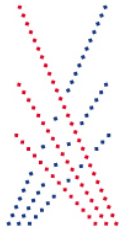

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Standing out from the Crowd:
Enacting Network Cultures of Organisation through Unconferencing

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Summary

This paper seeks to critically understand how information and communication technology (ICT) workers organise and share knowledge in ways that seek to transcend formal organisational boundaries and navigate the demands of high performance management cultures. We focus on unconferencing, a participant-centred, participatory approach to organising. Conceptually and empirically, we seek to understand the cultural values on which unconferencing is based and the knowledge sharing practices it enables. Through analysis of a qualitative interview and observational study of unconference organisers and participants, we identify three themes on which this form of network organisation relies: 'open source community', 'structureless organisation' and 'freedom through escape'. We show how these themes are used by participants to co-construct a culture that differentiates them as a distinct group of knowledgeable experts capable of influencing the sector.

Keywords: Entrepreneurialism; Interorganisational networks; Knowledge sharing practices; Unconferencing.

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Introduction

The rise of networks as a mode of organising in the contemporary informational economy is suggested to have enhanced opportunities for interorganisational knowledge sharing (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002) across time and space boundaries. The information and communication technology (ICT) sector is particularly conducive to enabling such distributed, networked forms of communication (Castells, 2015). The ICT labour market is now characterised by high performance cultures enabled by increasingly outsourced, casualised and geographically dispersed work, with many workers operating as freelancers (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howecroft, 2014; Pongratz, 2018). Such flexibilisation is indicative of a broader shift in the current cultural political economy towards increasing entrepreneurialism (Butcher, 2018; Fairclough, 2007; Harvey, 2007; Holtgrewe, 2014; Loacker & Śliwa, 2016; Pongratz & Voß, 2003). 'Projectification' of ICT work through the introduction of new technologies has reshaped the labour market (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howecroft, 2013). Such fragmentation and ephemerality of working life have implications for how and where ICT workers maintain the currency of their knowledge and skills, and for how they construct and maintain distinctive individual occupational identities.

In this paper, we examine how ICT workers enact network cultures of organisation through the practice of unconferencing to navigate the demands of high performance management cultures. Unconferencing is a method of organising participant-centred, 'free-form' (Ohmann, 1974) meetings that are characterised by the absence of formal structure (Boule, 2011; Wolf et al., 2011). There is no agenda and participants self-organise to identify and work on issues of shared interest (Budd et al., 2015). This provides an opportunity for teamwork and community building (Budd et al, 2015), a platform for knowledge sharing and learning (Dennerlein et al. 2015), and an emancipatory resource (de Groot and van der Vijver, 2013). Specifically in the ICT sector, Pongratz (2018) identifies how independent workers are increasingly rejecting the moniker of 'freelancers' to discursively co-construct self-affirming personas as 'talent'. Together, they create 'talent pools' through which to co-construct knowledge and generate new opportunities for work (Pongratz, 2018; Spinuzzi, 2012). Thus, conceptually, we suggest that unconferencing provides a performative platform for the enactment of individual and collective proficiency through interorganisational knowledge sharing. Empirically, we will examine how ICT workers use unconferencing as a platform to not only exchange knowledge and skills, but to also to 'stand out from the crowd' by co-constructing and enacting distinctive occupational identities. Following the metaphor of staging and performing, we are particularly interested in how ICT workers use unconferencing as a platform on which to enact knowledgeable proficiency as experts and educators. We therefore aim to critically understand how and why the practices of unconferencing are transforming entrepreneurial discourses and co-constructing a distinct social strata in the ICT sector through cultures of performative networking.

This paper will proceed with a critical review of extant literature, followed by an outline of our empirical methods, preliminary findings, and plans to extend the paper. Our approach assumes that organisational knowledge is situated, social, contextually-determined and dynamic. Collective knowledge emerges through interaction within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This draws attention to the social nature of learning within communities and focuses on the importance of social relationships and exchange in the creation of knowledge.

Interactions are based on relationships of mutuality and shared understanding of the collective purpose served by engagement with other members of a social learning system (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Knowledge sharing communities rely on a shared repertoire of language, sensibilities, routines, tools and stories, that enable members to demonstrate their proficiency (Wenger, 2000; Orr, 1996).

Why unconferencing?

Developing reciprocal practices of knowledge and skills sharing has become key to freelance ICT workers' ability to build their reputations and 'win' contract-based work (Azad et al, 2016; Holtgrewe 2014; Pongratz, 2018). "A freelance culture requires an active and effective network, both in terms of finding work and workers, becoming a key conduit of knowledge about job opportunities" (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howecroft, 2013: 974). Such neoliberal discourse is creating a widening digital divide in the ICT labour market (after Pongratz, 2018). At least two types of platform currently exist for ICT freelancers to seek work: online platforms colloquially known as 'the crowd', where individuals win work based solely on client ratings of their previous work (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howecroft, 2014); and physical spaces of knowledge and skills sharing via exchange-based networking practices (Pongratz, 2018), such as unconferencing. These are precarious spaces, where an on-going stream of work is far from guaranteed.

The crowd is a particularly precarious space, where freelance ICT workers operate in virtual anonymity, dependent on the good faith of past clients to provide ratings that future clients refer to when deciding whether or not to hire them for discrete piecemeal task-based work (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howecroft, 2014). The crowd, via platforms such as Amazon's Mechnical Turk, is a marketplace where freelancers sell their services to the highest bidder. To identify oneself as a freelancer is therefore no longer sufficient to 'standout from the crowd'. So, in physical networking spaces, such as unconferencing, discourses circulate differently – through networking practices rather than market dynamics – with ICT workers identifying themselves not just as freelancers but as 'talent' (Pongratz, 2018). Unconferencing provides platforms on which individuals are given time and space to promote their distinctive capabilities by sharing ideas and educating others. Similar discourses of shared learning and exchange practices have been observed in coworking spaces (Butcher, 2018), and maker spaces (de Vaujany & Aroles, 2018). A key discursive outcome of these exchange practices is 'talent pooling' – the creation of informal networks through which individuals coalesce to learn from each other, co-create new ideas, and reinforce their individual and collective occupational identities (Butcher, 2018; Pongratz, 2018; Spinuzzi, 2012). The divide between those who merely process data in the crowd and those self-described talents who create knowledge in the ICT sector is stark. Whilst it is not necessarily easy to escape the crowd, to fall back into it is. The ambiguities of this labour market (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2014) create a sense of precarity that is a key motivation for freelancers to find ways to co-construct network-based occupational identities as talent that distinguish them from that market.

For Benkler (2006), networks have the potential to transform the information economy through radical decentralisation. The 'networked information economy' is enabled by nonmarket-based individual and cooperative production of information and knowledge – a trend that he associates with free and open source software communities. Benkler (2006) argues that the power of networks stems from their ability to create freedom from capital requirements of production which 'limit practical individual freedom to cooperate with others in making things

of value' (p.14). This paves the way for what Benkler refers to as non-market collaborations between individuals as social beings rather than market actors, who can do more in 'loose commonality with others, without being constrained to organise their relationship through a price system or traditional hierarchical models of social and economic organisation' (p.17). Critically, however, scholars have observed that few are immune to the pull of the free market. Whilst creatives are drawn into precarious unskilled low-paid work to be able to pay the rent and pursue their arts-based practices, even academics feel the demands of the free market to remain flexible, mobile and adaptable to the marketisation of that sector (Gill & Pratt, 2008; Loacker & Śliwa, 2016).

Benkler (2006) argues though that the networked information economy enhances the capacity of individuals to act in ways that have the potential to improve democracy and enhance critical culture. Key to this is the fluidity of networks, and loose affiliations between individuals as the basis of collaboration. What is distinctive about Benkler's argument is that it is the *technical* characteristics of computer networks, which he argues has enabled a shift away from *organisational* structures based on hierarchies, towards non-marketised, fluid interactions. This provides the basis for what he terms 'commons-based peer-production', a 'new modality' of organizing 'based on sharing resources and outputs among widely distributed, loosely connected individuals who cooperate with each other without relying on either market signals or managerial commands' (p.85).

Networks arguably thus provide an alternative to markets and hierarchies that challenges the economic view of the firm (Podolny and Page, 1998). Podolny and Page (1998) assert that, unlike adversarial markets, legitimate organisational authority is absent from networks, and 'can be characterised by a distinct ethic or value-orientation on the part of exchange partners' (p.60) and a high level of trust and obligation between members. Interorganisational knowledge sharing is therefore enabled by an ability to transcend organisational boundaries, for rapid transfer of information and 'encouraging novel syntheses of information that are qualitatively distinct from the information that previously resided within distinct nodes' (Poldony and Page, 1998: 63). Powell et al (1996) suggest that, within networks, innovation is reliant on interorganisational relationships rather than on protection of organisational affiliations, markets and firms. This helps to sustain a fluid and evolving community and provides a basis for reciprocal knowledge exchange. Some scholars suggest networks are a particular kind of social order that is distinct from other types of organisation because 'a genuine network emerges spontaneously' and membership evolves informally through relationships (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011: 90).

Spaces that offer networking opportunities such unconferences have thus become central to entrepreneurial learning and identity construction. Unconferencing is not a new idea. It has been adopted in various sectors including in education (Ohmann, 1974), space exploration (Summerer, 2014), librarianship (Lawson, 2010; Costello, 2007), health promotion (Norman, 2009) and scientific research (Budd et al, 2015). Unconferencing practices are related to the notion of the 'camp' - examples include EdCamp[i], BarCamp, PodCamp, Mashup Camp and FooCamp (Bacon, 2012). One of the first was Foo[ii] Camp, organised by O'Reilly & Associates in 2003 as an outdoor gathering for Silicon Valley ICT workers where participants camped in tents.[iii] It might thus be seen as space of retreat, for learning and self-development. Unconferencing draws on and overlaps with a wide range of alternative meeting and presentational techniques including Lightening Talks, Norinal Group Technique, PechaKucha and Ignite (Boule, 2011), 'unBla' (Wolf and Troxler, 2008), peer conferencing (Segar, 2010) and World Café (Brown, 2010). Unconferencing is suggested to offer the possibility of

overcoming power inequalities associated with conventional conferences (Vanneste, 2008), including those that contribute to lack of voice by reinforcing established hierarchies and power inequalities (Bell and King, 2010; Ford and Harding, 2008; Nicholson, 2017).

Thus, we argue that unconferencing provides key platforms for enacting network cultures as a means to co-construct non-market-based occupational identities in the ICT sector. Conceptually, this is an outcome of the marketisation of the sector, in that entrepreneurial individuals are seeking to co-construct ways to liberate themselves from it. It is a means through which individuals enact alternative discourses to those of the market-based crowd, through shared learning practices and the co-construction of new, liberated discourses that position themselves as knowledge providers, or talents, rather than data processors or information workers. Our empirical research will examine the situated social practices of unconferencing to understand how such individuals collectively enact network cultures of organisation to performatively co-produce personas of entrepreneurial proficiency and expertise, and thus a new elite class of ICT professional.

Methods

We take a practice perspective on organisation, seeing it as a social formation comprised of bundles of practices and material arrangements (Schatzki, 2002). According to such a perspective, knowledge sharing in interorganisational networks is based on practices that are characterised by certain collective (involving multiple people), material and spatial, as well as social arrangements. Fundamental to this is the idea that the social reality of organisation is constituted through practices (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011). This enables a focus on actions that are performed in the enactment of networked organisation, including the 'practice-arrangement bundles' (Schatzki, 2005) on which they are based.

Our analysis is based on qualitative case study analysis of three unconferences between January 2015 and July 2016. Cases were selected on the basis of anticipated opportunity to generate an inductive understanding of an emergent phenomenon (Stake, 1995). The first event, Spacecamp[iv], was a two-day unconference attended by 45 freelance project managers, consultants and trainers and held in a Spanish city. The second, Freecamp, is an annual one-day unconference now in its 9th year that attracts around 200 participants, mainly ICT workers in UK public sector organisations and independent learning and technology consultants. The third is Connectcamp, a one-day unconference on communications, attended by approximately 160 participants, mainly employed in technology related and communications roles in UK public sector organisations.

With the consent of organisers, we attended these events as participant observers, taking fieldnotes based on our observations and experiences and following social media coverage via Twitter and blog posts. Immediately prior to, during and following the unconference, snowball sampling was used to identify suitable respondents (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 29 unconference organisers and participants, including organisers of other unconferences. Respondents were based in the UK (n = 19), Germany (5), Spain (2), USA (1), Belgium (1), Cyprus (1), and several participants and organisers understood themselves to be part of a global unconferencing network. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Most interviews were conducted via Skype, which was seen by our respondents as a naturalistic mode of social interaction (Hanna, 2012). Analysis began by reading transcripts closely several times before uploading the data into NVivo and using the software to code thematically. Analysis was iterative, first-order coding of recurrent

terms used by interviewees forming the basis for ongoing data collection and second-order coding of a more abstract, conceptual nature. This led to development of three interconnecting themes discussed in this paper: i) open source community; ii) structureless organisation and iii) freedom through escape, to co-construct knowledgeable proficiency (i.e. talent pools). We tested the validity of these themes with respondents using an end of project event modelled on unconference practices, attended by 20 unconference organisers and participants.

The practice of unconferencing

Unconferencing is characterised not only by an understanding of how to do things, but also by clearly articulated rules, including 'explicit formulations that prescribe, require, or instruct that such and such be done, said, or the case' (Schatzki, 2002: 471). These rules are drawn from Open Space Technology (OST), an approach to leadership and meeting organisation developed by Harrison Owen (2008). One of the first rules is: 'whoever comes are the right people; whatever happens is the only thing that could have; whenever it starts is the right time; and when it's over, it's over' (Owen, 2008: 95). This was likened by one organiser, Conrad, to a jazz session. A further rule is the 'Law of Two Feet, which states that *if, during our time together, you find yourself in any situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet and go to some more productive place'* (Owen, 2008: 95, emphasis in original). Rules also influence the physical arrangements of the unconference, which is seen as important in enabling open communication, such as by participants forming a circle (Owen, 1997). Practices are also embodied, such as through the use of breathing: 'when you need to leave a discussion, session, or workshop to clear your head, to relax, or to cool off during a particularly heated discussion, you are encouraged to do so… you are then free to join the session you left or find somewhere else you would rather be' (Boule, 2011: 19).

An unconference typically begins with participants generating ideas that are written down and placed into the 'marketplace', a bulletin board in a central area. Participants then decide which ideas are most important to the group, typically by voting. Active participation is expected - it is emphasised that there is 'no space for tourists'.[v] Formal presentations and PowerPoint slides are discouraged (Costello, 2007: 23). This provides the basis for agenda formation on the day, as this account highlights.

> Lead organiser [Jason] gives an introduction which lasts around 2 minutes. It is a large room. All participants are assembled. Some wear T shirts with logos and details of previous camps they have attended. Jason is holding an air horn which he sounds to get the attention of the group. The mood and tone is upbeat: 'welcome to [Freecamp] 2016' – cheer, repeat – louder cheer. 'This is not going to be a conventional conference, where you listen to white male panels, it's an unconference, which means that *you* set the agenda'. He asks who has been to [Freecamp] before, around two thirds raise their hands. [Freecamp fieldnotes]

The next stage of the process involves 'pitching' - anyone who wants to propose a session makes a brief (30 second) pitch for what they want to discuss. Some organisers suggested pitching should be entirely unplanned and spontaneous to ensure sessions are genuinely user generated. This ensures participation and lessens the power of meeting organisers to shape agendas (Boule, 2011; Owen, 2008). At Freecamp, participants were asked: '*who's interested in that session?*', prompting a show of hands. Audience response was used to calculate the size of the room the session took place in; if no hands are raised the session does not take place. Unconference planners, or 'campmakers', write parallel session details onto a poster sheet with

timings, room numbers and information about the 'pitcher' who will introduce and facilitate the session. The whole process was concluded within an hour and the remainder of the day dedicated to sessions proposed by participants.

Social media and other technologies are important in enabling unconference communication. Many events encourage the use wikis, blogs, Twitter and teamworking apps prior to, during and following a meeting (Boule, 2011). Social media is seen by advocates of unconferencing as a way of granting autonomy to individuals, and is contrasted with formal organisations that have 'sought to suppress or steer individual autonomy, through the imposition of professionalism, job descriptions, command-and-control management' (Barrington-Bush, 2013: 53). Participants also associate unconferencing with Agile Software development and the Agile principles of 'self-organisation' and 'co-location'[vi].

> You're never going to beat the bandwidth of face-to-face communication in the same room… If you go to the Agile manifesto, one of the principles is… face-to-face communication is the best… the people that… are most at the heart of the Agile movement… are almost dogmatic about co-located teams. [Jeff, informant]

Face-to-face communication was generally seen as key to the effectiveness of unconferences.

> I'd seen in the USA the first Bar Camp… a number of people in my… blogging network were… either directly involved in that or who were talking about it… that was my first real exposure to unconferences in about 2005… I was meeting lots of people online that I wanted to spend time with offline. I knew that there were people that lived just down the road from me… I'd never met them face-to-face, but I was spending an awful lot of my time with them. So… how do we meet up, how do we join up all these people who are doing interesting things online together in the real world?... My experience had been… meeting up with people who I'd originally met online and having conversations and building relationships and just having fun and talking about ideas, meant that when we went back online our online relationships were even more productive and more interesting, and had expanded. [William, informant]

> With an unconference, you have a physical event in a place and a bunch of people come to that and they share their stories, their energy, their questions, their issues, their obstacles, you know, whatever it happens to be… You get people from different sectors, from different perspectives, from different organisations and from different places geographically, converging on a place to have this sort of wonderful experience of energy and sharing and creativity… [Simon, Freecamp]

Yet, despite the existence of formal rules, open space practices have the potential to generate 'significant tension between the need to allow emergent decisions to guide the group rather than adopt action for its own sake, and the need to see concrete results in order to maintain enthusiasm and participation' (Ganesh and Zoller, 2014: 246).

Open source community

The values of unconferencing are also associated with open source software development, a decentralised, participatory system that grants users the right to use, copy and change software through the free availability of source code. Open source is motivated by the shared goal of producing better computer software through providing an alternative to industrial, proprietary approaches to technology development (Pearce, 2014). It depends on many individuals

contributing to a common project 'and sharing their respective contributions without a single individual or entity asserting rights to exclude either from the contributed components or from the resulting whole' (Benkler, 2006). Unconference participants emphasise the importance of these values in informing their practice.

> [Open source] has an ethos of sharing and creating stuff together… [the] key issue [is that] people… are open, sharing, informal… It's really whether you believe that by meeting people, giving stuff away, sharing stuff, having it spread, more comes back to you than you lose. That's the really fundamental issue… It's the difference between networking, as in trying to make contacts and pitch stuff, and sharing in a network. [Josh, informant]

While this self-organizing system originates in software engineering, the concepts of collective organisation and peer production on which it relies are seen as having broad organisational application (Benkler, 2006). Freecamp organiser, Jason, explained: '*in the tech sector in particular people are more amenable to like putting an idea out, having a discussion and then, you know, challenging perceptions and actually trying to talk it through and stuff*'. This includes the sharing of resources and giving information and knowledge for free, rather than as commercial exchange.

> One of the elements of open source community is that stuff is free, and not just free in the monetary sense but without restriction… There's a gut feeling that to really get the value that you can get from maximum participation… [you] have to remove… restrictions, like charging and so on. So I think there's an ethos… [to] charge would be going against that kind of open democratic, participatory spirit because, you know, you start to exclude people… It's [also] the idea that… the knowledge… doesn't belong to any one individual... Those concepts have been… concretised or made sort of more tangible in the open source community. [Ed, Freecamp]

The purpose of the network is to enable relationships between people and information and knowledge to pass between them quickly and easily.

> …the premise… is share your experience, share your knowledge and learn from each other, that's the core… I guess I'm just at that point in my career, and maybe life, where I've got a lot of things that I've been through professionally that I know people will find useful because they've told me previously… Why would I be silent if I can talk about something that might help somebody else? [Dan, Spacecamp]

Spacecamp organiser, Conrad, associated this with the '*network effect*' which means '*the larger the user base is, the… higher… the opportunity to get something back from the user base… When open source became… mainstream at the beginning of 2000 or so… there were a lot of people that just liked the fact that they could see what's happening behind the scenes… openness in terms of transparency*'. By making things publicly and freely available to everyone, the open source movement is suggested to have enabled 'a considerable reorientation of knowledge and power in contemporary society – a reorientation of power with respect to the creation, dissemination, and authorisation of knowledge' (Kelty, 2008: 2).

Structureless organisation

A third theme that characterises the teleoaffective structure of the unconference is the value of structureless organisation. Within networks 'horizontality is the norm, and [it is presumed that]

there is little need for leadership because the coordination functions can be exercised by the network itself through interaction between its nodes' (Castells, 2015: 132). As in social movements and feminist organizing, this is driven by a desire for leaderless organisation as a means of overcoming oppression (Freeman, 1971). However, as we discuss later in the paper, such desire is prone to being undermined. Structurelessness is signalled by the absence of job titles on name badges, to enable conversations to take place without awareness of an individuals' position in an organisational hierarchy or professional community. Participants contrast this with conventional conferences comprised of panel presentations delivered by '*men in suits*'. One rule of Freecamp, distributed to participants at the start of the day was: '*Been talking for a while? Shut up!*' [fieldnotes]. This was viewed by unconference organiser, Jason, as the most important rule of the event. While he acknowledged that it was not possible to remove awareness of status hierarchies altogether, (regular attendees who were known as leaders in their field being accorded higher status than other participants), he commented, '*we very rarely get someone who is sort of blasé or who has a huge ego, who just thinks I know everything, just listen to me and do what I say*.' Discouragement, or even talk of 'banning' PowerPoint presentations is used to limit one-way, didactic communication.

> At the beginning, I try to explain that if you come armed with a massive slide deck and you expect to tell people everything on the slide deck and then do a Q&A you're in the wrong place. [Jason, Freecamp]

If participants find a session is not working for them - for instance if it is dominated by one individual who sees it as 'their divine mission to impart [knowledge], regardless of anyone else's feelings or desires' (Owen, 2008: 95), they are encouraged to exercise the 'law of two feet' and leave the room.

> I have seen a session where somebody, some consultant did walk in there and started firing up a PowerPoint, basically doing a hard sell, and everybody walked out of the session. [Otto, Freecamp]

However, enforcing this norm could sometimes be problematic and organisers and participants varied in their willingness to tolerate speakers who resisted. For example, at Freecamp, one of the first sessions involved a lengthy PowerPoint presentation where the session pitcher, (who seemed to be well-known to participants), spoke continuously to an audience of approximately 30 people for 15 minutes. At this point:

> An audience member introduces himself and says 'In my role as moderator, we are now 15 minutes into the 45-minute session and nobody else has spoken yet'. The speaker appears defensive. He stops his presentation and says 'I've been instructed to engage you all in conversation'. There is a pause. Someone says, 'I have a question…' The speaker sits on the desk and answers the question at some length. No one uses the rule of two feet. Some further questions follow, audience members raise their hands to indicate they wish to speak, the speaker indicates when he is ready to hear them by saying 'next question'. He then answers the question by saying things like 'I can tell you'. Questions are not necessarily answered in the order in which hands are raised. [fieldnotes]

As this example highlights, self-organisation implies that authority rests with the session 'pitcher' who exercises a high degree of influence in shaping participant interactions. The group does not necessarily challenge their authority despite rules that encourage them to do so.

As in open source software development (Duguid, 2006), the idea of the unconference as a self-organizing system where there are no rules is misleading. Some unconference practitioners expressed awareness of the tensions between the need for authority and structurelessness.

> There's a tendency in [the] open space… facilitation community, to move towards structurelessness and I think that open space is actually quite structured… There's a very specific authority structure design in open space. But people who are drawn to open space are often almost like anarchists and they don't want to have any bosses… There's definitely a movement in that direction in industry, in [ICT]… managing both so that you're aware of the value of some kind of… visible structure. It's just an ongoing issue for me. [Jeff, key informant]

As Freeman (1971) argues, there is no such thing as a 'structureless' group and nothing 'inherently bad' about structure and organisation. Therefore, 'to reject them out of hand because they are misused is to deny ourselves the necessary tools for further development' (p.152). Where unconferencing differs from conventional conferences is in making rules of interaction explicit and transparent. This 'hinders the informal structure from having predominant control and makes available some means of attacking it' (Freeman (1971: 153). By using rules to try to restrict the influence of informal or covert structure, the visible structure of the unconference limits informal communication within elite groupings, based on friendship, shared values and orientations. This distinguishes it from informal networks which tend to reinforce and perpetuate elites. Nevertheless, it is arguable that through these network cultures, new informal networks form and elite groups emerge.

Freedom through escape

A third characteristic of unconferencing arises from the value of freedom, as liberation from formal hierarchies and commercial exchange relationships, as highlighted by Ed:

> the fact that anybody is free to talk about anything is a key characteristic of [Bar Camps]; the fact that it's community organised, it's informal, it's grassroots. [Ed, Freecamp]

Jessica from Spacecamp explained, '*there are not really any rules and you can… be spontaneous*', despite the clear articulation of rules. Similarly, for Kurt [Spacecamp], freedom was characterised by being able to '*hop from one session to another*'. Most events are organised in a central location, often sourced at relatively low cost or enabled by sponsorship. The principle that unconferences are free to attend was viewed as important by participants.

> I don't charge anybody for my meet-up group… I've got sponsors… and I don't spend a penny, the attendees don't spend a penny, the speakers most of the time are kind enough not to ask for a fee because they support this kind of thing… I think that's how it should be, it's a principle thing. [Dan, Spacecamp]

To ensure equality of opportunity, tickets are distributed on a first-come-first-served basis but this can cause problems related to inability to meet demand, as Jason [Freecamp] explained:

> Dunbar's Number… [is] the total number of people that you can have in a social context and maintain a kind of network with the people… If we go above 200 it's probably going to be difficult… to talk to… and remember those people… The way we're doing it the last few years, it's broken basically. The demand completely outstrips… supply.

> So, the last few years we've been releasing five batches of tickets at different points, different times of day, different points in the week… The tickets, they go unavailable within about a minute or two and they all get booked within nine minutes, so it's ridiculous.

Unconferencing was suggested to be a practice that took place in an individual's free time, providing a break from work and an opportunity to enjoy '*not… needing… to perform*' [Kurt, Spacecamp]. The importance of using non-work time was seen as indicative of an individual's commitment to unconferencing and was interpreted as a sign that they really wanted to attend, rather than being expected to by an employer, or wanting a day out of the office.

> People turning up on a Saturday to do something for themselves and for free, I think that really stood out to me as quite different to what I'd seen in the six years before in the public sector. So yeah, that kind of level of commitment, that was really impressive, and community. [Paul, Connectcamp]

> Take a camp on the weekend. There's some discussion about it but it's by and large on a Saturday, right, and it's free. And the reason behind that is that it should be as frictionless as possible your decision to come and participate. We know Saturday has some issues for people with families and kids and stuff, but your manager can't tell you not to go because it's on your own time. And we aren't going to put any money price on your participation because we don't want to like discriminate against anybody who doesn't have the financial means…. If you give a damn enough about this thing, then you're welcome to come. [Otto, Freecamp]

Holding unconferences at the weekend was viewed as freeing participants from the need to obtain permission to attend from their line manager or, in the case of Jessica, a freelance consultant, enabling learning to be disassociated from the need to make money.

> I like… events where I don't have to spend [work] time… On the weekend. Because then it's… my free time… and I just take it… I think I like it better that way… On a work day [if] I… decide not to work that day but to go to that event… it costs me money.

Several Freecamp participants related their need for freedom to working in the public sector.

> We're all recovering bureaucrats. We worked in public services and we had this feeling that public services are full of really good and enthusiastic and vocationally minded people, but they are unable to deliver the public value that they want to because they get crushed by bureaucratic cultures and all of the… less desirable behaviours that happen in these kinds of systems. [Otto, Freecamp]

> I'm convinced that there's lots of clever people in local government; it's just that they're under such a 'kosh' with the austerity measures and a lot of time, you know, bad management, that they don't really have time to actually think outside of the box or take… a helicopter view of what's going on. [Greg, informant]

> It's tough working in the public sector, so many cuts in these austere times, and it's just about people really getting together, sharing woes, sharing ideas and helping each other out really. [Beth, Connectcamp]

For these individuals, unconferencing provided an alternative to the formal order and hierarchical structures that characterise their employing organisations. Within the space of the unconference they sought to define themselves 'against or in spite of' (Cohen and Taylor, 1978: 22) their everyday organisational lives, by temporarily absenting themselves (Cohen and Taylor, 1978). Unconferencing was also used as a means of counteracting the detrimental effects of 'bad' management on participants' identities.

> I met up with some former colleagues and the older ones said… 'so what did you get from your time [working in government]?' And I said, 'well, a complete mistrust of bureaucracy as a general-purpose management tool', because, you know, I recognise that bureaucracy has its value and is a useful way of organizing, but it's not the way of organizing lots of things. And particularly, I think not useful for this kind of knowledge creation and, you know, the kind of yeah, knowledge work. It's not a great way of organizing that. But I didn't see any great examples of how else to manage this kind of work… I'm always looking for ways in which we can work together in different ways, other than, you know, I'm the boss and basically you are all cogs in the machine, which is a very general description of bureaucracy. [William, informant]

William expressed his desire for freedom from formal organisation using a reference to popular culture.

> Harry Tuttle is this character in Terry Gilliam's film, Brazil, which I saw in 1985… [He] is a subversive heating engineer in this dystopian world… who doesn't do the paperwork, just cuts through all of that - intercepts calls for help and… sometimes bodges things up and it doesn't always go great. But he is the kind of anti-paperwork hero and I just tucked that cultural reference in the back of my head for, you know, 30 years, before it was needed. [William, informant]

As these accounts highlight, unconferencing is a way of accommodating everyday organisational life and making it more bearable (Cohen and Taylor, 1978). Yet the temporary nature of the unconference also has the potential to amplify frustrations with formal organisation. By standing outside their organisational boundary it seemed that some participants became more aware of it (Cohen and Taylor, 1978). Some cited participation in unconferences as a critical moment in informing their decision to leave employment in large public sector organisations in favour of self-employment or independent consulting.

> I worked in local government, then I went to the Learning & Skills Council. [I] went to Freecamp and, to be honest with you, about six months later I resigned and went freelance… it was partly the connection that I made with that event that made it possible, but it was also that I was going out of my mind… something was going to have to change and that's what it was. I suspect it's more to do with the personalities of people who are attracted to these things, they naturally struggle within hierarchical command-and-control organisations. [Steve, informant]

Paradoxically, escapes from reality can also signify a support for that reality (Cohen and Taylor, 1978). For most participants, unconferencing as a form of escape from formal, hierarchical organisations remains a temporary fantasy that cannot be permanently realised. It is, as with any retreat from the everyday mundanities of work, merely a line of flight from which we are bound to return (Wood & Brown, 2011).

Network cultures of knowledge sharing

In this paper, we have explored the culture of unconferencing, the material arrangements, rules and practices that constitute this site of network organisation and define, shape, and restrict what members are able to do within it. The culture of unconferencing is characterised by distinctive material arrangements including rules and, through which 'actions structure others' possibilities' (Schatzki, 2005: 479) and a 'teleoaffective structure' that is oriented towards enabling face-to-face communication, sharing ideas and knowledge (Schatzki, 2002). Critically, definitions of networks that rely on an opposition between networks and organisations (Arne and Brunsson, 2011; Benkler, 2006) only limitedly explain these practices. Network organisation, as shown here in unconferencing, depends on explicit rules to a greater extent than is often acknowledged. This oversight is related to the tendency to conflate the concept of networks with informal organisation, and the assumption that formal structure undermines network organisation (see Arne and Brunsson, 2011). Hence our analyses draw out this contradiction by showing how practices founded on discourses of open source community, structureless organisation and freedom through escape are dependent on establishing, communicating and reinforcing clearly articulated rules (Schatzki, 2002). Thus through such situated practices, a shared repertoire is co-constructed, which enables members to demonstrate their proficiency through their language, sensibilities, routines, tools and stories (Wenger, 2000; Orr, 1996). Legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) via the unconferencing platform, we find, co-creates new shared understandings of knowledgeable proficiency, which in turn serves to legitimise individual enactments of expertise. We propose that a significant outcome of this virtuous circle of learning, is to reinforce the discourse of talent pooling and co-construct networks of self-defined knowledge providers – not just mere individual market actors but a cohort of newly liberated social beings (after Benkler, 2006).

Critically, we note that unconferencing makes space to practice this neoliberal discourse through enactments of knowledgeable proficiency. For Standing (2014), such 'proficians' represent an emerging class of elites who distinguish themselves from the precariat classes who are dependent on free market economics. Our findings suggest that the practices of unconferencing serve to co-construct talent pools – new networks of proficians who seek to influence the market, rather than be subjects bound by it (after Pongratz, 2018). The practices of unconferencing are thus generative of this social group seeking to liberate themselves not just temporarily, but permanently from the free market. And yet they tie themselves to the market through their embrace and enactments of our neoliberal ideals. Discursively, they are seeking to influence rather than be influenced by the political economy. Thus, despite its rhetoric of equality (Vanneste, 2008), unconferencing ultimately reinforces meritocratic ideals (Young, 2017) embedded in high erformance management cultures that not everyone can live up to.

In conclusion, whilst the practices of unconferencing offer ephemeral opportunities to reimagine and reinvent oneself as the next Steve Jobs or TED Talk visionary with a million likes on YouTube, they illustrate the precarities of freelancing in the ICT sector. Unconferencing is indicative of a desire to 'stand out from the crowd', to be recognised as a talent, and to gain peer support. It is a deeply affective practice that is part of a neoliberal process of perpetual identity reconstruction and self-reinvention that is experienced in other sectors being reshaped by individualisation (Butcher, 2018; Loacker & Śliwa, 2016; Sennett, 2012). As Sennett (1999) has suggested, this restructuring of the ICT sector as a stark warning for other professions once deemed stable and secure. We are not only all becoming more

entrepreneurial, we are being driven to perform our proficiency of it. From Twitter to TED Talks, there are evermore platforms on which perform knowledgeable proficiency. These not only bolster a sense of the entrepreneurial self but are generative of and by neoliberal circuits of culture. As Butcher (2018) shows, there is an underlying intentionality and opportunism to participating in entrepreneurial learning, which holds a potential to co-construct an influential social group that not all can become a part of. As Shakespeare (2015) quipped, all the world is truly a stage.

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[i] For teachers http://www.edcamp.org/ - Accessed 04.11.15
[ii] The use of labels 'foo' and 'bar' derive from computer programming, where they are used as general purpose names for unspecified entities.
[iii] http://edition.cnn.com/2004/TECH/ptech/01/09/bus2.feat.geek.camp/
[iv] Pseudonyms used throughout
[v] http://barcamp.org/w/page/405173/TheRulesOfBarCamp - Accessed 19.05.15
[vi] http://agilemanifesto.org/ Accessed 22.12.16