

5

How to Stay Entangled in a World of Flows

Flexible Subjects and Mobile Knowledge in the New Media Industries

Hannah Knox

At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, the city of Manchester was gripped by the promise that the much heralded knowledge economy might hold the key to the transformation of its fortunes as a post-industrial city. Emboldened by its own history as the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, aware of the role the city had played in the development of modern computing, and drawing on the (in) famous music scene that had emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps the greatest excitement revolved around the idea that Manchester might be developed as a hub for an emerging new media economy.

As the 1990s drew to a close and the promise of a new century beckoned, Manchester City Council facilitated several meetings with local and regional development agencies, university departments and local business partners to discuss the best way forward for the city, and various funding bids were submitted to national and international bodies in order to bring money into the city to support this vision of a new media future for the city. One such bid went to the European Regional Development Fund, outlining the case for the establishment of a business support organization that would be oriented towards making and supporting the creation of a new media city. The bid was successful, and in the summer of 2000, the doors of MediaNet opened, with the aim of tethering the flexible, mobile workforce of an emerging new media industry to the hope of a sustainable future for Manchester and its surrounding regions.

This chapter focuses on the ways in which the ambition to generate a new media industry in the city worked with and revolved

around a preoccupation with skills, training and the production and capture of knowledge. I suggest that conventional anthropological literatures on learning and enskillment prove limited in their ability to describe and analyse the combination of aspiration and ambivalence that pervaded attempts to make a link between educational training and local economic success in the context of a global knowledge economy. Instead, I draw upon insights and ideas from anthropological exchange theory to rethink the ways in which training, and the production of knowledge, was envisaged as both a panacea for economic stagnation, and the basis of a perceived risk of economic isolation. Focusing on the ways in which knowledge, learning and embodied capacity became articulated as descriptions of their relative alienability or inalienability from subjects, places and histories, I suggest that certain insights from exchange theory allow us to re-approach 'flexible' capitalism as a contested form of value production. Claims to knowledge and the importance of skills in what has come to be known as 'flexible' capitalism are shown to be caught up not only with the question of technical or intellectual competence, but equally with relational claims which recast the question of the impact of flexible capitalism on contemporary subjects as a process which revolves around tensions in the relationship between public and private forms of action.

Intimately linked to technological change and alterations in working patterns, the way in which industrial restructuring has been linked to human experience has often been through a preoccupation with skills (e.g. Braverman 1975). Yet in anthropology, discussions of skill and enskillment have been largely divorced from a consideration of the part that they are supposed to play in processes of economic transformation. Instead, skilled practice has permeated the anthropological discourse in relation to investigations regarding the embodiment of knowledge and the theorization of craft practices and tool use (Mauss 1973; Ingold 1993, 1995; Keller and Keller 1993; Suchman and Trigg 1993). Less has been said about the exalted position of skills in the 'development' of contemporary Western society, though some have tangentially dealt with more general cultural ideas about skills through discussions of human and machine agency (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis 1997). Harvey's (1997) edited collection provides a variety of perspectives on the relationship between the domains of the technological and the social, and a cultural sensitivity to the ways in which the separation between the technological and the social is maintained through ideas of skilled practice (Costall 1997; Graves-Brown 1997; Strathern 1997).

My specific aim in this chapter is to extend an analysis of skills to incorporate the ways in which a notion of 'skill' is mobilized in relation to ideas about economic practice. Rather than focusing on skill as a neutral categorical descriptor of a particular kind of practice, using skilled practice as an object of study to elucidate ideas concerning the embodiment of knowledge through practice, I look at the way in which skilled practice comes to operate as a somewhat unsettling kind of economic object. Narotzky's consideration of skill comes closer to articulating the perspective which I adopt to understand its place in the new media industry (Narotzky 1999: 20–21). She concentrates her analysis on the idea of skill as a socially recognized form of knowledge, thereby making apparent the divisive potential of such a categorization in the consideration of economic practice.

Narotzky helpfully reminds us that 'skill' is not an 'objective' quality incorporated in labour, but that it expresses the struggle over access to and the value of knowledge as a means of production. Indeed, the construction of power relations in the labour process is often expressed in the language of 'skill' (ibid.: 25). According to Narotzky, skill is: 'at once both ideological and material, and therefore critical to the understanding of the social relations of production. However "skill" can only be a valuable conceptual tool if clearly distinguished from technical capacities and specific and general knowledge of a labour process' (ibid.). Narotzky also highlights the historical nature of the use of skill as a politicized concept. As long ago as the nineteenth century, the 'ownership of skill' was a 'core ideological concept used by workers to organize the first unions' (ibid.: 20). She goes on: 'Only after the Taylorist battle to expropriate "skill" from workers did other concepts for the organisation of solidarity acquire force . . . The acknowledgement of technical capabilities is not homogeneous in society . . . It expresses lines of struggle over social relations of production' (ibid.: 20). Nowadays, in the context of the 'new economy', the reappropriation of skill by the individual has once again gained forcible power, yet, rather than being articulated in a communitarian ethos, the ownership of skill, as we will see, is played out to reinforce and reproduce flexible capitalism as it is manifested in the proliferation of short-term contracts, freelance activities and the presence of sole traders, shifting terrains and the necessity of keeping up with technologies.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which exchange theory can help re-politicize the anthropological interest in skilled practice by rendering the current appeal to the importance of skills

and training in flexible capitalism a matter of historical rather than philosophical relevance. The focus of this chapter then is not the analysis of skilled practices as such – that is, the particular practices which by virtue of their place as embodied and technical activities acquire a privileged status in analysis as ‘skilled’. Instead, my focus is on the importance attributed to the notion of skill as a particular kind of knowledge, and an attempt to understand the implications of contestations over skill versus other kinds of knowledge in economic development. By considering skill from this perspective, I suggest that insights can be gained into the processes by which such an idea both draws on and acts to reproduce the condition of work within flexible capitalism. In settings of economic development, exchange theories can provide us with a helpful theoretical language for approaching the tensions that exist in discussions surrounding the relative value of skills and knowledge to economic transformation, and in doing so they represent a means of looking at the role of reciprocity, relationality and potentiality in the reformulation of working relationships in a contemporary context.

Skills for Development

At the time when MediaNet was being set up, the political landscape was full of the rhetoric of the importance of skills, education and training for a robust modern economy. The British Labour Party, relabelled under the term ‘New Labour’, had been elected three years earlier to the mantra ‘education, education, education’, and the government had been responsible for establishing a series of organizations oriented towards the nurturing of business expertise. Skills were being identified as the biggest limitation in the development of local economies in a global context. In particular, changes in technologies were producing new anxieties over whether the population was going to have the correct skills to work with new computing technologies.

The relationship between technologies and skills, made explicit in government rhetoric about skills for the country in general, emphasized basic skills (literacy and numeracy) and notably information technology (IT) skills. This focus on IT skills had come about as a response to the fact that many people who did not have access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) when they were at school were increasingly being expected to use them in their jobs, and the government had been involved

in ensuring that people, particularly those who had come from industrial backgrounds where the need for IT skills was limited, were able to get jobs in the 'new economy'. The UK government seemed to have truly committed itself to the importance of skill as the panacea to economic development, and the cross over between knowledge, training and education, and industry and markets could be derived from even the most perfunctory look at contemporary government directives concerning technological and economic change. Crossovers between the work of the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Education and Skills were common, resulting in the publication of such white papers as 'Our Competitive Future' (DTI 1998) and 'Opportunity for All in a World of Change' (DTI and DEE 2001), both of which make explicit the need to relate skills and training to the economy. The challenge of precisely how to develop a skilled population was taken up by a number of government-led organizations and initiatives, including the University for Industry, 'lifelong learning' initiatives, the Learning and Skills councils (formerly Training and Enterprise councils), the Technologies for Training scheme, UK Online and UK Online for Business.

The common assumption in all of these initiatives was that skills are simultaneously generic and neutral objects. A direct relationship was assumed between the emergence of a 'skilled' workforce and the societal effects that would result. It is in this way that the feared 'digital divide' was expected to be resolved through training. The foreword to the 1998 White Paper entitled 'Our Competitive Future' read: 'Our success depends on how well we exploit our most valuable assets: our knowledge, skills, and creativity. These are the key to designing high-value goods and services and advanced business practices. They are at the heart of a modern, knowledge driven economy' (DTI 1998: 5). This kind of approach to skills mirrors the ways in which scholars like Goody and Watt (1963) have written about literacy. Goody and Watt saw literacy from the perspective of what Street calls an 'autonomous' view (Street 1984: 542) conceptualizing it as a technical ability and believing that 'the advent of literacy in a society will have the same social and psychological effects, no matter which society is being studied' (Ahearn 2001: 127). Critics of this conceptualization of literacy argued that literacy should be seen as form of social practice (Kulick and Stroud 1990; Street and Besnier 1994; Gee 2000). Whilst this has been convincingly demonstrated by anthropologists who have studied skills as a form of social practice, the question then remains as to why the 'autonomous' view of skill

remains so powerful. It is here that the anthropological literatures on exchange are useful.

The basic premise of exchange theory as derived from Mauss's essay on the gift (Mauss 1966) is that the difference between commodity transactions and gift transactions can be understood through the relative capacity that people have to make alienable their possessions (Weiner 1992). Commodity transactions supposedly operate on the basis of transactions which leave no residue of connection between the producer or owner of an object and its buyer or receiver. Gifts, on the other hand, involve delayed reciprocity, whereby something of the giver remains in the transaction (Gregory 1982). In this sense, gifts remain inalienable from the giver, always requiring a return at some point in order to sever them from whence they came, whereas commodity exchange involves the severing of relations at the point of the transaction. Commodities are in this sense alienable from their producers or buyers. This is not an essay on the relative strength or weakness of exchange theory, or the various positions of its different proponents over the years, though there has been much contestation over the ways in which the differences between gifts and commodities have become simplified or read as typologizations of different societies. For the purposes of this chapter, I merely want to take the notion of the relative alienability/inalienability of objects from bodies of different kinds under conditions of exchange to think about claims that are made for the relative value of skills and knowledge as facets of a new economy.

One thing that government documents like those mentioned above seem to do is to disembody or alienate the notion of 'skill' from the person. Given the amount of ink that has been spilt in anthropological writings on the social constitution of skill, the very pervasiveness of the idea that technical skill could be disembodied is an intriguing ethnographic observation. The need to resolve the perceived risk of a digital divide between those who have the skills to access information and those who do not, focuses on what are called 'basic' skills. The idea of basic skills requires that we imagine the population as needy and receptive to such forms of enskillment. It also requires that we see skill as a de-socialized category, suitable and necessary for all. In such documents, skills are non-specific and seem to take on characteristics of commodities which the person can gain to add to a list of marketable capabilities on their curriculum vitae. In the specific context of business development, more specialist skills come to be the focus of political discourses.

At this point, I turn to the way in which these discourses were engaged in practice. MediaNet's engagement with these political discourses was at the level of ensuring competitiveness through techniques which would nurture the development of specialist skills, rather than an articulation of their activities in terms of the provision of basic skills. Much of MediaNet's staff's time was spent organizing seminars, holding workshops, disseminating information, writing for their website, establishing training events and putting people working in new media in touch with training organizations. We will come back to some of these activities in more detail below. The question for now, is: How did the political discourses described above actually figure in the daily practices in which MediaNet were involved?

Firstly, it must be noted that government documents were not taken on board unquestioningly by those implementing projects of development. It would be too simplistic and straightforward to suggest that these documents simply informed MediaNet's activities by informing them about the needs of the population, and the ways in which these needs should be dealt with. In fact their importance lay less in the intricacies of their content as their role as legitimizers of MediaNet's activities. Documents such as government white papers were largely considered dull and unhelpful, and the way they were written was *considered* so self-congratulatory and superficial that they were considered limited as a source of information, and hence predominantly uninteresting on a day-to-day level. Furthermore, the content of such documents was treated with scepticism. Although supposedly based on neutral research, these texts were produced by government, and were therefore considered by MediaNet staff to have a particular partisan agenda. MediaNet staff were aware that such objects are created as forms of public communication, and the style in which they present information is highly rhetorical and riddled with 'sound-bites'. In MediaNet's offices, such government information was generally found on the internet by a member of staff, printed off, placed in a file, put on a shelf and left there, evidence that it had been acknowledged, albeit often not read.

If it was not in the specificities of the content of these documents, then the question remains: Why was it that these texts were still deemed to have importance to organizations like MediaNet? One thing they did was to situate the local setting in a larger macro 'context'. Although treated with distance and scepticism with regards to their content, their very presence acted as evidence of an important context for their work enabling the people working at MediaNet to juxtapose the local need for skills with wider trends of economic

change. These texts were a necessary part of the process through which the local could be situated in relation to the nation. Wastell suggests that the effect of scaling is to make us think that we must 'accept each manifestation of a local context as a constituent element of a global whole, a subjective position in an objective reality' (Wastell 2001: 186). In this way, these documents worked to create a macro context, of which the local could then be seen to be a constituent part. It may appear paradoxical that documents that were treated with scepticism could be a part of the legitimization of a project like MediaNet. However, it was less the partisan fact of their production and more the 'public' audience to whom they were directed that I suggest had the effect of legitimizing MediaNet's activities and situating them in a national milieu. Furthermore, such documents provided a reference point and a mutually comprehensible language through which support for business could be publicly articulated in discussions between public and private sector organizations.

Recognition of the wider discourses exhorting the importance of skills and training provides one part of our understanding of the importance that MediaNet staff ascribed to ensuring a provision of some sort for the issue of a potential skills shortage. However, the government concern with skills extends far beyond the new media industry that is the focus of my research. A more specific framework within which support organizations like MediaNet operate can be identified by considering the demands of the European Union (EU), and particularly the manifestation of those demands in the documents which condition the allocation and use of EU monies in particular regional locales.

Rather than dealing directly with the EU, responsibility for the regulation of projects like MediaNet in the north-west of the UK was delegated to regional intermediaries, to whom each EU-funded project in a particular region became directly accountable. The intermediary organization was responsible for producing a document which outlined the rubric within which projects like MediaNet's work fitted. This document, called the Single Programming Document (or SPD), was much more directly mobilized in MediaNet staff acts of self-description than the generic government initiatives described above. This was due to the fact that organizations like MediaNet were funded by the EU, and thus were expected to deal expressly with issues outlined in this document. Furthermore, the SPD explicitly stated that it 'has been developed taking full account of European Union, national, regional and local policies' (EC 2000: 181). Even a cursory look at the SPD can help us understand part of the reason for

the centrality of skills and knowledge to the definition of the general field of economic development, echoing the assertions of government documents, and creating a much more tangible link to the specific problem of skills shortages within the new media industry. According to the north-west England SPD, one of the main objectives of funding in the region is, 'To contribute to the creation of a 21st century economy through the development of new and high growth employment sectors as well as supporting the competitiveness of existing businesses, where the key features are enterprise and knowledge' (ibid.: 231).

The SPD had a more direct influence on the project's activities as it provided a basis for auditing and direct justification for the project's activities. As such, the SPD was used as a source of reference in the writing of quarterly reports. Such documents became useful in the practice of bid writing, where applications for funds demanded that certain criteria were addressed. The managers of the project encouraged members of staff to read this documentation, but in reality the staff who had most contact with companies and were in direct communication with local companies were not inclined to read such documents unless explicitly instructed to do so by their superiors.

MediaNet's articulation of the SPD's aim with regards to the new media industry was through the model of 'sectoral convergence' which would be resolved with recourse to the resolution of skills problems. The problem facing the new media industry was set up as a problem of miscommunication and misunderstanding between different professional 'tribes' that had been brought together in the invention of new media technologies, namely 'techies', 'creatives' and 'management'. MediaNet staff were encouraged by the director to think of the new media industry as a sector made up of companies that were formed through the fusion of technical, creative and managerial staff. In this light, Manchester was considered to represent fertile ground for a possible new media industry considering its creative and technical past, alluded to above, alongside four universities in the city, which would provide the 'skills base' for its future. The issue of skills, from the beginning of the MediaNet project, was central to the idea of convergence inasmuch as the employees of new media companies would have to be highly skilled if they were going to compete on a global stage. However the responsibility that MediaNet took in the provision of such skills for the region was not as might have been expected, through the training of individuals, but through the provision of already trained people to the industry, and in providing support in dealing with such skilled workers.

Skills: A Means to an End

One of the mechanisms through which MediaNet publicly hoped to bring about a convergence of creative, technical and managerial skills within the new media industry was through the technique of 'action learning'. This management technique had been included in the original bid for money from the European Union, and was to be a key aspect of MediaNet's work with new media companies. A delay to the start of the MediaNet project meant that by the time the project was up and running, action learning had already been piloted by another group who were part of the wider support organization. This group had attempted to effect action learning for local new media companies, with a particular emphasis on companies who were producing digital learning materials. The group who carried out these action-learning sets were employed as researchers, therefore the learning process was not just restricted to the companies who were involved in the research but extended to the team who were facilitating this learning opportunity. The focus of the group was on providing support for companies, but through this form of business support the team of researchers would be in a privileged position to find out the issues facing companies and, in particular, difficulties facing managers of companies who were having to deal with change and the 'convergence' of individuals with different skills within their own organizations.

The purpose of action learning was not only to bring about sectoral convergence however. Action learning was chosen as a form of business support for a number of reasons. Firstly, MediaNet was not funded to provide training, as this was the remit of organizations which were funded by the European Social Fund and not the European Regional Development Fund. However, it was important for MediaNet's director that the project was able to be seen to be tapping into not only European directives but also national and regional concerns. According to the project director, the convergence of people with different capabilities required a mutual understanding of different ways of working, divergent occupational histories and more specifically the emergence of techniques for 'managing creatives'. Action learning was supposed to provide a means through which managers could come together and share stories about their experiences of managing creatives in the context of new media. Thus action learning presented a means of bringing together people to articulate a discourse of skill through which the hype of political rhetoric could be grounded in daily experience.

As well as having a theoretical basis, the decision to pursue action-learning sets as a form of business support was also influenced by much more mundane and practical considerations, or what Narotzky (this volume) calls ‘tactical needs’. The involvement of managers in such a learning process not only meant that they could be counted as an ‘assist’ – the auditable unit that MediaNet was being measured by – but also provided a way of counting their contribution to the action-learning set as ‘match funding’. One of the ways in which match funding could be achieved was by encouraging people to give their services for free or at a discounted rate. The money that business managers would have charged for their time and knowledge in normal circumstances could then be considered a private sector contribution to the project. Whilst it was put to the managers that they would learn from their involvement in action learning, it was argued to funders that such managers were not only taking something from the experience, but also giving something to others in the process of their involvement. In this respect, a principle of exchange based on a particular form of reciprocity was being articulated as key to the process of business engagement and industry development. Managers were considered to be providing a service in the form of anecdotes of their own experiences, and thus it could be argued that they were contributing to the construction of a concept of ‘best practice’ which could then be disseminated to the industry as a whole.

Here we start to see how the different kinds of value attributed to knowledge were being articulated in a language of relative entanglement or detachment from business managers, MediaNet and the industry. Systems of accountability had the effect of extracting knowledge from the everyday flow of interactions in order to make it into an objectifiable entity like ‘best practice’, which could then be counted, compared and circulated. Action-learning sets combined a view of learning, whereby knowledge could be produced out of collective social relations, and would be a personal asset to the individual participant in the action-learning set who would nurture and develop their understandings of their business and the industry through conversations with others, whilst simultaneously rendering knowledge a circulating object which could form the basis of transfer of value from businesses to the support organization.

There are interesting parallels here with Narotzky’s description of the way in which contemporary capital relations turn norms of reciprocity into a form of social capital (Narotzky, this volume). In the case of action learning, the effect of this activity was to blur the line between skills, training and knowledge sharing. The managers’

ability to manage 'creatives' and 'technical staff' was articulated by the director of the project to be a form of tacit and skilled practice, but the means through which managers' embodied experiences could be transformed into a model of 'best practice' required a transformation of their embodied and socially acquired skill into transferable and capitalizable knowledge for the greater good of the region. The capacity of knowledge in this case to be both valuable because of its entanglement in social relations and valuable because of its capacity to be detached from those relations was a means by which it was possible for the twin aims of private profit and public good to be pursued. However, the lines of division between alienable/inalienable knowledge and its public/private status were far from clear cut. The ambiguity and slippage surrounding the relations that were being set up around knowledge was to have dire consequences for MediaNet's original ambitions over the capacity of action learning to square the circle of knowledge's capacity to act simultaneously in the public and the private interest.

This first attempt at action learning had mixed success. Company managers had complained that they had too little time to engage in such learning exercises, and although a series of feedback questionnaires indicated that most companies had found the experience of action learning in some way useful, various problems had been brought to the fore. As this initial round of action-learning sets had been carried out as a pilot scheme to test the viability of this method of learning for local new media companies, the subsequent difficulties raised in the evaluation of the training meant that action learning was slow to be taken up by MediaNet. The difficulties included lack of time, confidentiality, the size of the groups of companies involved in the action-learning sets, different levels of knowledge and issues of trust between participants, based largely on whether or not they knew each other before they met at the sets.

The issues which made action learning problematic were intimately entwined with the relationship between the conceptualization of skills which I have described and its relationship to wider discourses of globalization and information society, of which it was a part. In discussions of how to achieve a place for Manchester and the north-west UK in the information society, skills had been positioned and articulated as privately learnt, embodied, often tacit and most importantly personal, individualized resources. People's ability to gain skills had been considered a means of competitive advantage, and, as such, skills were very much considered a private 'asset' of the person. Action learning appeared to undermine the private status

of 'skill' because of the expectation of transforming aspects of different people's skilled practice into mobile and circulating 'knowledge' which it was hoped would benefit the city and region through dissemination to local companies. This was nothing less than an attempt to make alienable that which had been inalienable – a highly political and contentious process with profound consequences for the relationship between new media company employees who were supposed to be recipients of support, and MediaNet staff who were attempting to provide that support. Due to these contradictions and some internal conflicts within MediaNet, a second round of action learning did not occur. Instead, a training organization was brought in towards the end of the project in a last-ditch attempt to accrue some extra funding. The action-learning sets were outsourced to a training company, who reworked what were originally supposed to be collaborative workshops into a series of seminars addressing particular issues which local companies would find interesting. What had proved to be a problematic model of accumulation through reciprocity was here replaced by a more straightforward system of circulation based on the provision of information to businesses by a public sector organization that derived their funds through public subsidy.

As Graeber (2011) has recently pointed out, the main effect of the action of alienability, a process which tends to be effected through monetary transactions (but in this case occurred through the mediating technology of auditing), is to force a severing of the relationship between producer and consumer so that each can proceed after the transaction without any residue of obligation to one another. If we consider the commoditization of skill, however, alongside anthropological literatures on enskillment which have shown how skills are intrinsically social phenomena (Lave 1988), we can start to understand some of the difficulties that MediaNet faced as they attempted to fulfil the political ambitions of a knowledge economy by transforming complex relational histories into traceable lines of cause and effect.

The initial approach to business support, which had managed to reconcile the widespread recognition of the importance of skill in industrial development with the fact that MediaNet could not resolve the issue of skills through training, was eventually replaced. Instead, MediaNet put in place an approach which forfeited the organization's role as a skills provider, moving first to a role whereby they could facilitate the transformation of skills into knowledge or 'best practice' through action learning, to a final position where they were simply disseminating knowledge in the form of a unidirectional model of

learning. This was done not because of a straightforward ideological adherence to the idea of enskillment, or because of a sense that the central needs of new media companies revolved around getting skilled individuals to work there. Rather, MediaNet staff and the director of the project negotiated decisions surrounding what kinds of support to provide through a combination of engagement with contemporary political discourses and the need to follow accountability procedures, which required that they simultaneously forged ongoing relationship with companies whilst at the same time rendering these relationships the basis of objective measures which would demonstrate certain kinds of productive outputs for the project.

Here we can see therefore that the provision of advice to deal with training and skills was not simply a value-free response to the capabilities of a pool of employable individuals in the locale. The way in which MediaNet dealt with the idea of skills involved a constant negotiation between ideas about the value of different kinds of skill and knowledge, a value that largely derived from their capacity to be held in place relative to their capacity for circulation. At the same time, micro-political decisions within the support organization required engagement with these discourses to legitimate or delegitimize the value of providing support for skills provision. The importance of skills to the development of the industry that was embedded in the original enthusiasm for action learning at the beginning of the project endured even when action learning was not followed through. In the following section, I build on the observation that systems of accounting and accountability had rendered skills as potentially alienable objects to explore the kinds of contexts for action that this rendering of skills helped produce.

Talent Match

Although action learning was abandoned as a collaborative and situated form of learning and skills exchange, the idea that skills were key to the development of the industry was engendered in other ways in the project. Rather than being involved in the creation of the right 'skills set' through the provision of training, MediaNet's staff shifted their attention towards the provision of people who already had the right skills for the companies which needed them. Focusing largely on graduates from local universities, but also with a parallel consideration of the large number of freelancer new media designers and programmers in the city, much of MediaNet's work came to be

concerned with matching skills as located in individuals to skills as abstracted, technologically defined entities that were desired by the companies they were supporting. The role of the support organization was thereby configured as that of broker or facilitator, rather than that being the provider of the setting in which skills could be developed.

Looking back to the project SPD, it was therefore much easier for staff at MediaNet to justify their involvement in such activities as fitting into the remit of ‘Re-engineer[ing] the industrial and commercial structure to develop a sustainable economy’ (EC 2000: 216). The privatization of enskillment was not in this case compromised as skills were not transformed into knowledge which could then be shared or made public. Instead, people’s skills were seen much more unproblematically as residing in the individual. The intervention of MediaNet took the form of creating a market for such skilled people, rather than creating a public for specialized knowledge. The region would be ‘re-engineered’ through activities which enabled the ‘natural’ process of supply-and-demand economics. What was being sold was no longer knowledge but the well-known commodity of labour time, whilst skills were firmly relocated as the inalienable possessions of individual bodies. In fact, attention to attempts to match up a market for skills to skilled people reveals once again that the terms upon which people were situated as valuable assets involved not a commitment to an inalienable relationship between skills and persons, but rather the irresolvability of this opposition.

This notion of ‘re-engineering’ the region drew on the idea of a ‘skills gap’. This ‘skills gap’ referred to the relationship between the new industries which constituted part of this re-engineering process, and the availability of people to work in them. One of the fears was the possibility that the ‘pool’ of skills in the area was being bled dry by the lure of better employment prospects, either overseas or in London and the south-east through ~~an imagined~~ sense of the flows of a ‘globalized’ world. The need for skills represented a need for a particular pool of individuals with those skills which companies could draw on when needed, rather than the enskillment of individuals within the context of the work that they were engaged in. This conceptualization of a local skills shortage was only possible through the discursive articulation of space, whereby people could create local and global as opposed domains (Knox et al. 2012: 32–46).

The means through which MediaNet worked to resolve this much more market-oriented notion of skills was through an event called a ‘talent match’. The talent match, as the name suggests, was

an attempt to match graduates with particular skills to companies with particular needs. One part of the half-day event was a panel discussion between Nick, the director of a local business support organization, and members of staff from four new media companies in Manchester. Rows of chairs that had been set up facing the speakers gradually filled with local students who had come to the event in the hope of finding a job. A brief introduction giving the reason for such an event was given by Nick, and was articulated predominantly in terms of geography and the located nature of skill in the maintenance of an industry sector. Some of the speakers made suggestions as to the ways in which graduates from local universities could be encouraged to work in Manchester after leaving university. Partnerships between companies and particular degree courses, the sponsorship of academic modules by local companies and the placement of students in companies as part of their degree were all put forward as suggestions for the resolution of the movement of graduates away from the city.

The powerful connection between geography and skills has much to do with the way in which markets and economies are envisaged within regional development agendas. In a meeting between MediaNet, the local Regional Development Agency (RDA) and various new media companies, the director of ICT and new media at the RDA made continuous reference to the skills gap in the north-west. Acknowledging that there was a 'brain drain' from the region, he argued that there were ways in which Manchester could stem the flow of people from the city to the south-east. Using the example of Scottish 'clusters' of new media companies which had managed to attract graduates from other areas of the country to come and work for them, he reinforced the view that Greater Manchester, with its four universities, was well placed to have such an industry. Ensuring that the 'right' skills would be locally available was articulated in terms of trying to 'create, trap, and retain skilled and talented people', something implicitly considered much easier than having to attract already skilled people from elsewhere. The retention of 'local talent' was expressed alongside the common idea of 'inward investment'.

In economic development discourses, regional development is frequently seen to require inward investment. This sets up a penetrative view of the local economy that relies on a movement into the region from the outside. This idea draws heavily on globalization theses, which see global markets in terms of flows of goods and people. The role of development agencies is to channel these flows into the city or region through whatever means possible. Retention

of skilled people on the other hand is concerned with the notion of being 'home grown'. 'Home grown' refers to those people who were trained or educated in the region rather than just those who are born there, and includes those people who come to the region to go to university. This very educational model of home-grown talent is prevalent in local development discourses, and it involves an attempt to introduce a relationship of obligation among graduates of local university courses towards the fortunes of the region where they study. The way in which the notion of being 'home grown' was used in local development discourse often jarred, however, with people's own sense of identity, which put much greater emphasis on birth and family residence as a criteria of belonging. As people often pointed out, being educated in Manchester does not make you a Mancunian. At the same time, it is striking, as we think about issues to do with reciprocity and exchange, that the use of the term 'home grown' to refer to 'talent' played on this local sense of belonging in order to give greater credence to calls for 'local' talent to stay in the region.

Much of the work to keep graduates in the region to work in ICT and new media was based on the idea that graduates needed to be made aware of the jobs available. Against the push of movement inevitable in a dynamic and globalized world, skills had become a mechanism by which a claim could be made for the importance of regionality, locality and the necessity of geographical affiliation achieved by evoking a sense of locality which was potentially missing from the educational or vocational experiences through which people gained skills.

The suitability of skills as a discourse through which the project could be implemented was further complemented by the fact that MediaNet were audited on the basis of various indicators of success, including the number of new jobs the project had created. The number of jobs created by the presence of MediaNet in the city was almost impossible for the project's staff to quantify. However, activities which confronted the skills issue engaged critically with the idea of employment, and as such they provided a basis by which MediaNet were able to locate their effect on the local industry in a very obvious and visual way. The graduate placement scheme which matched graduates from the north-west with companies in the local area and 'brokering' activities like 'talent match', gave MediaNet a means by which they could be seen to be responsible for the creation of employment, and solid proof (in the form of micro-economic indicators) of the relevance of the support organization to the local industry.

So far we have seen the ways in which the discourse of skills was a means through which skills were imagined as commoditized aspects of people's selves, and how this came to be reproduced through the activities of organizations like MediaNet. Engagement with contemporary discourses surrounding skilled practice resulted in the abandonment of a form of business support which drew predominantly on the idea of communication with a public to a more economically oriented form of support which had the effect of creating a market for the skills which people in the area were imagined to have. Furthermore, the discourse of skills located in texts produced for global and national publics was incorporated into the processes by which economic development was legitimized, and by bringing about an imagined relationship between the different scales of local, national, European and global.

Just as MediaNet's staff were engaged in the tension between skills as something owned by people and skills as a circulating commodity, so too did new media companies articulate their experiences through recourse to the same discourse of skill. Many company managers discussed the skills of their staff in highly market-oriented terms, and made similar recourse to the same discourses of globalization and supply and demand. The manager of one of Manchester's new media companies very clearly articulated to me the importance of obtaining the people with the right skills, with the suggestion that it was only due to his foresight regarding the relative importance and redundancy of particular skills that they were awarded an important piece of work. Tying this need to constantly reshape the skills of his company's workers to fit the exigencies of the modern market economy, he explained:

The market changes so fast and moves so quickly, it is sometimes confusing. Well, it is confusing for us, and we live in this hyper-state . . . For example, over the last four months, when NASDAQ has been going through the floor, we've lost money in three consecutive months, and it took us three months to change direction . . . This month we made money, and we've dumped four or five people who were doing whatever we were doing before, right? . . . I have to look ahead and say, 'Oh God, if this doesn't work, what we're doing now, we're really going to be in it'. You know? But as it happened, I can tell you the anecdote: We made a decision to let go of some people with some skills and employ one or two others with other skills because we felt that the market was moving in that way. And you know, as it turned out, one of our major clients has just sacked one of their other developers – well, they didn't sack them, they resigned, they couldn't do it. Four months late on the project and

they resigned. And we got told yesterday we'd got the work. Christ, if we hadn't done what we've done, we wouldn't have had the facility to do the work, and you can't just recruit people like that, it takes two or three months.

Once again, we can see that the relationship between macro notions of economic instability and the necessity for individuals to take responsibility for their own capabilities was a central aspect of new media practice. This highly market-oriented conceptualization of skill, however, often appeared to undermine attempts of new media workers and company owners to tie themselves to workplaces in ways that would make not just their skills inalienable possessions of their own, but would also have the effect of making their labour part of a reciprocal engagement with the organizations and cities within which they worked.

Exchange Potential

In the panel discussion at the 'talent match' event described above, a dialogue took place which highlighted the discursive nature of the skills problem as envisaged by companies. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes illustrates the main thrust of the argument:

The two speakers from Magnetic seemed to agree with the idea of training new recruits up when they got into the company, and suggested that having specific skills beforehand was not as important as being willing and open to learn. But one of the other panel discussants interjected, explaining that he thought it was most important for people to make sure they had their own particular specialisms and keep it that way, so that whilst they could expand into other areas if they needed to, they always had something they were particularly good at.

Here we can see that the interest in skills lies less in the capabilities of individuals to carry out particular technical tasks than in exhibiting a particular kind of competence, which is judged by their ability to be flexible. In the retort given by the second speaker, the emphasis is on the value of an individual who has a particular specialism. This specialized knowledge is exalted as a valuable asset largely because of the unstable nature of the industry sector and an expectation that those working in that industry are likely to move from company to company. Having a specialism is shown here to be an important factor in obtaining employment, yet it only retains its importance by virtue of the fact that a constant re-evaluation of one's position and an expectation of movement between companies is woven into the language of work within this industry. What matters is

not so much technical ability in and of itself but the potential to be technologically capable. This is not to say that technological expertise is not valued, but that there is a very conscious awareness of the intransigence of particular technological skills, and a recognition that, in order to be successful, having the ability to change one's personal competencies is of central importance.

By the end of the discussion there was little agreement as to whether it was better to have one major skill or several at a lower level. However, everyone seemed to agree that, as the industry was growing so rapidly and it was thus a popular career choice for graduates, it was important for people to make themselves stand out. Everyone on the panel had got into the industry at a time when it was in its infancy and there were less people interested in it, but it has become increasingly associated with large salaries and unbelievable success stories, particularly in relation to the dotcom companies, so that now it is not enough to simply 'be enthusiastic' about getting into new media, you have to have something tangible to offer which will make you stand out from other applicants.

Informing these perspectives was the core notion of the company as a sustainable economic unit. However, in many new media companies, the need to be able to make money was paralleled by a need to make the workplace a desirable place for people to work. Managers of new media companies frequently distanced themselves from the potential accusation that their relationship with their employees was merely about the extraction of value. Instead, they worked hard to create seemingly new working practices which provided some kind of 'freedom' or self-determination for employees, and they were often frustrated when they found that the old pressures that they had faced in previous jobs had come back to haunt them in new workplaces that were supposed to operate according to different principles. Ross (2003) has provided a robust critique of the emancipatory benefits of the 'no collar' workplace, but nonetheless, the construction of a particular kind of workplace identity was a central preoccupation in the recruitment and retention of staff. In this light, the centrality of actual skills that was so evident in national and supranational discourses was frequently played down by people working in new media. The employment of new members of staff was often articulated in terms of people having the 'right personality' for the company, which was seen as a more important concern than what skills they had. In terms of the training that they were offered, instead of engaging in formal training, individuals were expected to engage in a process of trial and error through which they would gradually learn how to achieve a particular effect using a combination of different pieces of software.

This was seen to give the designer, for example, a sense of freedom, enabling them to explore their own capabilities.

This way of working tends to be posited in opposition to Taylorized forms of work activity, which have been widely criticized for being overly rigid, structured and non-creative (Braverman 1975). Through processes of 'experimentation' at work, staff could learn how to use a piece of software whilst simultaneously developing ideas that could potentially be used in a future job, a proposal for work or on the company's website as a marketing tool. The 'freedom' afforded to these workers in the development of their own capabilities, however, meant that they were supposed to fit such experimentation in and around other pieces of work. They would play with ideas for sites by surfing the internet, reading industry magazines and communicating with other members of staff. The experimental creative process was thus simultaneously a learning experience, an economic activity and a creative way through which people could express and thus develop their selves through notions of creative authorship. The terms upon which enskillment was read as any one of these kinds of activities depended in part on how it was rendered as a form of knowledge or practice that could or could not be alienated from the person, the company or the location where training took place.

Whilst a level of skill was clearly important for the completion of particular contracts, skills were largely considered by new media company employees to be something which could be learnt when needed, and the close relationship between skill and constantly changing technologies meant that an ability to learn and fit in with the company rather than the specific knowledge of how to use a particular program was generally considered more important. Certain skills were taken for granted, and were seen as so ubiquitous as to not require mention. Literacy, numeracy and the ability to use a computer were all expected pre-requisites of employment. These were not even categorized as skills and were considered to be a form of basic ability rather than expert knowledge or specialist competency. When people talked about skills in new media companies, they referred very specifically to the technical knowledge of how to manipulate a particular computer program. Most people working in the technical or design areas of new media development were able to reel off a list of software and programming languages which they were familiar with. 'Creative' ability was not usually categorized as a skill in such discussions, and an ability to be creative was more likely to be considered to be as a talent that a person either had or did not have.

What emerged out of conversations with new media companies then was not the importance of simply matching skilled individuals with positions which required specific skills, as in the ‘talent match’ model, but rather the requirement of employees within new media companies to be constantly aware of the need to manage themselves as a portfolio of more or less generic capacities which would make them employable in an uncertain and shifting market.

One example of this was the large online community of ‘Flash’ designers, who shared expertise, on various discussion sites, about how to manipulate the software to achieve different effects with the software. People who had ‘creative’ ideas but did not know the intricacies of coding to create them into animated movies would post a message on a message board for advice on how to achieve the effect they desired. In a popular critique of modern marketing, Locke (2001) identifies ‘communities of interest’, as he calls them, as one of the most important features of the internet. Whilst his manifesto is aimed at marketing managers, his observation that such communities are indicative of the most powerful potential of the internet supports the notion that skills are increasingly understood as the responsibility of the private individual. Such online communities represent a move away from apprenticeship – where a lineage of knowledge, both explicit and tacit, is established in particular settings (Sigaut 1993) – to a collection of individuals characterized by a communitarian logic rather than hierarchical responsibility who share their own technical expertise with others in the expectation that their collaborative sensibilities will be reciprocated.¹

Once again, the tension between the individualization or inalienability of skill and the capacity to put knowledge into circulation for the greater good in the case of software programmers points us towards the reworking of the relationship between the public and the private under flexible capitalism. As Kelty (2008) has pointed out, the open-source movement has been a powerful force in rethinking the terms upon which contemporary forms of public expression are being enacted. No longer can the individual be seen to be the autonomous site of authorship and invention. Rather, public forms of knowledge reconfigure the status of the individual in flexible capitalism. For Kelty, this takes the form of membership of what he calls a ‘recursive public’ (ibid.: 3). Meanwhile, the same calls for openness can be seen simultaneously to require the re-establishment of the terms by which claims to inalienability can be made as a form of resistance to the fluidity of a liquid modernity where jobs, opportunities and prospects are increasingly conceived of, rightly or

wrongly, as decoupled from the entanglements of geography and history.

I suggest that the importance of recognizing skill as a potential rather than an actual capacity which could be measured in the way in which MediaNet's systems of accountability required was one way in which people recovered something of the sociality which was erased by the way in which a discourse of skills had the effect of apparently objectifying skill into a market commodity. Designers and programmers saw themselves as simultaneously agents of change and innovation, and at the same time subjects of forces of transformation which they were having to respond to in their practices of retraining and re-skilling. Critically, it was more important for people to be able to demonstrate certain abilities of enskillment and flexibility than it was for them to have already learnt how to use a particular piece of equipment.

Conclusion

By moving away from an analysis of skill and knowledge as inherently human capacities towards an analysis which focuses on the ways in which the relationship between skills and knowledge in contemporary economies concerns the relative alienability or inalienability of knowledge from persons, organizations and places, I suggest that we have had to shift the terms of analysis of the new economy onto new terrain. I have paid attention to the ways in which discourses regarding the relative importance of skills and knowledge to economic improvement have come to produce difficulties, ambiguities and contestations over the power, freedom and control of workers in a global new media industry in ways that make it difficult to fall easily on the side of support for the emancipatory effects of new forms of work, or wholeheartedly embrace critical accusations of domination and relations of exploitation that they might be seen to entail. Instead, I have suggested that the way in which the relative alienability or inalienability of knowledge and capacity has been, and continues to be, negotiated in the context of new media work raises important questions about how public and private domains are being navigated, and social and political responsibility is being articulated in relation to processes of economic change. As the knowledge economy continues to be mobilized as a trope through which education and business are brought together to generate new forms of governance, accountability and responsibility, I suggest that using anthropological insights such as exchange theory so as to remain attuned to the specific ways

in which capacities and persons become entangled and detached at different scales can provide us with a powerful means of remaining attuned to the politics of economic transformation under shifting terrains of flexible capitalism.

Whilst exchange theory has concentrated primarily on the way in which exchange relations entail the negotiation of social relations of debt and obligation as they pertain to the circulation of objects within communities, an investigation of the commoditization of skills under what has come to be known as 'flexible capitalism' introduces the question of how the intrinsic sociality of enskillment is dealt with in a system of exchange which increasingly attempts to render skill an alienable quality. Whilst Narotzky (this volume) suggests that these forms of social reciprocity have become increasingly made available as a resource for (flexible) capital accumulation, I have emphasized the ambiguities inherent in this process by demonstrating that reciprocity remains a complex issue which continues to produce confusion and uncertainty, particularly at the interface of public and private sector organizations. In this respect, I have variously shown: how an individualized conception of the embodied nature of skills is re-socialized through attempts to transform personal skills into generic or 'best practice' examples of knowledge in a way that allows the collective basis of training and learning to return to society in the form of a publicly available form of knowledge; how the exchange of knowledge is itself complicated by expectations about the proper forms of reciprocity that should be manifested in a relationship between public sector and private sector organizations which are situated in different positions vis-à-vis their relative roles and responsibilities for producing industry-level sectoral development; and how attempts at the implementation of a market for skills raises the question of both who it is that must take responsibility for ensuring a pool of skilled individuals to service the needs of a high-tech industry, and what kinds of skilled practice count as the responsibility of the individual vis-à-vis those skills that remain the responsibility of the state.

In the final section, I suggested that the idea that a pool of individuals is needed to fill a corresponding pool of jobs misses a key dynamic in people's experiences of flexible capitalism, one which is revealed by paying attention to exchange – that is, the importance of being receptive to the uncertainty of the future and demonstrating a capacity for transformation (Knox et al. 2007) in the face of shifting environments. I have suggested that we might see this attention to the importance of personal potential as a particular means by

which people working within flexible capitalism negotiate the sociality of a market system which works to transform complex histories of personal relations into marketable commodities. The experience of work in flexible capitalism is thus shown to be neither primarily a matter of new forms of exploitation, nor of increasing autonomy and worker control, but rather a site for working out what kinds of exchange relationships are appropriate as people try to negotiate the (re)constitution of a division between public and private modes of social organization.

Note

- 1 See Adkins (2005) for a discussion of the de-differentiation of culture and economy in labour relations in the new economy.

References

- Adkins, L. 2005. 'The New Economy, Property and Personhood', *Theory, Culture and Society* 22(1): 111–130.
- Ahearn, L.M. 2001. 'Language and Agency', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30: 109–137.
- Bloomfield, B.P., and T. Vurdubakis. 1997. 'The Revenge of the Object: On Artificial Intelligence as a Cultural Enterprise', *Social Analysis*, special issue, 41(1): 29–45.
- Braverman, H. 1975. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Costall, A. 1997. 'The Meaning of Things', *Social Analysis*, special issue, 41(1): 76–85.
- DTI. 1999. *Our Competitive Future: Building the Knowledge Driven Economy*. London: Stationery Office.
- DTI and DEE. 2001. 'Opportunity for All in a World of Change', White Paper. London: Stationery Office.
- EC. 2000. 'North West England: Objective 2 SPD 2000'. E. Commission. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- Gee, J.P. 2000. 'The New Literacy Studies: From "Socially Situated" to the Work of the Social', in R. Ivanic, M. Hamilton and D. Barton (eds), *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*. London: Routledge, pp.180–196.

- Goody, J., and I. Watt 1963. 'The Consequences of Literacy', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5: 306–326.
- Graeber, D. 2011. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. New York: Melville House.
- Graves-Brown, P. 1997. 'From Highway to Superhighway: The Sustainability, Symbolism and Situated Practices of Car Culture', *Social Analysis*, special issue, 41(1): 64–75.
- Gregory, C.A. 1982. *Gifts and Commodities*. London: Academic Press.
- Harvey, P. (ed.). 1997. 'Technology as Skilled Practice', *Social Analysis*, special issue, 41(1): 3–14.
- Ingold, T. 1993. 'Tool-use, Sociality and Intelligence', in K.R. Gibson and T. Ingold (eds), *Tools, Language and Cognition in Human Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 429–445.
- 1995. 'Building, Dwelling, Living', in M. Strathern (ed.), *Shifting Contexts: Transformations in Anthropological Knowledge*. London: Routledge, pp. 57–80.
- Keller, C., and J.D. Keller 1993. 'Thinking and Acting with Iron', in S. Chaiklin and J. Lave (eds), *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 125–143.
- Kelty, C.M. 2008. *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Knox, H., D. O'Doherty, T. Vurdubakis and C. Westrup. 2007. 'Transformative Capacity, Information Technology, and the Making of Business "Experts"', *Sociological Review* 55(1): 22–41.
- 2012. 'Enacting the Global in the Age of Enterprise Resource Planning', *Anthropology in Action* 19(1): 32–46.
- Kulick, D., and C. Stroud. 1990. 'Christianity, Cargo and Ideas of Self: Patterns of Literacy in a Papua New Guinean Village', *Man* 25(2): 286–304.
- Lave, J. 1988. *Cognition in Practice: Mind, Mathematics and Culture in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Locke, C. 2001. *Gonzo Marketing: Winning through Worst Practices*. Oxford: Capstone Publishing.
- Mauss, M. 1966. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. I. Cunnison. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- 1973. 'Body Techniques', *Economy and Society* 2(1): 70–88.
- Narotzky, S. 1999. *New Directions in Economic Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.
- Ross, A. 2003. *No Collar: The Hidden Cost of the Humane Workplace*. New York: Basic Books.
- Sigaut, F. 1993. 'Learning, Teaching, and Apprenticeship', *New Literary History* 24(1): 105–114.
- Strathern, M. 1997. 'A Return to the Native', *Social Analysis*, special issue, 41(1): 15–27.

- Street, B. 1984. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B., and N. Besnier. 1994. 'Aspects of Literacy', in T. Ingold (ed.), *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. London: Routledge, pp. 527–562.
- Suchman, L., and R.H. Trigg. 1993. 'Artificial Intelligence as Craftwork', in S. Chaiklin and J. Lave (eds), *Understanding Practice: Perspectives on Activity and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 144–178.
- Wastell, S. 2001. 'Presuming Scale, Making Diversity – On the Mischiefs of Measurement and the Global: Local Metonym in Theories of Law and Culture', *Critique of Anthropology* 21(2): 185–210.
- Weiner, A.B. 1992. *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-while-Giving*. Berkeley: University of California Press.