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# Make Me Laugh: Creativity in the British television comedy industry

DOI 10.1515/humor-2015-0051

**Abstract:** The three-year (2012–2015) AHRC-funded research project Make Me Laugh: Creativity in the British Television Comedy Industry worked with writers, producers, directors and other industry personnel to map the productions they work on and follow their labor as they move from one job to another and strive to maintain a career. This article draws on interview material from this project to investigate the ways in which comedy workers negotiate the maintenance of their creativity within economic, cultural and industrial contexts such as policy, funding, and the whims of broadcasters and production companies. It argues that while such contexts are evident for all cultural production, there are specifics of the comedy sector because of humor's relationships with the social role of broadcasting. It therefore highlights the specificity of comic creative labor, contributing to ongoing Humor Studies debates focused on the particularities of comedy as a category.

**Keywords:** creativity, television, comedy industry, BBC, creative industries, creative labor

## 1 Introduction

*Where I live, we live near a lot of bankers. Those kinds of professional people. And they always think it's crazy. I mean I'm married to a comedy writer and they always, these people always think it's kind of some form of madness that you could possibly earn money and have a career, make a career out of comedy. And my husband's actually had that said to him by a city banker before, 'How could you pay your mortgage by writing jokes for a living?'. 'Guess what? People do. And it's an industry like any other...'. Well maybe it isn't like any other industry. (McPhail 2013)*

The above quotation comes from Ali McPhail, a British television comedy producer who works for the London-based independent production company Baby Cow. McPhail has many years' experience working on television comedy, having produced series such as *Human Remains* (BBC 2000), *Nighty Night* (BBC 2004–2005),

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*The Mighty Boosh* (BBC 2004–2007) and *Uncle* (BBC 2014–). As the quote demonstrates, McPhail is aware that people in other professions might see her job as odd, because it is assumed that it is something that cannot maintain a career, or produce enough income to enable those involved in it to do everyday things such as pay a mortgage. McPhail's assertion that this is "an industry like any other" makes a claim that to work in comedy is similar to other professions, such as that her banker neighbors are employed in, with concomitant opportunities for career progression, a sense of professionalism, and appropriate financial rewards. Yet McPhail then corrects herself, reflecting that, "maybe it isn't like any other industry", and she then goes on to see the differences between what she and her banker neighbors do as being centered on their job security, whereas her work is much more "haphazard" with outputs that are "kind of hit and miss". This tension between the industrialized nature of comedy production and the "haphazard" aspects of working on a wide range of projects means the industry sits oddly within how contemporary labor is often conceived in everyday conversation. That bankers might be surprised they share their locale with people who write jokes for a living shows how some professions are normalized while others are not, and comedy production serves as a useful case study for the discussion of such marginalized forms of labor.

The quotation from McPhail comes from an interview carried out as part of the three-year research project, *Make Me Laugh: Creativity in the British Television Comedy Industry*. This project took as its starting point the tension noted above, and explored it via examination of the working practices of a wide range of people who make comedy for a living. The research involved interviewing multiple writers, producers, commissioners, directors, and other personnel, often multiple times, tracking their work over those three years to find out how they actively managed their careers within the contexts of the industry. Rather than simply see these people as individuals, the project was also interested in the collaborative nature of comedy work, and the extent to which individuals work with, and are reliant upon, others. To this end, the project also followed the production of a number of television comedy series, often from initial idea through to eventual broadcast, tracking the ways in which a large number of professional individuals come together to successfully complete a project. Of course, many projects never get commissioned or move beyond the development stage, and so the project similarly followed those ideas that never got off the ground, and therefore it explored how creative individuals manage their failures as well as their successes. The key interest here was to examine creative and industrial processes *over time*, seeing how individuals move from one project to another, and therefore develop a portfolio of work that sustains them financially and creatively. A major aim of the project was to examine what helped and

hindered these processes, and therefore to produce recommendations for the industry for how these could be improved, and the labor of those involved in the profession better supported.

In doing so, the project aligns itself with a wealth of recent work examining how individuals in the creative industries manage their careers. For example, Jason Toynbee (2000) has explored those who work within the music industry; Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton (2012) have studied creative artists; and Peter Bloore (2013) has done the same for film screenwriters. Projects more specifically about television include Vicki Mayer's analysis of workers often ignored in "common-sense definitions of who produces television" (2011: 1), David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker's (2011) participant observation work in a television production company, and, much earlier, Todd Gitlin's (1983) interview-laden account of the mechanics of the commercial nature of American television production. While each of these examines particular parts of the industry at different points in time, all such studies seek to explore the ways in which creative individuals function within production systems which are not of their making but which they are reliant upon. That is, television production is reliant upon distribution, as there is no point in making programs that cannot be accessed by audiences in some way. As Nicholas Garnham notes, "*It is cultural distribution, not cultural production that is the key locus of power and profit*" (1990: 161–162, emphasis in original). While to some extent newer technologies such as YouTube enable creative people to disseminate their work in alternative ways, this too functions as a distributor with structures and regulations within which contributors must function. Studies of creative workers, then, repeatedly focus on the ways in which individuals shape their output in response to the norms and needs of the distribution systems that disseminate their work, and how those individuals manage a career within those contexts. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such studies are often critical of the desires of the industry, seeing individual workers as exploited and disempowered by a system that relies on their creativity. As I will discuss below, this tallies with this project's findings, whereby television comedy workers seem to spend a lot of time second-guessing what the industry wants, or will want, and carrying out significant amounts of unpaid work with the hope that it will, in the future, become something for which payment is granted. The tension here, then, is between workers' desires to express their creativity through their work, and the necessary compromises they carry out in order for it to be something the distribution system they are beholden too is interested in.

Debates about the conflicts between culture and the systems that produce it are crystallized in Theodor Adorno's (2001 [1981]) formulation of the contemporary structures that produce culture as an "industry". Adorno distinguishes

between “traditional” forms of production, whereby culture “arises spontaneously from the masses themselves” (98) with a function is to serve as an expression of those masses. He sees this as having been replaced by cultural industry, which “misuses its concern for the masses in order to duplicate, reinforce and strengthen their [the industry’s] mentality, which it presumes is given and unchangeable” (99). So we have lost the role of culture, which “raised a protest against the petrified relations under which they [the masses] lived” (100), and the progressive, anarchic nature of culture has, by this account, been eliminated by an economic production structure in which “[c]ultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through” (100, emphasis in original). Adorno’s primary concern here is with the nature of the culture that is produced, and its effects upon the citizens that consume it; the work on cultural labor noted above similarly aims to explore the consequences of the culture of production being industrialized, but does so via examination of its producers instead. To be sure, Adorno’s assertion that culture no longer arises “spontaneously from the masses” can be seen by the long and tortuous process that making television comedy entails, and the regulatory and industrial structures within which such production takes place. Indeed, making television comedy is not a “mass” activity, and many in the industry have queried the unrepresentative nature of the workforce that means it is disproportionately white, male, and middle-class (Cumberbatch Research Group 2009; Creative Industries Federation 2015; Department for Culture, Media, and Sport 2015). And for those who are successful, creativity is not only required to fit into the needs and interests of the industry that distributes their work, but much time and effort is taken up in doing work which is not creative, but administrative and managerial (Bilton 2010; Christopherson 2011). The Make Me Laugh project therefore investigates how individuals, and working teams, negotiate these various conflicting forces within their labor, while avowedly maintaining the creative nature of the work.

As already noted, a number of other studies have carried out similar research, but there are two aspects to the Make Me Laugh project that are of interest here. Firstly, the project is longitudinal, following its participants over a number of years and many projects, thereby enabling analysis of the ways in which a career is managed, rather than simply looking at how a particular program is made. A key finding here was that many in the British television comedy industry spend more time doing things *other* than making programs, such as meeting with potential or actual collaborators, administration and training. Working in comedy is, then, about spending most of your time *not* making any comedy. The second aspect which this project prioritizes is its focus on comedy, and it therefore foregrounds the specificity of that sector of the

television industry, and the particularities of those who work within it. It asks if there is something specific about comedy cultural labor, both in terms of the people who carry it out, but also the industrial system that they work within. These respond to the cultural position that comedy occupies in British society, and the roles it is required to play within British television, as will be outlined below. Suffice to say here, the discussion about what social purposes comedy fulfils, if any, recur, and these inform the thoughts and actions of those who produce it for a living. Another reason Adorno bemoans the culture industry is that it “forces together the spheres of high and low art” (2001[1981] : 98) which means that “the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it” (99). Presuming that much comedy would be categorized by Adorno as low culture, his qualm here would be that civilized humor fails to fulfill its critical role because of the needs of the industry, which sees value in comedy only as a commodity. Exploring the sitcom, David Grote (1983) has made similar arguments; furthermore, Michael Billig has critiqued the social space given over to comedy, asking “why not be anti-humour? There are worse crimes” (2005: 9). The point here is not to resolve this problem, but instead to note that this is a context that workers in television comedy function within and are aware of; there are cultural hierarchies that mean working in television news, documentary or drama are seen as more prestigious, more worthwhile and of higher social value than making people laugh. Of course, they also reject these hierarchies, but the fact that they do so readily demonstrates their prevalence. Comedy therefore offers a useful case study for thinking about creativity labor, because it can enable us to explore what it means to work within a sector which is comparatively maligned, and whose social purpose might not be so readily apparent. So, what consequences are there if you feel you have to constantly *justify* your creative labor because you work in comedy?

## 2 The creative industries and public service broadcasting

This need for justification is even more apparent because of the particularities of the British television industry, which, while not completely dissimilar to systems in other countries, has contexts that make such justifications both easier and more difficult. For a start, television in Britain has, throughout its history, been understood as a public good, able to fulfill social roles that enable citizens to actively and productively engage in democracy. It is worth noting this particular

relationship between the nation and television, whereby, “[f]or most of its history, in most places where it is available, television has been a national medium” (Turner 2009: 54). This is despite technology both enabling programs to be transmitted beyond national borders, and the problems of transmitting to remote parts of nations which, if the medium were not understood as having a social role, would probably not be given access to broadcasting. In Britain, this national ideal has been formalized within a concept of public service broadcasting (PSB), a philosophy of television that many other countries similarly adopted, though with local inflections. UNESCO argues that “[t]hrough PSB citizens are informed, educated and also entertained”, and it can therefore “serve as a cornerstone of democracy” (2015). In the United Kingdom, the media regulator Ofcom defines PSB as “programmes that are broadcast for the public benefit rather than for purely commercial purposes” (2015). A definition of this, which distinguishes between the commercial and public service aims of broadcasting, demonstrates Adorno’s arguments about the cultural industries in action, suggesting that commercial imperatives may not necessarily produce programming that contributes to the social and national good. Indeed, the concern that economics might affect the function it is assumed television is capable of serving in a democracy has resulted in persistent debates about how the medium should be funded. The UNESCO definition makes clear that it sees commercial imperatives as a bar to fully-functioning PSB, arguing that it should be “made, financed and controlled by the public, for the public. It is neither commercial nor state-owned, free from political interference and commercial forces” (2015). Many countries – including Britain – fund PSB in a variety of ways, and the debate about how this is best achieved has existed as long as PSB has.

While PSB informs all broadcasting in Britain, requirements to fulfill PSB goals are placed more heavily on some broadcasters than others. The most obvious of these is the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which developed a model of PSB at its inception that has informed similar broadcasters in other countries. The first Director General of the BBC, Lord John Reith, insisted the aim of PSB was “to carry into the greatest ... number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement, and to avoid the things which are, or may be hurtful” (1924: 34). Reith’s conception of PSB has sometimes been criticized as “anti-market and elitist” (Nicholas 2015: 324), as it requires a small number of people to decide what the “best” is, and to give that to a public because it has decided it is good for them. Reith defended this approach thus: “It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need – and not what they want, but few know what they want, and very few what they need” (34). While debates persist about exactly what it is that the public needs and the best way to ensure

this happens, the key point here is the assumption that television is capable of fulfilling needs, and should be given a role to do so. With the growth of commercial broadcasting in Britain, the need for publically-funded PSB has been questioned by some, and a House of Lords Select Committee debating this has noted that “the interpretation of public service broadcasting as content that the market does not sufficiently provide is gaining increasing support” (2009). By this account, PSB would fulfill the role only of filling the gaps that commercial broadcasting can supply without public funds. However, it remains the case that, notwithstanding these debates about funding, there is an assumption here that there are goals that television should fulfill, irrespective of whether this is achieved via commercial or publically-funded means.

Why does all this matter for comedy and those who work within the British television comedy industry? It matters because – unlike many other countries – comedy is understood in Britain to be part of PSB, and the two main broadcasters of comedy production – the BBC and Channel 4 – are both public service. This means that every comedy program made and transmitted by them must demonstrably fulfill PSB roles, giving the genre a social role less prominent for other broadcasters and perhaps surprising considering humor’s common categorization as “mere” entertainment. This has consistently been achieved by these broadcasters, by demonstrating comedy’s role in representing society back to itself, enabling viewers to engage with social change via comedic representations that are perceived to more palatable than hard-hitting documentaries or dramas. For example, the BBC has stated that “[g]ood comedy continues to resonate with audiences, particularly when it reflects the texture of British life” (2012: 18). However, both the BBC and Channel 4 also argue that comedy is an essential part of PSB by pointing towards its inclusive nature, and its ability to reach, and speak for, audiences that other genres fail to attract. Both broadcasters have a remit to reach particular audiences, but with slightly different goals. As *the* national broadcaster, one of the BBC’s requirements is to “[r]epresent the different nations, regions and communities to the rest of the UK”, “[b]ring people together for shared experiences”, and “[r]eflect the different religious and other beliefs in the UK” (BBC 2015). It therefore asserts that “[t]he BBC must be a place where every voice is heard, where every licence fee payer can see or hear something of their world” (BBC 2013: 4). Channel 4, on the other hand, is required to “appeal to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society” with programming that “exhibits a distinctive character” as it “demonstrates innovation, experimentation and creativity in the form and content of programmes” (Channel 4 2015). Channel 4 might therefore be seen as filling the gaps that the BBC, in its interest in large, mainstream audiences, finds hard to reach. Together, the BBC and Channel 4 can be seen as regulated to work in



tandem, acknowledging the wide variety of audience needs and experiences that constitute the nation they are required to serve (even if this does not work in practice; for example, see Lockyer 2015).

Tellingly, both broadcasters use comedy in order to reach audiences that might otherwise be marginalized by PSB. Channel 4 does this via comedy programming it assesses as having “stimulated debate, promoted alternative viewpoints and nurtured new talent, with strong emphasis on cultural diversity” (2014: 49), suggesting that “[c]omedy is often the first way of expressing an alternative voice” (Clarke, quoted in Channel 4 2014: 50). That comedy can have a social purpose that overrides its humorous intent is demonstrated in Phil Clarke’s (Channel 4’s Head of Comedy) support for “witty, acerbic, knowing comedies. You might not laugh out loud, but they’re clever and sophisticated. You admire them” (quoted in Channel 4 2014: 51). The BBC similarly sees comedy as a place where audiences underserved elsewhere can be reached, primarily through its BBC Three channel. This channel has the remit “to bring younger audiences to high quality public service broadcasting”, and its “target audience is 16–34 year olds” (BBC Trust 2013: 1). Like Channel 4, BBC Three should foreground “taking creative risks and experimenting with new talent and new ideas”, and even though it should have a “mixed-genre schedule”, it is asserted that it can best fulfill its goals by experimenting “in particular in the area of UK comedy” (2). The importance of comedy to BBC Three is demonstrated by the fact that it has, for a number of years, broadcast more of it than the rest of the BBC’s channels combined; in 2013–2014, it showed 1,182 hours’ worth of the genre, as opposed to BBC One’s 216 hours, BBC Two’s 273 hours, and BBC Four’s 85 hours (BBC 2014: 71). Comedy therefore functions as a genre that, rather than fulfilling the aims of PSB in and of itself, is employed to encourage audiences who might engage less with the social functions of PSB to find an entry point into these forms of broadcasting. While this demonstrates one of the values of comedy, it also inadvertently does suggest that comedy is, in and of itself, not necessarily indicative of PSB goals. The assumption here is that if a channel such as BBC Three can attract audiences via comedy, those viewers will then, hopefully, move onto the more “obviously” PSB topics, such as “science, business, religion and ethics” with the channel offering “comprehensive support for knowledge-building content as appropriate” (BBC Trust 2013: 5).

It is within these complex contexts that workers in television comedy production function. While the participants in the “Make me laugh” project rarely foregrounded conscious debates about PSB as part of their thinking processes, an awareness that BBC channels had a social role and were funded by public money was evident. For example, one of the programs the project followed was *People Just do Nothing* (BBC 2014-), a BBC Three sitcom about a



pirate radio station produced by the independent production company Roughcut TV, which is owned and run by the producer Ash Atalla. The program began as a number of short videos made by the writer-performers and distributed via YouTube. Atalla then worked with the creative team to produce a reworked version for a BBC scheme called “Feed my funny”, which allowed short pieces to be broadcast on BBC Three online, giving those new to the creative process a chance to experiment with ideas, and work with those more experienced than them, away from the pressures of a traditional broadcast channel. Schemes such as “Feed my funny” allowed Atalla to go through what he called “a long, tortuous process” (2012) to help the creative team turn a set of ideas into a program of broadcast quality, though he commended the BBC on initiating schemes that allowed that process to occur, no matter how tortuous. For Steve Stamp, one of the writer-performers, the “Feed my funny” platform was a significant boost because it included “Comedians and established people alongside people like us that were new” (Stamp 2013), and he outlined how competitive he and others got, sharing the program via Facebook to try to ensure they were viewed more often than those of the better-known performers. A series broadcast on BBC Three followed, with a second commissioned for 2015; in this instance, the “Feed my funny” system worked in enabling those new to broadcasting to be mentored through the creative process, resulting in a program with a voice intended to appeal to the channel’s demographic. To be sure, this was not always a smooth process, and Stamp outlines the many discussions concerning creative decisions that had to be made in order for the program to work as a series of thirty-minute episodes, rather than online shorts.

These processes are expensive, and take a long time. The BBC often argues that it is able to engage in such schemes precisely because it is funded in a manner that means it knows what its income will be in the future, and can plan accordingly. Many participants in the Make Me Laugh project commended the BBC for doing such work, but also insisted that it should be doing much more. For example, the comedy writer Simon Nye saw the BBC having a particular role to play in terms of supporting and training those new to the industry, saying “the BBC is a special case because it is a unique organisation and ... we own it so they should be giving back” (Nye 2012). Indeed, questions about training recurred across interviews. While many saw schemes like “Feed my funny” as worthwhile, it was noted that, on the whole, these still required small, independent companies – such as Atalla’s Roughcut TV – to work with new talent, even if that process was funded by the BBC. Considering the heritage and expertise in-house at the BBC, many interviewees wondered why it was that the Corporation didn’t engage more actively in things like mentorship schemes, and instead in essence tender out its training responsibilities to independent production companies.

That said, others complained about the virtual monopoly BBC has over television comedy production in the United Kingdom. While channels such as Channel 4 and Sky do commission comedy, the overwhelming amount of production comes via the BBC. Some interviewees queried whether this might negatively impact upon the range of comedy that is produced, with the BBC functioning as too powerful a player. By this account, good comedy arises from a wealth of broadcasters being involved in production, enabling writers to have a number of potential outlets and a wider range of voices being present on-screen. While a number of interviewees expressed problems in the lack of broadcasters commissioning comedy, it was also apparent that for many people the BBC was the place they wanted to work for, precisely because of the institution's social role and its heritage of producing great comedy. There was a sense for many that once you've done something for the BBC, you've made it. Furthermore, interviewees were often willing to work for the BBC for less money than they might get from other broadcasters, partly because of the BBC's wider reach, but also because of the prestige associated with its heritage and social position. That program-makers might choose to work with the BBC for less money because of the kudos and prestige the broadcaster brings, demonstrates that the value of comedy, and cultural work, often lies outside of economic contexts. Here we find that the philosophy that underpins PSB is one that those who work in comedy production employ to evaluate the outputs of their own labor, rejecting higher financial rewards in order to be engaged in "good work" where "excellence and ethics ... are in harmony" (Gardner et al. 2001: 16). And while some of those we interviewed might bemoan the difficulties they face in ensuring the amount they earn from their work is appropriate and enough to live on, we encountered no-one who saw the production of comedy as nothing more than a business. That making comedy can be seen as something expressive of values other than commerce is indicative of the PSB context within which such labor takes place. More than that, though, it also points towards something specific about creativity, creative labor, and those who work within the creative industries.

### 3 Creativity and creative work

While all labor takes place within regulatory and industrial contexts, the creative industries, and creative work, are typically seen as somehow different to that which occurs in other sectors. So while workers in a factory create products to be sold for profit, so do those who make television comedy; but the nature of the product is assumed to signal something particular about the specifically creative process that has brought it into being. Defining what is and is not a

creative industry has often proved difficult (see, for example, Throsby 2008a; Throsby 2008b; Potts and Cunningham 2008), and the whole concept itself is a relatively new one, its current prevalence arising from governmental ambitions. Terry Flew traces the idea that policy-makers should be interested in the creative industries to the election of the Labour government in the United Kingdom in 1997, which set about mapping the amount of work done in the sector, the number of people employed in it, and its contribution to the national economy (2012: 9). The discovery that, for example, the creative industries were “London’s second largest economic sector after financial and business services” (9) meant a case could be made for the value of this kind of work in economic terms, and investing in the sector could be seen as a logical way to promote economic growth. Flew notes that the policy decisions that developed at this time became a model for many countries around the world, meaning that “[a]s a policy discourse, creative industries was itself a successful British export” (11). The adoption of such a model is seen to be unsurprising for countries struggling to replace “traditional” economic forms such as manufacturing, and the creative industries meant growth could be developed by fostering “individual creativity, social and cultural entrepreneurship, and a meritocratic spirit” (14).

As outlined above, the idea that creative work should be encouraged primarily because of its economic contribution is one that thinkers such as Adorno would criticize, and there has long been a tension between the various ways in which the value of creativity might be measured. For a start, the economic context is one which sees creativity to be of use because of its contribution to the wider economy, whereas for many it is the expression of the self which is the most important aspect of doing creative work. This individualized aspect is evident in that creative artefacts are often defined wholly or primarily by a sole creator, such as the writer of a novel or director of a film, despite the wealth of people involved in any such production; as Bourdieu notes, “[t]here are in fact very few other areas in which the glorification of “great individuals”, unique creators irreducible to any condition or conditioning, is more common or uncontroversial” (1993: 29). The Make Me Laugh project aimed to explore the tension at play here, by following both individuals and their own creative labor, and production projects that necessarily involve considerable group work. Indeed, many participants saw one of the key pleasures of their job to be finding other creative people to work with and the collaborative nature of bringing something to completion. One of the productions we followed was *Detectorists* (BBC 2014-), primarily via the work of Adam Tandy, the producer. The program was shot entirely on-location, requiring the entire crew to live together for weeks in a hotel in a remote country location. For our research, I visited the set twice: once very early in the production and then again towards the end. On the first

visit, Tandy was heavily involved in many aspects of the production, actively seen discussing many creative decisions with actors, the director of photography, and the director. By the time of the second visit, Tandy was much less involved, instead sitting back and letting everyone get on with what they were doing. He explained to me that, by this point, everyone knew what their roles were and had a sense of what the aims of the program were; he could now simply trust everyone to continue the excellent work he saw them doing. In essence, his successful enabling of others as a producer had rendered himself unnecessary, and he jokingly noted that he was hoping something might go wrong somewhere simply so he would have something to do. In a much earlier interview Tandy had outlined what he saw his role as a producer to be:

*As a producer I think what you're doing is you're bringing everything to the party. And you're letting the people with the vision ... to play in the sandbox, play with the train set, make the thing that works. And you marshal them and you advise them. But fundamentally you're there to keep the train on the tracks. (Tandy 2012)*

Many of the crew members of *Detectorists* were relatively young and been given responsibilities beyond those they had had before, and Tandy took pleasure in seeing them succeed in these areas and therefore the contribution he was making to the development of the next generation of program-makers. Here it is evident how an individual working on television comedy defines their work as both collaborative and individual, with Tandy's particular skills, experience and ways of working shaping the entire production, but in a manner that enables collective creativity to occur.

This relationship of the individual and the collective is also evident in how those who work in television have organized themselves industrially. Charles Leadbetter and Kate Oakley (1999) outline the role of small, independent companies within the creative industries, and the production of television comedy in the United Kingdom is one where broadcasters like the BBC make some programs in-house, but also commission production from a wide range of independent producers of various sizes. What is significant about such independent production is that “many want their businesses to stay small because they want to retain their independence and their focus on creativity” (1999: 11). This idea of independence is key, with Tandy a useful example as he gave up a permanent in-house job at the BBC to go freelance, precisely so he only had to work on the projects he was invested in and therefore could prioritize creativity over commerce. Running through our interviews are recurring ideas in the value of culture and the individuals' need to protect these processes from the institutional and economic structures that all labor occurs within. Indeed, for our participants, working in comedy was something they did not for commercial

reasons; it was something they “had to do” and they could not imagine doing anything else. To be sure, many had complaints about the amount they were paid for their work, and had concerns over whether they would be able to continue making a living after whatever current project they were working on ended. In this sense, “precarity” was a key part of their existence, as many who have studied workers in the creative industries note (Deuze 2007: 20–27; Gill and Pratt 2008; Ross 2009: 34). But they also made clear that they accepted this as a consequence of their own need for independence, and celebrated their freedom in comparison to their friends who had “proper” jobs. Perhaps unsurprisingly, what is evident here is the emotional commitment, and sense of passion, that informed how our interviewees discussed what they do. And this passion was not predicated on the potential for being rich or famous; it was about doing “good work” that gave pleasure to audiences and was respected by colleagues.

The importance of this emotional investment in their work was most evident when we presented to many participants the definitions of the creative industries currently in place in British legislation, and therefore the official framework that defined their labor. According to the British government’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the creative industries are those “which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (2014: 4). This definition foregrounds the individual as the locus of creativity, but sees the value of such labor in primarily economic terms, through intellectual property. It is by these processes that Adorno critiques such industries. However, the problems our participants had with the definition were less about these economic aspects, and more its failure to acknowledge the emotional and personal relationships such workers have with their activities. In their study of colleagues working on a television program, Hesmondhalgh and Baker point to the significance of the emotional context within which such labor takes place, whether this is through “maintaining an emotional distance” (2011: 171) between themselves and others, or the emotional pleasures from the “camaraderie and fun involved in working together on a television show (174). Similarly, all of our participants noted the extremes of emotion their work demanded of them – from the elation of getting something made, to the despondency of a rejection – and all discussed the techniques they used to try and manage this over a long-term career. While workers in all jobs will have emotional responses to their labor, the personalized nature of creative work is seen to intensify this, whereby the rejection of a script, for example, is seen as a statement about some aspect of the writer who conceived it. The point here is less about the particular ways in which our participants managed this labor, and more their insistence that the DCMS definition of their industry was flawed because it failed to take account of it. If

these workers are necessarily required to give something personal of themselves in order for good creative work to take place, then, they argued, the definition of their industry should similarly be emotional, and passionate, using a form of language which did not feel so managerial and corporate.

They also insisted that it should take into account the value of creative work beyond the purely economic. In making such an argument, these workers aligned themselves with a wealth of work critical of the concept of the creative industries, which inevitably sees value in its work primarily in economic contexts (for example, see Doyle 2010; Garnham 2005; Hesmondhalgh et al. 2015). Working as a group, these participants produced a definition they thought could replace that written by the DCMS: “creativity is a process of invention where imagination, critical faculties and craft skills are used to make/construct something that has meaning”. For them, the assertion that their work had “meaning” was vital, even though they had difficulty deciding exactly how this is measured, what kind of meaning it might be, or to whom that meaning might have value. The choice of “meaning” was a deliberate rejection of the word “value” because, as the comedy producer James Farrell said, “you can be creative without having value ascribed to your work at the point of creation” (Farrell 2014). For this group, the process of creation was, unsurprisingly, the most important aspect, irrespective of whether something ever reached audiences or not. Furthermore, the writer Paul Doolan argued that “‘creativity’ needs to cover the 99% of people who are making unbroadcastable television and terrible television, terrible writing” (2014). Here, creative labor is seen as worthwhile even if it never manages to have any economic value, not least because doing “bad” work is seen as part of the process somebody has to go through in order to learn the skills to do better work.

Such discussions demonstrate the particularities of creative labor, and those who undertake it. Perhaps most importantly, the creative industries and the creative process are here shown to be things that arise from the individual, but are brought to fruition by the group. The television comedy industry is one that necessarily requires a large number of people to be involved in the production of any program, but, in doing so, attempts to ensure the particular voice of world-view of the individual is preserved. When Tandy suggests he wants to help people “play in the sandbox”, he is constructing his role as one enabling others to express their own creativity, knowingly downplaying the significance of his own in the process. This preservation of the particularities of the individual, but within a large-scale mass media industry that uses a complex production process, is one of the industry’s contradictions, and something that our participants’ discussion of how their work should be defined attempts to grapple with. For George Steiner, creation and creativity are emblematic of “*enacted freedom*”

(2001: 108, emphasis in original); for our participants, the question repeatedly arose about how to ensure that freedom is enacted, in a manner not so restrictive that it destroys the creativity it intends to secure.

## 4 Creativity, comedy and cultural value

So, the creative process is one that is intended to enable some kind of artistic freedom, and the participants in this study desired their work had some kind of meaning. As noted above, much television comedy production in the United Kingdom takes place within a context of PSB, with programming required to have some kind of cultural value. The problem that remains for those working in comedy is that it is conventionally situated as of less worth than other genres. As James Farrell noted, “I think people are generally very dismissive of comedy and it’s not seen as high art or anything” (2014). Indeed, the funding bid that resulted in the Make Me Laugh project taking place itself downplayed the specificity of comedy in arguing for the worth of the study, and instead foregrounded the contribution the research could make to broader debates about creativity and industry, in the knowledge that arguing for public money to be spent on analysis of comedy would be a difficult task. That comedy is a genre perceived to have less social worth than others has been seen as evident in the BBC’s recent announcement that it plans to remove BBC Three from traditional broadcasting and instead make it solely “a new and innovative online service” (BBC Press Office 2014). This plan aims to save £50 million a year, and £30 million of that would be spent on drama for BBC One. In essence, the major funder of television comedy production in the United Kingdom is about to be removed from broadcasting, and much of its funding allocated to the production of drama instead. Unsurprisingly, the comedy community has read this as evidence of the genre’s lowly position – especially in relation to drama – and, for many, it augurs poorly for the BBC’s long-term commitment to comedy.

At the outset of this article, it was noted how disbelief at the ability to maintain a career in comedy was routinely expressed for those highly successful in the industry, such as Ali McPhail. For such workers an awareness of the cultural perceptions of the work you do are part of the job, both marginalizing your activity as of little cultural worth, but simultaneously being part of the pleasure involved. The creative work that these people do is necessary for the programs they make, but is also essential for the emotional labor required in repeatedly having to justify the value of what you do. That longstanding ideas of what counts as PSB have complex relationships to comedy, with other genres more easily able to justify their value, necessarily requiring those who work in



humor to feel comfortable in an outsider status, and to take some kind of pleasure in this. This requires another kind of creativity, quite separate to that which is conventionally understood as necessary for the production of comedy programming. To work in comedy is to repeatedly and creatively manage how to justify to yourself – and others – the worth of the work that you do. The creative labor on show here, then, is not the same as that for other genres, and this points towards the specificity of comedy as a genre of production but also as a social phenomenon whose social consequences are often maligned. What this suggests is that there is something specific about the working practices, creative processes, and regimes of self-justification particular to those who spend their lives trying to make us laugh.

**Acknowledgement:** Data in this article comes from the research project Make Me Laugh: Creativity in the British Television Comedy Industry (2012–2015), which was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (Project Reference: AH/I003614/1). The project's Principal Investigator was Brett Mills, with Sarah Ralph as the Research Assistant and Erica Horton as the Doctoral Researcher, at the University of East Anglia, UK (see <http://www.makemelaugh.org.uk>).

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## Bionote

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