselves and he is left to his own devices. These quiet periods worry Tim a little and he tries to appear occupied because, although the job feels relatively secure in the short term he is aware of a "slow decay" in job security at his firm and does not expect, nor necessarily desire, to be in the same job when he retires (personal communication, 14 December 2005). The work is relatively interesting and varied, involving a fair degree of skill and initiative, and although Tim does not see himself as a techie and thinks of the job as "just a job," he finds the work fairly enjoyable.

In spite of this relative satisfaction with his job, Tim experiences quite a lot of doubts and frustrations regarding his work life, particularly the amount of time that his job eats out of his day, and he acknowledges that these feelings influence the types of things he writes about in his blog:

What I write about in the blog is a caricature of my life, as you might have gathered. I do go a bit over the top with the exaggerations, but there have been times in my life when I've been working, just commuting daft hours...or going off on jobs and what have you, and the motorway's no place to live your life. Being sat in traffic jams is no way to live. There's that old cliché about nobody ever says on their deathbed that I wish I'd spent more time in the office, and I think that's very true, and it's certainly a rule of thumb in my life (personal communication, 22 June 2006).

He admits that, in the interest of comedy (personal communication, 22 June 2006), he devotes more time in his blog to the negative aspects of his work than the more enjoyable or successful parts, but this negative choice of material — which includes caricatures of his colleagues, parodies of office social rituals, training seminars and motivational

retreats — also reflects strong value differences that set him apart from the company and from the majority of his colleagues, as detailed below.

Colleague Caricatures:

The cast of *AFMIP* have vivid and often unflattering names such as "Creepy Keith from accounts" and "Stella, my eighties style yuppie witch of a team leader." Tim ruthlessly exaggerates the features and traits of his workmates and of company clients, as in this description of a customer from a site visit: " Prince, the IT manager at Twat Brothers has a head shaped like a gnarled bone, lumps missing from his ears and nose, and firm doesn't begin to describe his handshake" (2005d). Regular figures are marked by recurring symbols that complete the caricature. Stella's preoccupation with positivity-enhancing new age paraphernalia such as wind chimes and whale music provides a humorous contrast to Tim's more sardonic worldview. On the most basic level, these caricatures help protect Tim's anonymity by abstracting from the true identities of his colleagues, but they also highlight the particular value differences and conflicts that arise in his working life.

Tim says he maintains cordial and successful working relationships but feels somewhat alienated from the majority of his colleagues. Within the IT department, this alienation derives in part from the fact that, unlike his more geeky colleagues, he is not particularly interested in computers beyond the requirements of his job. He finds the data centers where he spends much of his time, " incredibly grey and boring," (personal communication, 22 June 2006) and this aesthetic deprivation is the inspiration for the color and sensuality of the rural theme in his blog-writing, which he sees as the sharpest

possible contrast to the “windowless, airless, cheerless” (Tim, 2004e) interior of his workplace.

Tim feels that he is something of an outsider to the “hungry go-getter” attitude of many of the firm’s employees. In particular, he dislikes the conspicuous consumerism and naked ambition of the company salesmen:

An ejaculation of salesmen sit gloating on the wall, with their RayBans and Bluetooth earpieces, looking for all the world like emissaries from Planet Twat, making deals, doing business, cutting corners, greasing the wheels, booking their seat at the captain’s table. These are the school prefects, the headmaster’s golden boys, his crack squad of sales storm troopers, for whom the bell never tolls and life in the fast lane is not a song by The Eagles but a statement of intent. High in the upper echelons, where the air is thin and different rules apply, speed is a right, not a privilege, dog eats dog, power corrupts and the winning is more important than the taking part (Tim, 2004b).

In spite of this generalized disdain for the type of people he encounters at work, Tim’s writing about his colleagues is sometimes affectionate. He feels a certain envy for those of his colleagues who have a clear sense of purpose and direction, admiring Stella’s lack of angst and her unquestioning positive attitude:

I know I give her a lot of stick, but I do have a certain affection for Stella, my eighties style yuppie witch of a team leader...The answer is yes, Stella, I do like you. I admire your blithe spirit in the face of overwhelming reality, and your ballsy indifference to the same gloom that frequently swamps me. I envy your drive (Tim, 2005e).

Acknowledging the emotional strain of existing as something of an outsider to organizational culture, Tim sometimes envies Stella’s ability to harmonize her identity with company goals and values. However, as described below, he is simultaneously proud of his own anti-corporate values and, in spite of the alienation and “gloom” that results from his outsider stance, he values his ability to distance himself from the firm and its objectives.

Corporate culture:

Tim's blog goes beyond portraits of individual quirks to commentate more broadly on organizational culture and ritual. He makes fun of office social rituals such as the annual turkey-giving, satirizes company training events and business language, and disdains the greedy power-mongering at the higher levels of the company. A team of representatives from a competing firm who visit the office in connection with a possible takeover bid are quickly dubbed "the Four Horsepersons of the Apocalypse," and described as cold and inhuman: "dressed in Undertaker's Black, beady eyed and pointy of beak - they hardly stopped to breathe, let alone speak to anybody" (Tim, 2005h). Ultimately, two of the Horsepersons of the Apocalypse become full-time employees and appear from time to time in Tim's blog under the names of "Death" and "Pestilence," a persistent reminder of the way in which the company embraces and rewards predatory capitalist behavior.

Tim also writes critically about company training events and retreats, which feature team-building games and motivational workshops, facilitated by management consultants. In one posting, about a training event in the Lake District, he describes the contempt that he and his colleagues feel for the "Motivational Guru" who leads the workshop, and gleefully relates the antics that they devise in order to leave the Guru "wonderfully confused and enraged" (Tim, 2004a) by the end of the two-day session.

By contrast, Stella (in Tim's fictionalized account) returns from training seminars enlightened, and excited about trying out the latest management techniques and buzzwords on her bemused team. Tim's anecdotes about Stella's literal and uncritical absorption of the management ethos of the company, cleverly critique the company's use

of superficial motivational language to nurture unquestioning commitment from its staff. Stella's whiteboard, he observes, is a "huge migraine of boxes, squiggly arrows, intersecting balloons and a number of buzzword infested statements on the subject of being 'goal orientated'" (Tim, 2004g). When the Horsepersons of the Apocalypse arrive in their SUVs to begin a hostile takeover process, Tim uses Stella's whiteboard to illustrate how management and self-help language are a veil for questionable organizational practices. She buries herself in a "barrage of psycho-babble," covering her whiteboard with an elaborate "Magnum Opus" that reads:

Feeling moderately eager with high expectations? Distressed? Angry? Where do I fit? What is expected of me? Do it, delegate it, wish away your troubles? I need to find a place and establish myself. Come on over to my place: let's do business. Customers who bought books by Margaret Thatcher also bought books by these authors: Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev, Alex Comfort. My girlfriend was blown away just hours after I read this book. Dependant on authority and hierarchy? Some of the techniques taught will make your performance above average (Tim, 2005g).

Tim feels that his values conflict directly with the company's philosophy, which he finds unethical and excessively materialistic: "The entire company ethos seems to be founded on conspicuous consumerism. It's how we gauge our success" (personal communication, 14 December 2005). Although his employer — a private small-to-medium-sized enterprise (SME) that provides services to other businesses — gives lip service to ethical issues, Tim observes that it doesn't shy away from unethical clients: "We do business with a few companies that you would never find in the portfolio of an ethical investment fund." He feels that his values are incommensurable with those of the company's bosses who, he argues, could never comprehend the concept that "it's possible to get through life without ever wanting to drive a powerful German car" (personal communication, 14 December 2005).

While he hasn't thought much about the origins of the management buzzwords and training techniques that he parodies in his blog, Tim feels that there is something objectionable and possibly un-English about them, particularly as relates to the lack of irony displayed by people who embrace corporate ideology and embody business success: "I don't know, maybe it's just my Englishness or something like that but to me it just seems daft and I'd feel daft and self-conscious and doomed to fail if ever I was to try and be like that" (personal communication, 22 June 2006).

He partly attributes the value he places on irony and self-effacement to the *New Musical Express* (*NME*),³ an underground music magazine that he read avidly as a teenager: "I don't think I've ever been a hippie or anything like that but I was raised on the *NME*, the *New Musical Express*, and I suppose you pick up a lot of values. The values you pick up when you're 16 tend to stick with you for the rest of your life" (personal communication, 22 June 2006). Tim says that *NME* gave him a fundamental dislike of "people who really, really fancy themselves," and lack a sense of humor or irony. His unmaterialistic sensibilities, were also influenced by his father's "don't spend money on things when you can make it yourself" mentality. In one posting, he reminisces about how his dad eschewed shop-bought kites for ones that were home made out of bamboo and brown paper: "He could have just gone out and bought me one, but that wasn't his way, and I guess this is a trait I've picked up from him for better or worse" (Tim, 2004c).

³ The New Musical Express is known for its political viewpoints as well as its musical content. Throughout the eighties, it was associated with critical journalistic commentary on the rise of conservatism in the UK, and promoted bands such as Billy Bragg's anti-Thatcher collective, Red Wedge.

Appraisals and Limiting Ambition at Work

Tim is not a “go-getter” at work but he is a hard-working employee who takes a certain pride in his job, which involves installing computers, troubleshooting technical problems, and keeping clients happy, and he makes no secret of this in his blog. Writing about a challenging week at work, he reflects, “Joking aside, I want to do this well. I don't want the whole thing falling apart on my watch, thanks very much” (Tim, 2005i). This sense of a strong commitment to doing his job well has firm limits, however, and is counter-balanced by Tim's lack of interest in taking on more responsibility or committing himself more fully to his IT job.

Appraisals are a frequent topic in Tim's writings, focusing in particular on Stella's efforts to use the appraisal process as a vehicle to make him more career-minded. In one of several appraisal-related postings, Stella takes him to one side, hands him a packet of motivational materials and, “between a succession of vitamin tablets,” counsels him: “You need to trumpet your achievements [...] I want you to be more ambitious, Tim” (Tim, 2005f). In spite of Stella's exertions, Tim demonstrates a certain cynicism about the company's attempts to get him to devote more of himself to the job. Writing about the firm's inconsistency in rewarding his exertions, he refers to times when he has “laboured and slogged, and put in the hours and driven the extra mile” (Tim, 2005k) without a pay rise or any kind of recognition.

Although Tim's unwillingness to be more ambitious is caused in part by wage and reward issues, his rejection of career ambition is more closely tied to his creative aspirations and his definition of success, which, as he frequently elaborates, has very little to do with promotion and advancement within the traditional career context. Indulging in an imaginary confession to Stella, he bluntly tells her: “I've also found that not being

ambitious gives me more time for other stuff and suits my temperament much better.

Paradoxically, I think it makes me more productive. You want to chase your tail all day in the heat of the sun? Knock yourself out. But it ain't me, babe" (Tim, 2005k).

The humorous appraisal- and ambition- related postings in his blog reflect an ongoing real-life effort to limit his own commitment to the firm and separate himself from the "go-getter" expectation that pervades the company in order to preserve energy and resources for his creative life outside of work. He believes that this effort has been successful, in that his supervisor has learned not to ask him to go for a promotion or take on more responsibilities (personal communication, 14 December 2005).

This conscious limiting of ambition and commitment is also reflected in Tim's anecdotes about surreptitious time-wasting on the job. In one posting about his to do list, he informs readers that he keeps a list of jobs that don't actually exist, "I just make them up then cross lines through them to make it look like I'm good at getting stuff done," much to Stella's approval, who compliments him on being a "busy boy" (Tim, 2005j). For Tim this need to appear busy even during quiet periods is related to the threat that IT staff may one day become superfluous due to technological progress. Reflecting on the autonomy of the systems he manages, he writes, "the truth is the systems pretty much look after themselves. There are robots to change their backup tapes for them, and they can diagnose their own faults and even arrange site visits from engineers after hardware failures. It won't be long until they don't need us administrators at all" (Tim, 2005c). Aware of the ongoing possibility that his organization may one day consider him obsolete, Tim carefully manages his organizational identity so that he can benefit from the structure and financial rewards that his workplace offers without becoming

emotionally attached to his organizational role, or compromising his personal and creative freedom.

Separating Creative and Professional Life

Tim's creative and social life exists in sharp separation from his paid employment. The sharp boundary between his creative interests and his job is something he finds liberating, not aspiring to blur the two. His desire to separate his creative life from financial exigencies relates to a conviction that creative expression is constrained when it becomes a profession, and a preference for maximizing the spontaneity and freedom of his art.

As an undergraduate, Tim trained as a photographer, and after college he pursued a photography career for a while but found that it was very hard to make a living: "I tried to become a photographer for a few years, and was reasonably good but terrible at making money." While he admires successful artists, he admits, based on his own experience as a struggling photographer, "I'd be useless at making a living doing something more creatively satisfying" (personal communication, 14 December 2005). By contrast, the IT job gives him financial stability and frees him up to pursue photography, music, and writing in his free time, without having to worry about making a living from his artistic output. Tim is skeptical of the amount of real freedom he would have in a more creative career and feels that people who work in a paid creative capacity probably feel constrained in one way or another (personal communication, 14 December 2005).

Tim is unwilling to reveal his more creative side in a paid professional capacity, and this separation of creative self from the organization helps him to reconcile his ethical differences with his employer, since his identity is not defined around his job. He'd like to work for a company "whose work was worthwhile and in some way

admirable” (personal communication, 14 December 2005), but by minimizing his commitment to the company and keeping intact his creative life outside of work, he is able to do his job well and ensure that his pursuit of creative self-fulfillment is shielded from financial prerogatives. He enjoys his job and likes the money and stability, but maintains, “whatever ‘succeeding in life’ means, it doesn’t have much connection with what you do during office hours” (personal communication, 14 December 2005).

Although this compromise works well most of the time, time-scarcity is always an issue. Tim acknowledges that his inability to sustain creative projects is partly due to his own lack of self-discipline, but he would like to have a shorter workweek or a more flexible schedule in order to make more time for his creative projects, and worries that blogging is sometimes a “quick fix” compared to the more involved creative projects, such as music recording, that he would like to devote time to:

If I’m trying to write a song — sometimes I do songs and recording stuff into a little studio — it takes hours and hours! I [recently] did a song that I put up on my blog [...] and it just took absolutely forever. I spent all weekend doing that. So I threw it together, and it’s a little bit slapdash. I’d like to do it again with a little more care and attention, but I did it in a really slapdash way and just bunged it out as soon as I’d finished it, and again it just took me all weekend, I didn’t get anything else done. So really, to have done a proper job of that, I’d have to spend a week or a month or fortnight, and that’s what I would actually like to be doing (personal communication, 22 June 2006)

This sense of not having enough quality time for creative projects fuels Tim’s ongoing effort to manage his employer’s expectations via the appraisal process, making sure he remains in good favor, while diplomatically resisting his Stella’s enticements to be more ambitious or company-oriented.

Writing, Social Change, and Membership in the Blogging Community

Tim's blog stats, which are publicly available via the blog's Sitemeter, indicate about 90 visitors a day, most of which are referrals from other blogs.⁴ His blog is blogrolled (included in a list of favorite blogs) by at least 50 other bloggers⁵, and, as stated in the introduction, has garnered the attention of mainstream media, including a mention in *The Guardian Guide* and an interview on BBC Radio 5 (both in July 2005). Tim acknowledges that having an audience for his writing makes him more disciplined as a writer and he enjoys "the buzz of writing and publishing right away" (personal communication, 22 June 2006). He enjoys the "kind, encouraging comments" he gets from visitors, but gets the sense that his blog isn't really that popular and says, "most of the time, I don't have much of an idea who is reading" (personal communication, 14 December 2005).

⁴ Based on Sitemeter statistics, 7/5/06,
<http://www.sitemeter.com/?a=stats&s=sm3fr33maninpreston>.

⁵ Based on blogshare.com data, 7/5/06.

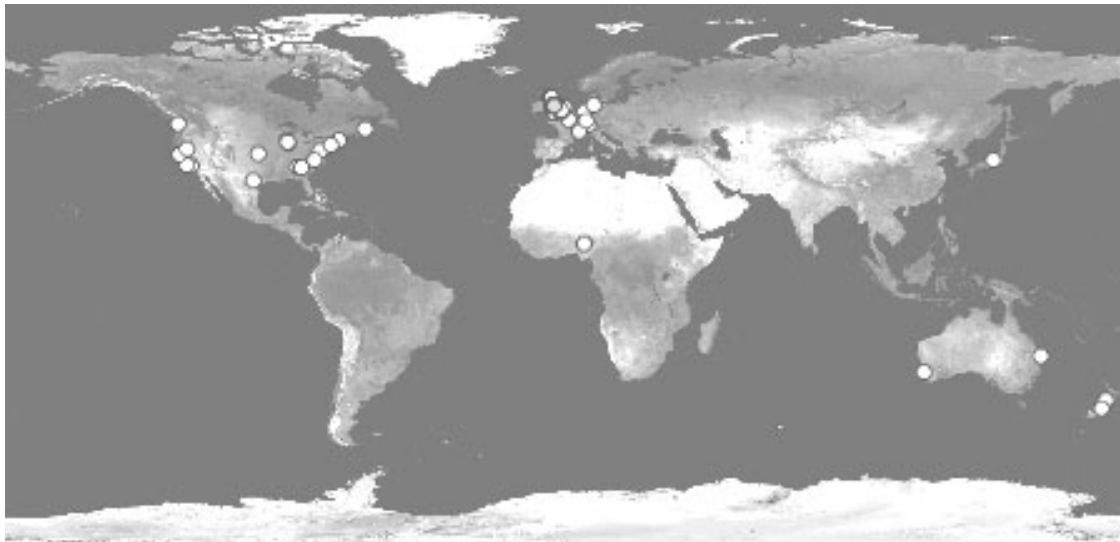


Figure 8: Google's Sitemeter displaying a geographical representation of the last 50 visitors to Tim's blog (October 12, 2006). URL: <http://www.sitemeter.com/?a=stats&s=sm3fr33maninpreston&r=79>.

Most of his postings, in fact, get between five and ten comments, some of which he replies to. The comments on his blog are often from regular readers, some of whom are other bloggers who are featured in this study. Often, readers offer their own insights in support of Tim's assertions about working life, briefly sharing their own experiences. In a typical example, a post entitled "Forgotten But Not Yet Gone," Tim gave an update on some compulsory redundancies that have occurred at his company, writing, "One of the things I like most about working for Company X, perhaps the only thing, come to think of it, is this: You are never in any doubt as to how much your contribution as an employee is valued. Because it is sod all" (Tim, 2006). Among the eight comments, four pick up on and agree strongly with Tim's assertion that employees need to avoid the delusion that they are valued by their employer, the others being broadly supportive or addressing other topics. A reader called "Anxious," writes: "As soon as you have experienced a wave of redundancies (even if you're not the victim), I think you realise the futility of your corporate existence (if you haven't already). It's a case of maintaining the

same attitude toward the corporation. You are there to line your pockets, none of it really matters” (comment posted August 3, 2006). “K,” another reader, concurs, writing: There's just been a "restructure to focus on the core business", as they euphemistically call it, at my company, and anxious is right – even though I wasn't affected, I now realise that I could be at risk another time no matter how much work I do” (comment posted August 5, 2006). Another reader, “Zed,” expresses his support by simply quoting one of the lines from Tim’s posting, and writing “Boy, do I know that feeling” (comment posted August 5, 2006). Comments posted to Tim’s blog reinforce his sense that his blog is generally read by a small and quite familiar audience of fairly like-minded people. Contact with this community of similarly cynical workers gives Tim an opportunity to “celebrate” his outsider status, and offers a sense of community that may counterbalance the alienation and fatigue he experiences as a result of rejecting the organizational culture.

Tim regularly reads several other blogs (although he doesn’t write his own blog at work, he does read other people’s blogs on company time), and stays in regular contact with other bloggers by email or by posting comments on their blogs in what sometimes becomes a reciprocal relationship of reading and responding to each other’s postings. He and his girlfriend “Beth” (who is also a blogger and is featured in Part Two of this chapter) have also attended a couple of “blogmeets,” where bloggers get together informally face-to-face in a pub. Going to blogmeets is a somewhat risky prospect for anonymous bloggers, but Tim is interested in meeting some of the people he has made friends with online and feels he has developed enough trust through the blogging community not to worry about his anonymity being compromised.

Just as Tim's motivation to write a blog is centered on his creative desire to produce good writing, his participation in the blogging community is oriented primarily to the craft of creative writing and not to critique of the labor process. He seeks to connect to community of writers and readers, not to meet like-minded frustrated employees and organize for social change, and he prefers reading blogs that, like his own, do not have an explicit agenda. However, this intent does not negate the critical content of his blog or deny the possibility that his readers might relate to some of his more scathing comments about corporate culture. His unmaterialistic, somewhat anti-corporate values are ever-present in his writing and are intrinsic to the humorously disaffected tone of his postings. Although Tim's writing is not outwardly oriented to social change, he feels strongly that the current social system is not equitable and that "it would be good if everybody everywhere had the means to support themselves in a way that was dignified and sustainable, for society and the planet itself" (personal communication, 14 December 2005).

<p>My Love Life 10 Signs Like This A Beautiful Revolution After The Rat Race All's Well, Jezebel Beyond Northern Iraq Call Centre Confidential Danger! High Postage Girl On A Train Hendrix Cat Jonny B's Public Arse Clinic Little Red Boat Liverpool Headlines Looby Magnetic Kid Liv Martin Newell My Boyfriend Is A Twat Paranoid Prom Queen Petite Anglaise Ria Secret Knowledge Of Backroads Silver Lining Stuart Murdoch Trolley Park Undivine Comedy Urban Badger Wibble</p>	<p>My Love Life 10 Signs Like This 43 A Beautiful Revolution After The Rat Race Airport Diaries All's Well, Jezebel Andrew Collins Anxious Billygean Call Centre Confidential Crinklybee David Hepworth Del Boy's Daughter Girl On A Train Hendrix Cat Indexed It's A Dog's Life! Joella Jonny 'Banjo' Billericay Keris Stainton Says I'm Funny Little Red Boat Liverpool Headlines Looby Lucy Pepper Magnetic Kid Liv Manchizzle Mancubist Martin Newell My Boyfriend Is A Twat Nine Foot Joe Petite Anglaise Ria Secret Knowledge Of Backroads Silver Lining Smaller Than Life Stuart Murdoch To Be Continued Undivine Comedy Urban Badger Yer Mam On Toast</p>
<p><i>Figure 9: Tim's blogroll (links to his favorite blogs), as captured in October 2006 (left) and July 2007 (right), indicating the growth and development of his social network.</i></p>	

He admits that he has not devoted much time to thinking about the mechanisms of social change and does not see his blog as a tool for overturning or improving the system in which he participates. Tim's experience with unions has been disappointing – and although he is not sure of whether unions are worthwhile, his prior contact with organized labor has given him the impression that unions are “not terribly effective or competent” (personal communication, 22 June 2006). While he is interested in shorter hours to make time for his creative projects and feels that many people are exploited and underpaid, he also feels that many people are workaholics voluntarily and that, if we had a shorter work week, “people might curse all their free time. It might be just like the Christmas holidays. It would just go on for ever and they'd be twiddling their thumbs and secretly wishing they could get back to work” (personal communication, 22 June 2006).

Tim's feelings about social change and the need to for worker advocacy and organization are mixed and he is happy enough with his lot not to think too much about it. However, he remains firmly attached to the conflicting values that prevent his unquestioning immersion in corporate culture, and this sense of discontent is intrinsic to the humor and artistic depth of his writing.

A Free Man in Preston and the Literature on Resistance

Tim does not characterize his blogging as an act of resistance because, at least in part, he is not given to grand statements about himself and his work. His identity as a creative writer militates against such earnest terms as “activist” or “labor organizer,” which preclude the necessary wiggle-room that an artist needs in order that his work might be rich and unpredictable. He has a love-hate relationship to his job, and is not particularly enamored of unions, or attracted by a vision of some alternative workless

world, and his writing encapsulates this ambivalence. Yet, he readily agrees that his values are embodied in his writing, and that his aversion to predatory capitalist behavior, his liking for old-fashioned homemade stuff, and his sense that the world could be organized more fairly and sustainably – come through in his blog.

He is too opposed to the company and all that it stands for to be, in Barsoux's (1993) sense, merely blowing off steam about a labor process that he finds otherwise satisfying. He is not a *Svejk* (Fleming & Sewell, 2002), a lone wolf, opposed to the system, yet working it to his own benefit with purely self-interested motives. His anti-corporate values are too concrete and too linked to a community of likeminded others to be interpreted as Wilmott's "confusion and emptiness" (1993a). His identity is too solidly anchored outside the organization to put him in the position of Kunda's (1992) engineers, who maintain a "tightrope walk" of identification with the firm and rejection of its values, yet return to the organization as their primary source of affirmation.

Cosmopolitan, educated, and skilled, Tim is shaped by and engaged in a Culture of Critical Discourse (Alvin Ward Gouldner, 1979), but he is not interested in controlling the means of production. Rather, he wants to cut back his labor time, and have more unfettered, uncommodified time, for his creative projects. He manipulates the work day to make time for his own projects, resisting colonization of his self by the organization and making time to dream, free from the exigencies of making a living. His acts of blog-writing are connected to a larger subculture of anonymous workblogging that imbues his actions with broader social significance, and are reminiscent of Scott's (1987) notion of everyday resistance. He comes close to the notion of refusal (Marcuse, 1991), but stops short of wanting to participate in an organized social movement. He enjoys his high

material standard of living and his professional status. He is aware of the compromise that his job demands and somewhat resigned to it, but – at least in the world of ideas – he is not politically apathetic. Tim understands the most authentic creativity to be that which is least commodified, least fettered by the need to make money. His resistance is embodied partly in his subtle, literary critique of the workplace, but it is also present in his ongoing effort to carve out the kind of time for unfettered artistic production that Marx (1993) sees as the ultimate goal of ending capitalism.

Tim is a well-remunerated employee with a transparent and critical awareness of his company's activities and interests. He is prepared to indulge in a professionally risky blogging practice in order to maintain his right to uncensored self-expression, and feels the need to criticize and cajole his employer. He is content working with the technical gadgets around which his job is based, but he also uses his computer skills to undermine his employer's ideological hegemony. He has organized his life in a way that allows him to “hide out” in the organization, making enough money to achieve creative freedom when he is away from work, and eluding alignment with any cause or agenda that might reify his writing.

Employees who hide out in this way have a role in social change, especially when they publish their private reflections to the world. Tim's aversion to attaching himself to a cause is not unlike the reticence of writers such as Charles Dickens or E.M. Forster. Dickens was always ambivalent about industrial progress and E.M. Forster flirted with the radicalism of the Bloomsbury group without ever declaring himself a member. Yet, Gradgrind's preoccupation with “facts and calculations” in Dickens' *Hard Times* and E.M. Forster's “anger and telegrams” portrait of the commercial classes shot arrows

through the brash confidence of the capitalists of another era. In Tim's blog, Stella's wind chimes and buzzwords; the sensual contrast of the apple harvest with the drab and dehumanized interior of the data center; and the dark, looming presence of employees called Death and Pestilence whose only emotion is greed, have a critical power that, when considered cumulatively along with the voices of other bloggers, might help to create a climate in which support for alternatives to the current status quo becomes tangible.

Tim's blogging practice, his motivation to write about his workplace, and the distance he maintains between his creative identity and his paid work, points to a complex critical relationship between knowledge workers and their organizations. Looking at a wider group of anonymous bloggers from the Manchester and Lancashire region, all connected in one way or another with *AFMIP*, the next section explores the differing values and career choices of a broader range of workers who have been inspired to blog about their work under concealed identities, conversing with other workers who seek creative fulfillment by "hiding out" in the knowledge workplaces of the 21st century.

Part Two: A Group of Mancunian Bloggers

Building on the close study of Tim's blog in the last section, this broader case study focuses on a diffusely connected group of anonymous workbloggers from the Greater Manchester and Lancashire region. These bloggers are referred to in this account as "Mancunian," to denote their identification with the city of Manchester as the cultural capital of the region. The Manchester area, which boasts both flourishing hi-tech workplaces and a strong countercultural tradition, has given rise to some of the most resilient and popular anonymous bloggers, such as the now defunct *Doing Less Harm*, written by an IT worker in an NHS Trust, and *Call Centre Confidential*, the diary of a call center manager. Upfront parodies of work are becoming noticeably scarcer as workplace surveillance of bloggers increases and the risk of being 'Dooiced' (fired because of one's blog) intensifies. However, critical commentary on working life persists, albeit in a more veiled and intermittent form, surfacing in blogs that are ostensibly devoted to other topics and cropping up in accounts of daily life where the urge for self-expression overwhelms cautiousness.

Looking both at blogs that explicitly parody work and at others where the labor process is a more subtle and fleeting presence, this section further explores the relationship between anonymous blogging and paid employment, exploring an ideological meeting ground that exists among knowledge workers in quite varied work situations. Reflecting on the countercultural values and creative aspirations of these bloggers, and how they are interconnected as part of Manchester's blogging community, this piece reflects on the potential of blogging to transcend individualized cynicism and contribute to the formation of an organized and vocal movement. Considering these

workers *as authors*, it reveals that a small yet vocal number of cynical workers are engaged in sophisticated, creative, and networked forms of resistance, exploiting the knowledge workplace's decentralized structure to reclaim time and creative space from corporate culture's encroachment.

Manchester is currently a booming new media and information capital, yet its rebirth is linked inextricably to a home-grown pop and clubbing culture that embodies disaffected rebellion, anti-commercialism, and rejection of mainstream career values. The blogs in this case study reflect this tension – a sense that the booming knowledge economy has provided well-remunerated, skilled jobs that give employees considerable autonomy during company time, and, on the other hand, a sense of artistic yearning, existential angst, and rebellion.

Introducing the Bloggers

The bloggers featured in this study are employed in a range of workplaces and occupations that typify the regeneration of the region's economy. All are college graduates in their late twenties to early forties (see Table 1 on following page). As indicated in the table, some write solely about work, while others mention their employment only as an occasional theme. While none of these employees has been fired for writing a blog, some have taken down work-related material or discontinued their blog as a result of being found out, or due to the fear of being discovered. This is also indicated in the table:

Table 1: Anonymous Workbloggers from the Manchester and Lancashire Area

Blog Name / URL #visits (up to April 24, 2007)	Blogger alias	Job (Sector/Orgtype)	Theme	Blogging since
A Free Man in Preston afreemaninpreston.blogspot 86,686 visits.	Tim	IT Specialist (Private, SME**)	Work is the main theme but also chronicles Tim's social life and travels.	March 2004 - present
Call Centre Confidential callcentrediary.blogspot 282,778 visits.	Wrapstar	Call centre team manager. (Private, SME)	Work. Very little mention of events outside the office.	Feb 03 - Jul 06 Discontinued. (Ended in March 2004, began again briefly in Jan 2006, but no new posts since July 2006.)
CB* url suppressed* 24,860 visits.	Dan*	Industrial Customer Service (Private, US-owned multinational)	Work is one multiple themes pertaining to Dan's life in Manchester.	Dec 2004 – present Work postings removed. (work postings cited in this paper were taken down in 2005 through fear of being identified.)
Doing Less Harm anytownnhstrust.blogspot # visits not available	Dr Dre	IT Specialist (Public, NHS Trust)	Work. Very little mention of events outside the office in posting available for this study.	Jul 04 – January 05 Discontinued. (Dre took down his blog after being identified)
Girl on a Train girlonatrain.blogspot # visits not available	Beth (has a pre-existing relationship with Tim)	Consumer Advisor (Public, local govt.)	Nominal focus on commuting, with MP3 playlists but work often mentioned, especially during stressful periods.	Jun 04 – present
Slow Afternoon www.slowafternoon.com # visits not available	Slowdown	IT Project Manager (Private, small Internet consultancy)	Current events, occasionally interspersed with events from Slowdown's personal/working life.	Jul 04 – present Work postings discontinued. 2006 due to change of job.

* name and alias changed to protect blogger identity – his blog is semi-anonymous.

** SME = Small to medium sized enterprise.

Short profiles of the bloggers in this case study are given below. Tim (*A Free Man in Preston*) is omitted since his blog is described in detail in the previous section.

Wrapstar (*Call Centre Confidential*)

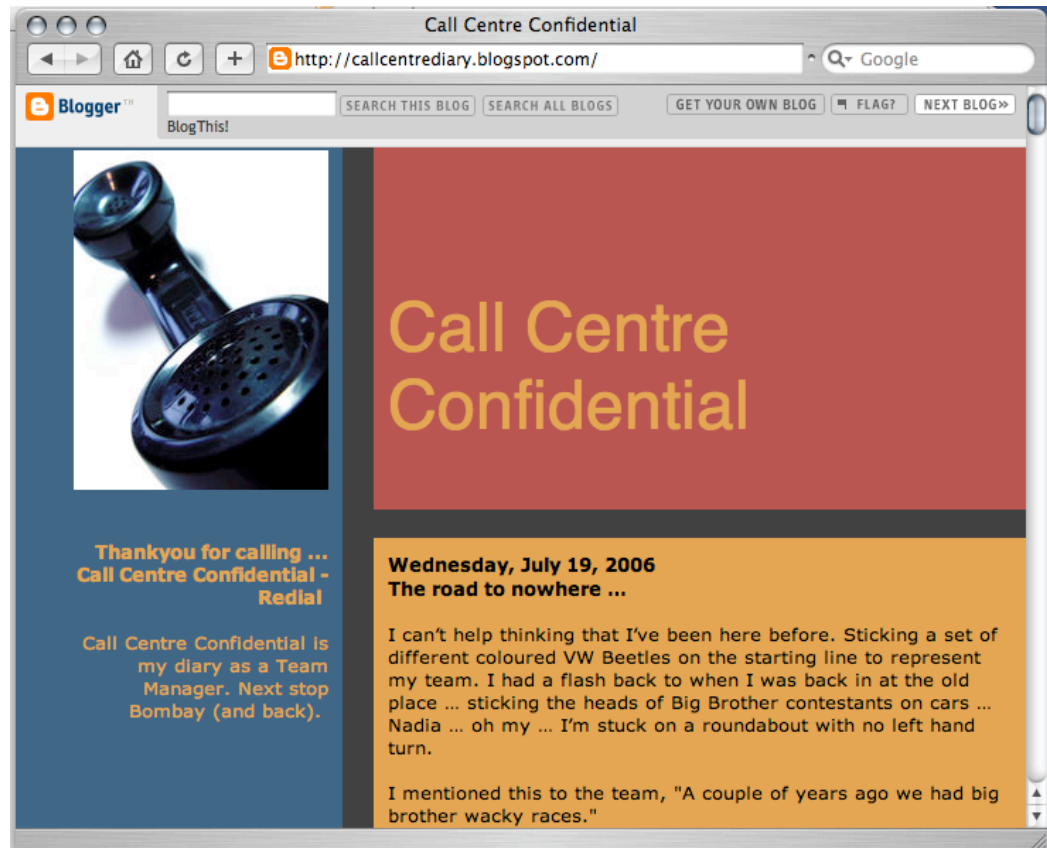


Figure 10: *Call Centre Confidential* (image captured 7 September 2006)

Call Centre Confidential (CCC), the diary of a call centre team manager, is one of the most famous anonymous workblogs, and has entertained over a quarter of a million visitors since its inception in February 2003.⁶ In October 2004, *The Guardian* celebrated CCC's status as one of the first anonymous blogs to "gain real recognition" and called it an "inspiration to others" (McClellan, 2004). By March of the following year, however,

⁶ Sitemeter statistics, July 24, 2006, <http://www.sitemeter.com/?a=stats&s=s10wrapstar>

CCC was dramatically abandoned by its creator, who wrote fantasy resignation letters in his last posts, wishing farewell to, “this...vampiric nightmare of a job that has sucked me dry of energy, creativity and the will to live” (Wrapstar, 2005) and claiming that he was quitting because his boss wanted to transfer him from Bolton to Wigan. Just as abruptly, on January 09, 2006 the blog started up again, but subsequent postings were infrequent and the blog is now once again inactive. In relation to this study, Wrapstar was very difficult to contact and although he expressed willingness to be interviewed, the interview never came off. All material quoted here is based on blog postings and media coverage.

Dan (CB)⁷

“Dan,” a modern languages graduate in his late thirties, works in one of the national sales offices of a large multinational corporation. His job, which involves taking orders and managing inquiries from industrial clients is relatively well-paid, secure, and stress-free, and he is rarely required to work more than 37.5 hours a week. Like Tim, Dan found out about blogging while reading *The Guardian* online newspaper at work. His own blog features writing on many subjects, including Manchester area’s lesser known football clubs, outings to obscure curryhouses in the city’s back streets, and raising his young son. During the first year of his blog’s existence he wrote a series of posts about his job, detailing the time-wasting rituals he and his colleagues had devised to relieve workplace boredom, satirizing corporate culture, and reflecting on his efforts to limit his

⁷ CB is not the real name of this blog. The real name has been changed to protect this blogger’s anonymity, as he has taken fewer steps than the others to protect his identity. The name of the author, “Dan,” has also been changed from the pseudonym the author uses. The blog image is not shown to protect his identity.

career advancement in order to leave time for his creative projects outside of work. In June 2005, alarmed by stories about sacked bloggers in the mainstream media and worried that he had not taken sufficient steps to protect his anonymity, he took all of his work-related postings down. Since that time, he strenuously avoids mentioning work, except in a very tangential or innocuous fashion.

Dr Dre (*Doing Less Harm*)

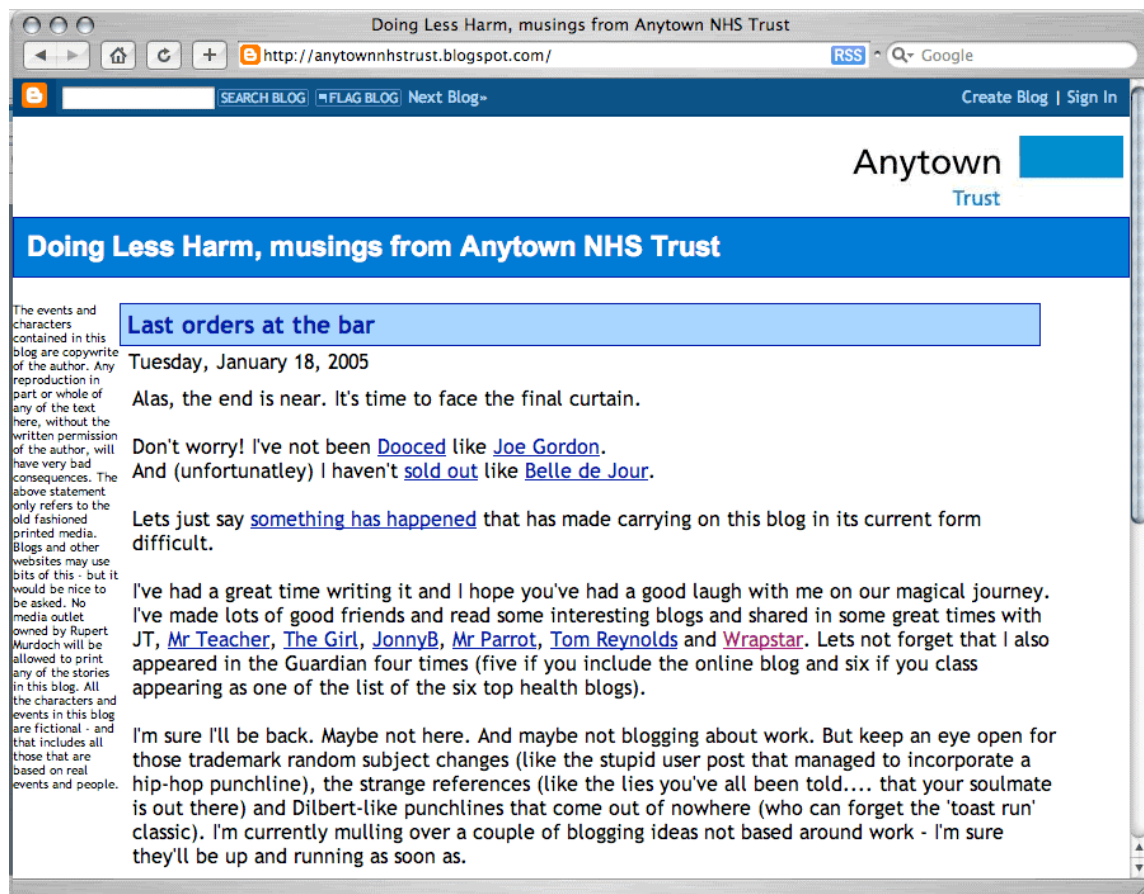


Figure 11: Dre's final post on Doing Less Harm (image captured 10 July 2007)

Dr Dre, a graduate in his thirties, works in the IT department of one of the UK's National Health Service Trusts⁸. His blog, which started in July 2004 and ended in January 2005, was an irreverent account of office life and the dynamics of contemporary healthcare delivery. Dre's postings, which were inspired by the BBC comedy *The Office* as well as his reading of other blogs that he found out about through *The Guardian*, were sketches of daily office events – meetings, answering the phone, the toast run to the canteen – rendered in a comedic way that highlighted the petty ego battles and what he perceived as the absurdly inefficient decision-making processes that shaped the daily life of the organization (personal communication, 29 December 2005). Dre's blog quickly gained popularity and, in October 2004, he was one of three bloggers selected for a *Guardian* feature about anonymous workblogging (B. Johnson, 2004). In January 2005, Dre was placed in a situation where he was forced to choose between his blog and his job, deciding to take the blog down (personal communication, 29 December 2005). He has since started another blog and continued to be an active member of the blogging community, but no longer writes about work.

⁸ The decentralized administrative units that were ushered in during the 1990s as part of the government's attempt to streamline how the nation's universal healthcare system is managed.

Beth (*Girl on a Train*)

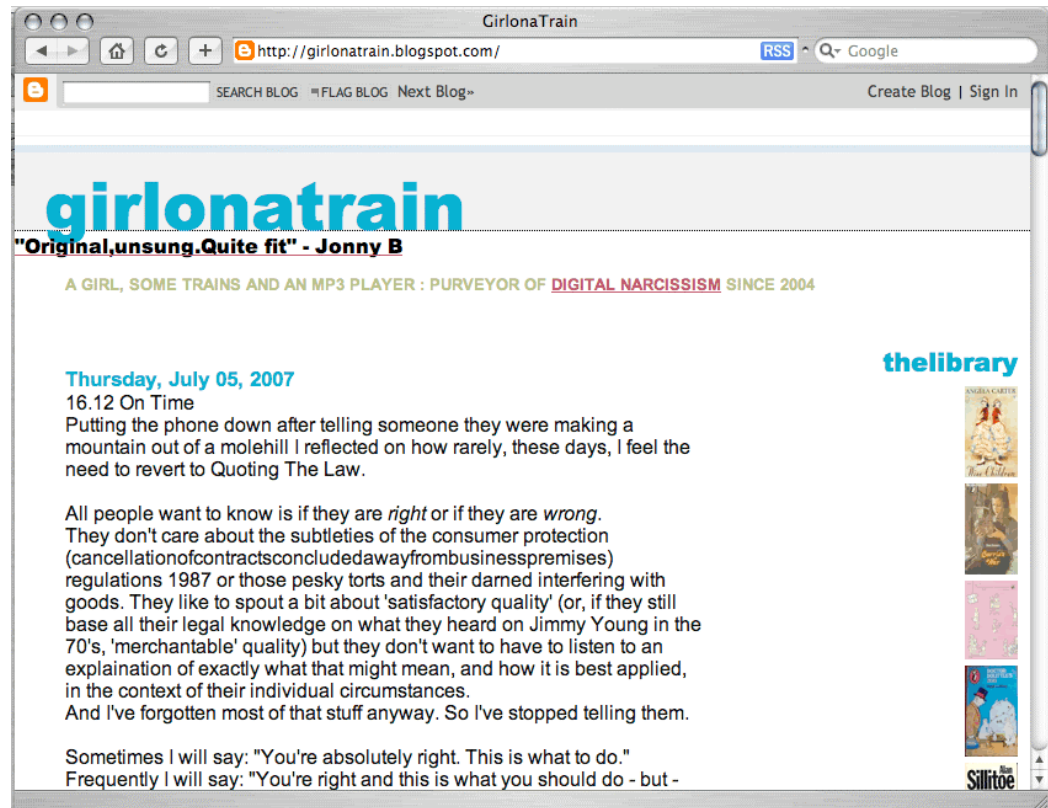


Figure 12: *Girl on a Train* (image captured 9 July 2007)

Girl on a Train is the creation of Beth, a consumer protection advisor who works in the public sector in the Lancashire area. Her blog – which was initially a diary of her train commute to work, but has become more job-focused – is written in a kind of poetic shorthand, using short prose and songlists from her mp3 player to convey complex emotions. Beth works 36 hours a week and gets 27 days of annual leave, doesn't usually feel overworked, has a lot of job security, and never has to take work home with her. Recently, however, because of a corporate-style workplace reorganization that she has found deeply troubling, she has found herself writing more candidly and critically about work, but she tries to remain cautious about protecting her anonymity (personal

communication, 1 January 2006). Beth is also Tim's partner (a relationship that long predates the blogging phenomenon).

Slowdown (*Slow Afternoon*)



Figure 13: *Slow Afternoon* (image captured 9 July 2007)

Slowdown has recently switched jobs but, during the period of this study, he worked as an IT project manager at a small, private Internet consultancy. His blog is a collection of short news snippets and pop culture tidbits (usually illustrated with images), interspersed with wry commentary on issues such as free speech and democracy. He entered the company at the startup stage and witnessed its growth and development over the space of several years. When he joined the company, he was excited about the relaxed work culture and the large degree of autonomy granted to employees. However, in recent years, he became very disillusioned and burned out, a situation that led him ultimately to

hand in his resignation (personal communication, 22 March 2006). These turbulent career events have been visible on his blog through occasional brief posts about long work hours and career decisions, but they are also present in a more obscured fashion through poems, links, images, and quotations that Slowdown includes in his postings.

Convergent Themes in Anonymous Workblogs

The anonymous workblogs in this section, while inspired by diverse workplace environments and occupations, have been selected for this study because of certain common features that in some ways are determined by the anonymous status of their authors. These blogs differ sharply from professional or corporate blogs, which are generally written under a real name, with the intent of building the author's organizational or professional credentials. In the previous section, Tim's blog, *A Free Man in Preston*, revealed suspicion about company language; contempt for management gurus, corporate rituals and training seminars; and concern about the blurring of boundaries between work and private life. This section, in looking at a broader selection of blogs from the region, follows other workers who have much in common with Tim's orientation to the labor process, using their blogs to express cynicism about organizational culture, and offer detailed testimony about the creative and subversive ways in which they waste time at work. The reclamation of time for spontaneous production, as well as the sophisticated composition of the posts themselves, among this disparate yet loosely connected, group of workers, signals the emergence of a milieu, where alternate values and artistic ambitions can be celebrated.

Perhaps the most strikingly common theme among the blogs studied is distrust of corporate language, and mockery of management gurus, consultants, and business self-

help books. Bloggers in both the public and private sectors contrast their personal experiences – such as a sense of lack of control over change – with the bold claims regarding fulfillment and purposefulness embedded in the official organizational culture.

Wrapstar, the author of *Call Centre Confidential*, depicts his company as run by a management-guru-obsessed entrepreneur called Bernard, whose shelves buckle under the weight of books such as *The One-Minute Manager* (Blanchard & Johnson, 1981), *Who Moved My Cheese* (S. Johnson & Blanchard, 1998), and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. He satirizes well-known management gurus and reserves particular scorn for motivational videos such as *Fish!* the popular management tool based on the fun-loving fishmongers of Pike Place fish market in Seattle, about which he writes:

The fishmongers are a group of relentlessly cheerful dorks who have derived a way of dealing with the mundane nature of their work [...] The whole video is designed so your trainer can say: "Well what do you think? These guys work a 14-hour shift and permanently smell like a docker's gusset and yet they love their job and customers. You lot work in a nice clean office with hot running water – stop being so fucking miserable and enjoy your work!" (Wrapstar, 2003a).

In a similar vein, Dan, the author of *CB*, makes fun of the dynamics of multinational corporatism, likening a site visit from his company's American Managing Director to that of a Roman Emperor to a remote outpost of empire:

There is a rumble of chariots, and we look up to see an unmistakable sharp-suited figure, surrounded by hangers-on, and nervous-looking management, like a prize-fighter on the way to the ring. He – for it is He – whirls around our side of the office, glad-handing and exchanging precisely 2.5 seconds of standard issue corporate banter with the employee attached to each proffered hand (Dan, 2004c).

Dan's postings about his job are grouped under the title "Diary of a Working Boy," an homage to Ignatius J. Reilly in John Kennedy Toole's (1980) novel *A Confederacy of Dunces*, who keeps an irreverent journal about his office job in a run-down pants factory.

Contempt for management practices is echoed among bloggers in the public sector. Alarmed by the creep of management lingo into his NHS work environment, Dr Dre plays ‘reverse management bingo,’ trying to cram all the possible buzzwords that he might encounter during a work day into a single blog posting. The post concludes, “By the end of today, my deliverables will all be goal-orientated and within my core competencies and the strategic game plan. They take into account lessons learned on previous mission critical objectives. And my proactive paradigm shift will show quantifiable benefits on a real time basis” (DrDre, 2004c). He voices skepticism about the NHS’s money- and time-wasting investment in management consultants and re-branding campaigns, commenting cynically about these approaches, “But they’re from the private sector and everything that comes from there is wonderful. Like Enron and Railtrack” (DrDre, 2004d).

Also writing from the public sector, Beth, who works for local government, reacts angrily to her employer’s attempt to ready its employees for a major reorganization by hiring a management consultant who delivers a euphemistically packaged “Communication Event” that glosses over the complicated reality of the transition. Parodying the consultant’s language, Beth writes: “Apparently we live in interesting times. We must keep a positive attitude. We will almost certainly be empowered. I *think* he said we could all play for Chelsea if we wanted it enough, but I might have slipped into a coma and misheard at that point. He definitely used the phrase “whatever floats the boat” more than necessary (i.e. *ever*)” (Beth, 2005).

As well as mocking the culture, all of the bloggers in this study make reference in their postings to their conscious efforts to waste time at work when the opportunity

arises. Surreptitiousness is integral to the humor of these postings, emphasizing transgression of official norms regarding workplace socializing. The bloggers studied write about snoozing through meetings, devising elaborate sports that are played when the supervisor is not looking, taking “sickies” (absence on pretense of sickness), and writing lengthy responses in *Guardian* discussion forums that consume entire afternoons of company time. Dr Dre, who uses morning meetings as “a chance to wake up properly” (DrDre, 2004b) often reminds readers that he is in no hurry to get his work done. After one singularly unproductive day, he reflects, “I am left pondering what I have actually done today. Is it possible I could have gone through an entire day without doing any work? Does writing this mean I have done some work? Do I care?” (DrDre, 2004a).

Mirroring Dre’s disdain for the idea of being a committed company man, Dan’s writings glorify the art of time-wasting on the job. Many entries are devoted to the creative exploits that he devises along with his small band of like-minded co-workers, showing how they exploit and fetishize the banal aspects of their work environment in order to shield themselves from boredom. These group rituals include the “Pie Club,” (Dan, 2004a) an underground society organized around “savory pastry items from the works vending machine,” and “In-the-Tape” a game that consists of throwing a juggling ball into a nearby giant roll of sticky tape for a prize of a key-ring featuring soap star Mike Baldwin (Dan, 2004b).

Keeping Creativity Separate from Paid Employment

All of these employees claim that they are performing well at their organizational role. Their disdainful and often witty treatment of management culture harmonizes with Gideon Kunda’s role-distancing concept, which captures workers’ attempts to distance themselves from company culture while simultaneously being attached to and immersed

in the organizational value system. However, bloggers' writings and interview testimony reveal a more fully formed set of alternate values and goals than the career-oriented engineers in Kunda's study, who indulge in moments of cynicism but ultimately anchor their identity within the organization. By contrast, some of these bloggers avoid promotion and elude supervisor's efforts to make their role more fulfilling or personally challenging, actively maintaining a lowly status in the organization and selecting careers and professional roles that do not utilize their full talents or threaten to fulfill their creative aspirations.

At appraisal time, Beth makes clear her rejection of ambition and career mindedness, writing that she is, "Pondering the wisdom of telling LineManager that I am treading water, stagnating, marking time *and quite happy with it* during my Personal Development Appraisal" (Beth, 2004c).

Dan resents his supervisor's attempt to align his identity with what he sees as the narrow confines and social importance of his job, and finds that he must carefully maneuver the appraisal process to avoid being promoted while still appearing committed. He comments, "[I] constantly resist – or take a non-committal attitude towards – advancement, because I don't want too much responsibility, and don't want to get so drawn into the corporation, and all that entails, that I feel I can never escape" (personal communication, 11 November 2005). This fear of being drawn in, which is reflected to a greater or lesser extent in all of the blogs in this study, is driven by a conviction that increased career commitment will be accompanied by unacceptable levels of stress and burnout that will clash unsustainably with these workers' alternative values and creative goals. Even Dr Dre, who is otherwise happy in his NHS job and not overworked, is

worried about a more subtle work intensification process: “I’m not talking about huge things, just little things – like in places where it is now commonplace to work through lunch and if you try and take a lunch break you get a reputation as a slacker” (personal communication, 29 December 2005).

The literary antecedents of today’s bloggers illustrate that participation in the labor process while simultaneously critiquing it does not necessarily suggest co-option or ideological ambivalence. T.S Eliot’s biographer Lyndall Gordon notes that he relished his job at the bank because “it left his imagination free, and he relished the completeness of his disguise, for he excelled as a clerk” (2000, p. 165). Likewise, Franz Kafka, whose boss considered him an “eminently hardworking employee,” insisted on rigid separation between his art and his livelihood. As his friend Max Brod wrote, “Franz insisted that the job have nothing to do with literature; that would have seemed to him a debasement of literary creativity” (Pawel, 1984, p. 182).

Bloggers’ complaints about time-scarcity and work-life balance relate to clear-cut value differences and firm convictions about limiting the significance of paid employment and career in order to maintain an unfettered creative sphere for personal projects. Again, these convictions underscore that these bloggers do not fluctuate between organizational commitment and an ideological void, but are instead anchored by a solid creative identity outside work that helps them limit the job’s centrality in their lives.

Slowdown, whose comments about work are generally more veiled than the others’, expresses his dilemma about the amount of time he commits to work by quoting Phillip Larkin’s poem ‘Toads’ (Slowdown, 2004a):

Why should I let the toad work,
Squat on my life?,
Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork,
And drive the brute off?
Six days of the week it soils
With its sickening poison
Just for paying a few bills!
That's out of proportion.
(Larkin, 1989)

Elsewhere, writing his blog from the office, he reports that he is working evenings and weekends to meet client deadlines, and offers a link to a book called *Downshifting: How to Work Less and Enjoy Life More* (Drake, 2001). During a similarly stressful time, he posts a picture of the iron bars on his office window, writing “There's no getting around it - I'm in prison” (Slowdown, 2004). After being signed off work for burnout, he feels that he has discovered the value of cutting back his work responsibilities in order to pursue more spontaneous and unfettered creative projects: “Having had time to actually do these things and rediscover myself a bit, I now feel much more that the activities themselves are what's important, for the relaxation, energy, satisfaction and self-knowledge that they give” (personal communication, 22 March, 2006).

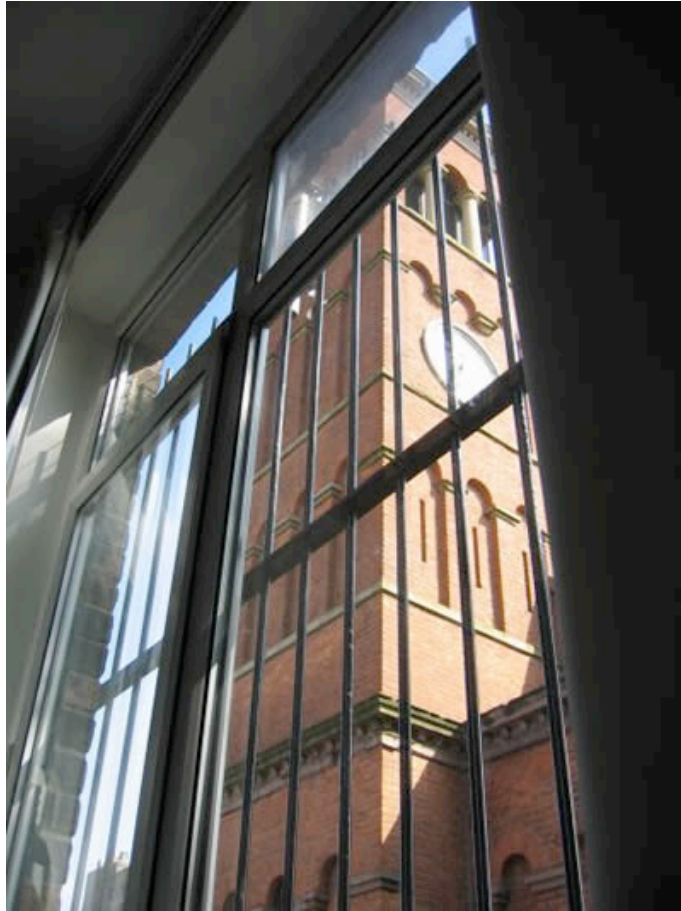


Figure 14: A photo of Slowdown's office, posted during a stressful period (Slowdown, 2004).

For some of the bloggers, resisting career commitment is more than a reaction to extreme demands from the company, or a process of stepping back from an otherwise fulfilling career. These bloggers have actively cultivated a disengaged relationship to the labor process that supports their commitment to an alternative set of creative and social ambitions. Dan describes how his identity as a creative writer helps him to resist the encroachment of the organization into all aspects of his life:

Well my creative life certainly isn't integrated with my work life – and you know I am not always sure I would like it to be. There is something romantic about being a lowly clerk and cultivating a rich inner life, isn't there? You know, living inside your head and savouring those little victories. And the blog is central to all of that – it gives me a discipline, an identity, a reason to keep on writing, and last but not least, an audience (personal communication, 11 November 2005).

Dan's conscious choice to resist promotion is a way of shielding the creative sphere from the exigencies of earning a living, emphasizing that the very mundaneness of his job helps to fuel and sustain his creative identity.

Beth also has creative ambitions that she wishes to keep separate from the arena of paid employment. In an email interview, she comments, 'I think having a paid job which satisfied my creative urges would be too much pressure' (personal communication, 3 January 2006). Beth feels strongly that her definition of success has little to do with paid employment. She'd love to write a book, and to spend more time in the garden. She'd also like to live somewhere more rural, and travel more. She wouldn't necessarily want to give up her job, which she finds relatively satisfying and worthwhile, but she would like more time to be able to pursue her personal ambitions:

I would love to work in a three day week society. If I had more time I would cook better meals, take more exercise, take control of my time instead of letting it control me, have no excuse not to do all the things I keep saying I can't do because I don't have time (personal communication, 3 January 2006).

Anonymous Workbloggers and Social Change

While very interested in issues surrounding work-life balance and the encroachment of work into private life, the bloggers in this study vary quite widely in the amount of thought they have given to the idea of transforming the labor process. Slowdown, who is ambitious about his career but believes professional life should be organized so as to absorb a smaller quantity of the individual's creative and intellectual resources, has given considerable thought to an alternative way of organizing society, and would like to see a reduced work week that would leave two days a week for volunteering, activism, further education, and personal creative projects. However, his clarity of vision breaks down when he tries to imagine how such a project would be

realized. He comments,

I've been telling my friends for the last six months that in the future we will need to move to a three-day work week, or a mixture of paid work and volunteering. How it will happen I don't know, because it's a massive social engineering task (personal communication, 22 March, 2006).

Dan is vocal about linking his frustrations about the labor process to a more radical social vision. He explains that he and some of his more left-wing colleagues entertain fantasies of participating in a 1970s-style labor movement. In this fantasy, he explains, "We'd down our headsets and march outside, and we'd have donkey jackets on and we'd stand around a brazier, and we'd bring the country to a halt because they couldn't get hold of flanges" (personal communication, 21 July 2006). He would love to be a union member and would gladly join a union if an attempt was made to organize his workplace. Articulating his conviction that the clash of interests between employees and management has been obscured rather than eliminated in recent decades, he comments, "I would join it, because I'm on the side of unions, man, I'm on the side of the workers" (personal communication, 21 July 2006).

In spite of some interest in labor issues, none of the bloggers in this case study directly associates their blogging activity with an overt or calculated attempt to create social change in the workplace. Some strongly deny any attempt to make a point through their writing, emphasizing the entertainment value of their postings as their primary goal. This would seem, on the surface, to confirm Richards (2007) finding that anonymous workblogging has little to do with resistance. However, in spite of arguing that blogging is an individual, purely personal act of self-expression, several of the bloggers simultaneously acknowledge that their writing, even if not consciously, does convey a

critical perspective on office life that may have repercussions in terms of social change and new forms of worker organization.

The enthusiasm with which bloggers seek to dissociate themselves from any kind of social agenda is evident in an interview exchange between a *Guardian* reporter and Dr Dre during an October 2004 interview. Asked by the reporter whether his blog was a personal way of dealing with frustrations at work or whether it served “a more general, possibly political purpose - a kind of low-level whistle-blowing function - letting people know the reality of certain modern jobs,” Dre replied: “I really didn't start my blog for any other reason other than to make people laugh. If in that process, I can make some statements about the modern workplace or some quasi-political posts about the NHS, then that is purely a side issue” (B. Johnson, 2004b). Dre does not deny that critical commentary on the workplace is present in his posts: “I suppose in some way my blog does whistle blow but not on the NHS so much, more on the office environment in general and what it is like to work in the 21st century”(B. Johnson, 2004). In a later email interview, Dr Dre acknowledges that postings were connected to his ongoing resentment regarding the shift in the balance of power between employees and management: “There is too much power, or at least perceived power with the employer. So blogging was one way I'd let off steam. It would allow me to share my frustrations and also help put things in perspective” (personal communication, December 29, 2005).

Dan shares the opinion that his blog is primarily about producing well-crafted writing that will entertain readers, but he is also aware that his writings convey his political opinions and hopes that they may contribute to a critical dialogue about the labor

process. Reflecting on whether his blog is trying to make a political or ideological point, he comments:

I know that somebody who reads my blog is going to know what my values are. I do feel that is something that's important. I sometimes think that what I do 9-5 stops me from putting my principles into practice, and I think that doing the blog, putting across my worldview, is a kind of contribution or a counterweight of some kind (personal communication, 21 July 2006).

Although he is not specifically affiliated with any group or organization directed at social change, he readily aligns himself intellectually with left-wing causes and would like to take a role in a movement oriented to a social transformation away from capitalist values. However, he sees himself as a social commentator, using his writing skill to back progressive causes from the sidelines, rather than taking center stage as a political organizer:

If I had a role in social change then I think it would be more to do with what I do, being the observer, and maybe satirizing stuff, and being the person behind the scenes [...] My blog is basically a modern-day online pamphlet that's waiting for a cause to attach itself to (personal communication, 21 July 2006).

Dan is not shy of attaching himself to a cause but feels that, as a writer, his role would be to offer anecdotal and personal insights that might make people think about social issues. Artistically, he is inclined against trying to make “absolutely black and white points” or consciously contriving to write posts with a forced message behind them. He prefers to allow his values and opinions to percolate subtly and unconsciously through his writing, emerging through his reflections on day-to-day experiences.

Anonymous workbloggers' refusal to attach themselves to a cause in spite of their critical disposition make most sense when their efforts are considered from a literary perspective. Blog writing is made more captivating by studied avoidance of ideological closure, permitting a degree of polyphony (Bakhtin, 1984; Carter et al., 2003) to pervade each posting. This technique is common to some of the best writing – Dickens' novels, as David Cecil writes, contain "no voice but reveals in its lightest accents a unique, unmistakable individuality" (Cecil, 1935, p. 39). Similarly E.M. Forster, who flirted with radicalism yet was repelled by organized political action, is noted for the dialectical nature of his prose (Stone, 1966). Yet, in spite of the difficulty in pinning these authors down ideologically, the critical power of their writings remains.

The bloggers in this study see themselves primarily as creative writers, not as activists or political agitators. They are, in many ways, the intellectual descendents of writers such as Albert Camus, Henry Miller, Franz Kafka, and T.S. Eliot, who, having endured the office routine, all saw in white-collar life some of the fundamental contradictions of their age. The disposition of some of the bloggers in this study – their political reticence, their pursuit of a double life that permits creative emancipation within the organization – can be interpreted in the light of Dickens' love-hate relationship with the machine age, which saves his novels from being overly ideological (P. Ackroyd, 2002); Eliot's delight at "sojourning among the termites" (L. Gordon, 2000, p. 165), which sharpened and freed his artistic faculty; and Kafka's refusal to pursue a paying literary career in spite of the "permanent torment" (Pawel, 1984, p. 222) that arose from his work as an insurance clerk. While acknowledging the distinctly bourgeois sensibilities of these writer-clerks, the historical impact of their writings in uncovering,

for example, the tyranny of bureaucracy or the sensual poverty of the industrial era, is undeniable. Similarly, study of anonymous workbloggers reveals employees who actively limit their advancement within the organization in order to maximize time and intellectual energy for competing projects outside of work – sharing the fruits of these efforts via their blogs, in ways that reveal cracks in the ideological hegemony of corporate culture.

Regardless of political intent, the creative aspirations of these six bloggers provide a counterweight to the organizational demands being made on them and provide a type of ballast that helps anchor their identity and values outside of the organizational culture. All struggle to find enough time to pursue serious writing or artistic projects that they feel are central to their self-development. Participation in the Manchester blogging community – which features face-to-face “blogmeets” and connections to local publishing opportunities – provides a strong sense of purpose and identity for these writers, and has forged connections among them that point to opportunities for dialogue and exchange of ideas, even at the level of simply identifying common values by reading each others’ work.

As well as all being listed on *The Manchizzle* (<http://manchizzle.blogspot.com>), a blog dedicated to building and publicizing blogs from the region, several of the bloggers in this study are cross-linked via the blogrolls on their respective blogs, or are aware of each other through media coverage, especially via the *Guardian* website. Dr Dre cites *Call Centre Confidential* as a direct influence on his own decision to start a blog, and Dan also recalls encountering *Call Centre Confidential* by following a link on the *Guardian* website. Dan, Beth, and Tim are listed on each other’s blogrolls (based on

blogroll data collected on August 3, 2006) and frequently read each others' postings.

These three bloggers are also long-time readers of *Petite Anglaise* – Petite guest-blogged several times on Tim's blog before her sensational firing, and both Beth and Dan wrote about being shocked to find that *Petite Anglaise* was no longer accessible from their workplaces shortly after the incident.

Evident in the blogs studied is a community of shared critical insights about the labor process and creative fulfillment. This community is a loose, heterogeneous, and shifting entity, formed by the ever-evolving overlap between different blogs and their readers, which is in turn loosely articulated to mainstream media sources and traditional publishing avenues. Lacking a labor organizing agenda and opposed to anchoring creative writing around a cohesive set of demands, this community is highly unlikely to crystallize into a social movement. However, its denizens are engaged in a sophisticated writing and reflection process that coheres and garners interest without the need for an external organizing drive. Each blog is a social milieu in which individual identity might be adequately anchored, successfully competing against the pull of workplace community and the hold of organizational culture. But each anonymous workblogger is also making a positive contribution to a global conversation that might help shift the *zeitgeist* against today's corporate cultures and in favor of more authentic and sustainable freedoms.

By pursuing creative identities outside their work, the six bloggers in this study demonstrate a concrete sense of identity and purpose that increases their resilience to corporate culture and helps them to make controlled decisions about limiting their organizational responsibilities. Since they continue to perform their organizational role, they are, in Kunda's sense, demonstrating a type of role-distancing that might be

construed as weak and easily co-opted, yet they are not vacillating between corporate values and the void. The very solidity of their creative aspirations, bolstered by participation in a social network of bloggers and blog-readers that provides both community and opportunities to acquire status and even fame, suggests a conscious process of limiting organizational identity. Rather than vacillating between a corporate embrace and “confusion and emptiness,” (Willmott, 1993a) these workers anchor their sense of purpose and identity outside of the workplace, and confidently erect immovable barriers to the encroachment of corporate culture into their creative and private sphere.

The link between blogging and organized social change is tenuous but, considered broadly, the cumulative power of employees writing critically about the labor process may contribute to an emerging public dialogue that undermines corporate capitalist hegemony. Workblogs are compelling because their authors are embedded participant-observers, reporting first-hand on office gossip, overheard conversations, meeting dynamics and corporate communications and transforming them into eloquent human comedy and drama. Bloggers who have the creative ability to dramatize or to juxtapose office events in provocative ways are able to reveal not just the foibles and quirks of individuals, but also important contradictions in organizational ideology.

Although this apparent freedom of expression – which is periodically reined in through tightening of electronic surveillance or media “scares” about fired bloggers – may suggest the type of cyclical consent-generating and dissent-containing process analyzed by Burawoy (1979), the nature of the medium suggests more disruptive possibilities. Even if bloggers, as good employees, remain armchair critics, their published writings contribute to a growing public discourse about the labor process. Their

aversion to aligning themselves with social causes does not necessarily reduce their writing to the innocuous level suggested by functionalist models of workplace humor, especially when considered as an artistic orientation to self-expression that favors polyphonic and nuanced writing.

Following the tradition of the great writer-clerks of the past, the bloggers in this study point to the presence, in today's knowledge organizations, of employees who enjoy their work yet are deeply critical of the ideological underpinnings of management philosophy and concerned that their labor is serving narrow corporate interests that fail to benefit individual workers and society as a whole. In a repressive climate where criticism is increasingly veiled, and frightened bloggers are removing their more "dangerous" postings for fear of losing their jobs, the impact of individual bloggers on corporate culture is small and fleeting. Yet, the urge to nurture a counter-cultural and creative milieu remains strong, and workers continue to carve out their role in the organization in ways that sustain this freedom. As Dan comments:

I sometimes think that I need to have a borderline meaningless work life in order to fuel the creative stuff that I do outside of work. I want to be a lowly clerk and to be doing my blog stuff when I'm not being a lowly clerk. It feels heroic sometimes. (personal communication, 21 July 2006)