

The new economy and the work life balance. A case study of the new media sector in Brighton and Hove.

Diane Perrons

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Abstract

Given the varied claims made about the new economy and its implications for the organisation of work and life this paper explores how the new media sector has materialised and been experienced by people working in Brighton and Hove, a new media hub. New technologies and patterns of working allow the temporal and spatial boundaries of paid work to be extended, potentially allowing more people, especially those with caring responsibilities, to become involved, possibly leading to a reduction in gender inequality. This paper, based on 55 in depth interviews with new media owners, managers and some employees in small and micro enterprises evaluates this claim. Reference is made to the gender differentiated patterns of ownership and earnings; flexible working patterns, long hours and homeworking and to whether these working patterns are compatible with a work life balance. The results indicate that gender imbalance is being reproduced rather than challenged in this emerging sector of the new economy.

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Introduction

Given the diverse nature, varied understandings and different claims made about the new economy, this paper seeks to explore how one sector, new media, has materialised in one particular location, focusing on the gender differentiated of work and organisations and the impact on work life balance.

The paper divides into three sections. The first explores some of the varied conceptualisations of the new economy and outlines potential risks and opportunities. The second outlines the view that the new economy provides new opportunities for women and can therefore potentially reduce gender inequality. The main section evaluates this expectation by reference to a qualitative study of the new media sector in Brighton and Hove, which has become a new media hub. It does so by exploring the gender differentiated patterns of ownership, management and earnings; the working practices, in particular flexible working patterns, homeworking and long hours and considers the extent to which these working patterns are compatible with a work life balance, especially when caring responsibilities are involved. The conclusion makes some suggestions for redressing the gender imbalance that seems to be being reproduced rather than challenged in this emerging sector of the new economy.

1 The new economy, new media and the organisation of work

conceptualisations of the new economy and new media

There are many different conceptualisations of the new economy. These include: the apparently sustained period of inflation free growth (Greenspan 1998); the increasing significance of knowledge and information technologies (Castells 2000; Quah 1996 and 1999); the feminisation of employment, and new less secure working patterns (Mishel, Bernstein and Schmitt 1999) which, in turn, have generated problems for the sustainability of families and communities (Beck 2000; Carnoy 2000; Hochschild 1997; Reich 2001). Flores and Gray (2000: 24) speak of the death of the career and

how lifelong identities are giving way to 'brief habits' such that, 'the lives of wired people are more like collections of short stories than the narrative of a bourgeois novel' (Flores and Gray 2000:24). More generally, it has been argued that the new economy is associated with increasing inequality (Quah 1996 and Reich 2001); that it offers risks as well as opportunities; and that people have become increasingly individualised in work and home life as traditional systems of social support through the company, state, family and community have been eroded (Beck 2000; Carnoy 2000). These arguments are increasingly accepted by the academic as well as the journalistic community but more detailed, comparative, empirical work is necessary in order to investigate the validity of these claims, the varied forms taken by the new economy and how it is experienced in practice. This paper makes a modest contribution to the debate by exploring the new media sector in Brighton and Hove, its gender-differentiated nature and the implications for work life balance.

Knowledge workers are associated with the advanced development of information and communication technologies and particularly the Internet, which provides new ways of organising the production, distribution and exchange of existing goods and facilitates the development of new services and products (OECD 2000). The new activities include the computing technologies, which manage web-based transactions, the development of internet services for training, marketing and public relations as well as interactive digital productsⁱ. In turn, these activities generate new forms of employment ranging from web based graphic design, web system/database management, video installations through to programming. The outcome is a range of new activities and jobs now commonly referred to as new media, which do not fit neatly into existing industrial sectors or occupational categories. They can be defined as a range of interactive digital products and services which offer new ways to trade, market, educate and entertain, delivered through the Internet, CD ROM, DVD, interactive TV and intranets' (Copeland 2000:7).

This conceptualisation conforms to media images of the new economy which emphasises higher level activities and these also form the main subject of this paperⁱⁱ. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that these activities also depend on a range of lower level jobs in distribution and consumer services, as changes in the mode of exchange influence production and distribution methods and new patterns of working

generate new kinds of services. Some work is displaced from conventional retailers and banks to call centres and some is transferred to consumers who manage their own transactions directly via the Internet. The development of E commerce, designed and managed by the higher level workers, has also generated different kinds of warehousing and delivery systems and related employment. Furthermore, given the long hours worked in the higher level activities there has been an expansion of jobs in the personal care and consumer services sector to cater for their needs. Thus, the new economy is characterised by a duality, which in practice may build upon and possibly reinforce existing social divisions of class, gender, race and ethnicity. Middle class, well-educated and white men tend to be over represented in high level 'self programmable' jobs, while, women, ethnic minorities and people from lower social classes are more likely to be found in the generic, lower paid jobs, providing people related services such as office cleaning, personal fitness, catering and care. There are however some similarities in the contractual structure and temporal demands of employment, if not in lifestyles and levels of pay, between high and low level workers that create problems for managing work life balance. Robert Reich (2001) argues that the increasingly competitive nature of the new economy, in part generated by the way that the new computing and information technologies have opened up the global market and increased the ease with which it is possible to switch between producers for all sorts of goods and services has meant that there are pressures on workers at both ends of the employment hierarchy to work long hours. Innovative workers are therefore highly prized by organisations seeking to maintain their competitive edge, who are prepared to pay highly for their services albeit on a contingent or project basis. Consequently these workers have a high opportunity cost of not working, both because of the immediate income offered and because of the uncertainty about future contracts; that is they 'have to make hay while the sun shines.' At the lower end of the employment hierarchy competitive pressures between firms lead to wage cuts and correspondingly these workers have to work hard to 'make ends meet' (Reich 2001).

New economy patterns of work and the work life balance

In the context of increasing economic deregulation, the new economy and associated moves towards the 24/7 society, has extended the temporal range of potential working hours and contributed to the development of non standard, flexible and long working hours (Harkness 1999; Presser 1999). Relatedly, internet access has extended the range of locations from which paid work can be carried out. Thus, flexible working

has opened up opportunities for a wide range of people, including carers, to take paid employment, even though employers often retain control over the parameters of flexibility (Dex and McCulloch 1997; Breedveld 1998; Figart and Mutari 1998; Rubery, Smith and Fagan, 1998; Perrons 1999;).

On the other hand, flexible working has eroded the boundaries and collective rhythms of working life and the concept and reality of a fixed working day has declined for many people. The process is also cumulative. As working hours become more varied, people will expect services to be available at a wider range of times. Further, as the boundaries of the working day have become increasingly opaque, many salaried workers are expected to work long hours to demonstrate commitment (Hochschild 1997; McDowell 1997) and to match the working hours of different time zones. Entrepreneurs and freelancers often work long hours, owing to deadlines, the unpredictable nature and flow of work and, in some cases, because of intrinsic work satisfaction which also erodes the boundaries between work and life (see Massey 1996).

Time however, is not available in equal quantities to women and men and can form a new means of differentiation just as other differences, such as qualifications and formal opportunities are becoming more equal. The long hours culture poses problems for people with caring responsibilities, who are often forced to choose between jobs with career possibilities and those that can be combined with caring activities. The more varied working patterns, including short and unsocial hours which allow people to combine caring with paid work are more likely to be found at the lower end of the hierarchy, perhaps even supplying the concierge services for employees in the knowledge sector (see Chaudhuri 2000). For lower level workers, and especially women, the combination of paid and unpaid work leads to an extended working day. The question of longer-term security for both sets of workers and social reproduction more generally remains.

In terms of job security at the aggregate level only a small proportion of new jobs are full time and permanent (Gregg and Wadsworth 1998). Similarly, Castells (2000) points out how the regular full time year round contract applies to only 33% of the Californian labour market. Counter evidence suggests however, that there has been

little aggregate change in the length of time that people stay with any individual employer. In the UK, average job duration was 10.5 years in the 1970s and now 9.5 years and for women there has been little aggregate change (Green, Felstead and Burchell 2000 see also Doogan 2001 who also points out that long term employment has increased). These writers suggest that insecurity has become a topic of discussion and research because it is now more strongly felt by the professional or the chattering classes and also implicitly by men. Certainly not all elements in society ever had a career so writers emphasising increasing insecurity are perhaps overstating the extent of change. Nevertheless, broader and complex questions of caring and social reproduction as a whole arise in the context of increasing participation in an insecure labour market, and more individual and fragmented lifestyles (Carnoy 2000; Folbre and Nelson 2000).

The range of the developments associated with the new economy is immense and the ramifications difficult to assess. It is important to emphasise however that these developments have not happened because of new technologies but rather because of the ways in which technological developments occur within a capitalist and increasingly global economy. The processes shaping these changes are those which motivate the decision makers in the large corporations and nation states. Similarly, the way in which individual lives are affected depends very much on traditional individual and social factors. The capacity of people to organise their own work biographies and plan their lifetime finances continues to vary now, as in the past, with individual and social factors. The former include responsibilities and opportunities outside as well as within the workplace and these remain highly structured by individual characteristics including gender, ethnicity, race, social class, educational background, age and stage in life course as well as individual preferences. Social factors include: the level of development; the welfare regime and prevailing labour market regulations and company size and status. Thus although everyone is affected by these developments, they are involved in different ways and to different degrees depending on their existing individual and social positions. Therefore, these issues require empirical investigation, as there will be considerable variation in outcomes. Before presenting the findings of the case study however, the current state of gender inequality in the UK is outlined together with some indication of official thinking

about how the new economy might contribute to increase gender equality while maintaining a work life balance.

The new economy potential for redressing gender imbalances

current gender inequalities

Gender inequalities in employment in the UK have narrowed in that more women, more mothers and more mothers with young children are now in paid work. However, inequalities in terms of hours of work, segregation and earnings remain (Thair and Risdon 1999; Rubery, Fagan and Smith 1998). On the most favourable measure, hourly earnings, women remain at 80% of the male level but only receive 60% of male average earnings (EOC 2000). A study projecting lifetime incomes identified a very wide gender gap, 'the female forfeit', even for those women without children (Rake et al 2000). Furthermore, women are over represented in part time employment, which often represents the private solution to the low levels of childcare in the UK.

women in the new economy

The Women's Unit of the UK government has argued that ICT represents 'one of the biggest opportunities for women in the 21st century to earn more, have more flexible working practices and adapt their current business or try a business start-up'. Thus, they maintain that 'self-employment and enterprise offer women a real alternative means of earning good income and achieving greater flexibility in their working lives' (Women's Unit 2000). That is given the way that contemporary technologies extend the range of working opportunities both temporally and spatially they potentially provide a means of redressing current gender inequalities. 'Family friendly' working patterns, if not work quantity, can be constructed by entrepreneurs, homeworkers and freelancers who can manage their own routines especially when working from home. In some ways they may realise the vision of the 'electronic cottage' (Toffler 1980) although the problems of social isolation, family tensions also have to be recognised (Phizacklea and Wolkowitz 1995; Huws 1996; Baruch 2000).

However, women also face constraints; they are under-represented on ICT courses, the proportion working in these areas has fallen and they have more problems obtaining access to capital and in fact the Women's Unit have been holding workshops to identify ways of overcoming these constraints. The purpose of the empirical investigation discussed below is therefore to illuminate some aspects of new economy, to outline the differential opportunities and constraints experienced by

women and men in this sector and to consider the implications for managing their work life balance.

Opportunities and constraints for women and men in the new media sector in Brighton and Hove

Brighton and Hove - 'the place to be creative'

Brighton and Hove on the South Coast of England with a population of 255,800 (ONS 2001) has been socially constructed or marketed as 'The Place to be Creative' and become the 'focal point for creative industries in Europe' (BHC 2000) It has always been a very vibrant place where *'eyebrows are more often pierced rather than raised at eccentric behaviour'* (BHC 2000) and it attracts celebrities, media, arts people as well as tourists. It is also a divided town, with more restaurants but also more people sleeping rough per head than anywhere outside London and of 354 council areas in the UK it is the 94th poorest (ONS 2001). Thus while marketing itself as the 'place to be creative' it is simultaneously applying for and receiving funds targeted at the poorest areas under a variety of regeneration programmes nationally, recently obtaining funding under the new Deal for Communities programme and from the European Union's Social Fund

Brighton and Hove was chosen for this study because it is said to constitute a 'new media hub' and in fact reflects the varied dimensions of the new economy within a relatively small location (see also Tang 1999 and Pratt 2000). It has at least 200 new media companies with a further 170 companies in Sussex- the surrounding countyⁱⁱⁱ. Most of the companies are very small, however it is this type of company that corresponds to the opportunities for women identified by the Women's Unit. However, the research findings suggest that although the new media sector provides opportunities for women, significant gender divisions remain.

The results reported come from a wider on going study of the local labour market in the context of the new economy and the future of trade unions^{iv}. Initially, seven in depth interviews were carried out with women who attended the Women and in the New Economy seminar in Sussex sponsored by the Women's Unit in July 2000. From these, key issues were identified and fifty further interviews lasting between forty five

and seventy five minutes, based around a structured questionnaire, were carried out with owners, managers and some employees of small firms and micro enterprises^v.

Gender composition, size of companies and earnings

New media is an emerging sector comprising of wholly new companies which have developed in response to new needs as well as existing companies that have adapted their operations to make use of contemporary technologies. Of the companies participating in the survey, 63% had been in existence for less than 3 years, while 14% were over 5 and a further 11% over ten years old. The majority (70% n = 38) are owned and managed by men, despite the fact that the original interviewees were with women attending the women in the new economy conference. Just over half of the total are limited companies (38% female and 63% male) and 20% (43% female and 11% male) are one person firms. Measured by direct employment the majority of the companies in the survey were small, 50% having no direct employees and 25% not even employing freelancers on an occasional basis (see Figure 1). Companies owned by women tended to have a smaller number of employees of either kind than men but the difference was not statistically significant.

Women are also over represented among the smaller companies as measured by turnover. Only 1 wholly owned female company, compared to 14 owned by men had a turnover of above £500,000 and the two female companies in the £250,000 to £500,000 category were co-owned with their male partners (see Figure 2). When divided into two broad categories - above and below £50,000 this difference is statistically significant^{vi}.

There was a significant association in the data between earnings and turnover^{vii}, but in the case of small companies, and especially sole traders, earnings are difficult to evaluate. The owner can receive earnings, dividends or re-invest profits in the company, Indeed, accountants often advise owners that it is tax efficient to pay themselves only the minimum wage. With these qualifications in mind, women in general earned less than men did^{viii}. Taking earnings and turnover together it is clear that the majority of people in this sector do not conform to the media image of high earners even though they were mainly graduates and worked long hours (see below). For people on low earnings especially, a further problem arises from their irregularity:

'I earn less than £10,000 p.a. Sometimes there is a whole month with no earnings - the big companies in particular are very slow at paying out.' (Woman, aged 35-44, web page designer, caring responsibilities, herself major role, ID 1).

Gender, caring responsibilities and working hours

Working hours for women and men in this sector are varied, often flexible but also long, the mean number of weekly hours for women was 46 (SD = 16) and 48 (SD = 17) for men. The main gender difference was at upper end of the distribution with a small number of men working extremely long hours (6 working over 70 hours a week compared to only 1 woman who worked over 65 hours). However, the median (45) and mode (55) for women were higher than for men 45 and 40 respectively, probably because men were more likely to be managers of larger companies with more standard working hours, while women were more likely to be sole traders or owners with more varied working patterns. Some women and men worked part-time hours but for different reasons. For the men this was either because their new media activity was a second job, (and for one women) or because they had been unable to get more work. For women domestic responsibilities were more likely to curtail their hours see Figure 3, Women were statistically more likely (at the 5% level) to have a major responsibility for childcare. Overall working hours are long and were either increasing or remaining the same as was the pressure of work, only a minority 12% and 9% respectively reporting trends in the reverse direction.

There are four main reasons why people work long hours in this sector: the unpredictable nature and flow of work; uncertainty associated with a business start up; the need to continually update skills and knowledge, and the intrinsic satisfaction derived from the work itself.

In the new media sector, many products and services are 'bespoke', but clients often do not really know what they want or what to expect and frequently change their specifications as the project develops. Over a third of interviewees autonomously identified this lack of clear boundaries around project content and corresponding uncertainty about the volume of work, as a source of stress. At the same time, deadlines were often inflexible - for example, the launch date for a web site. As many of the companies were new and still building their reputations they wanted to produce high quality products, and often did not charge for all of the amendments requested by clients. Furthermore, they were reluctant to turn down work, because of uncertainty about future contracts.

For owners and sole traders, working long hours was often seen as temporary, and a form of investment in the company and their own future as illustrated in the sentiments below which were repeated many times.

'I am working long hours now (110 a week) but this will not be forever. I want to earn a lot now so that I can **do** things later on - like travelling.' (his emphasis, man, aged 25-34, specialist web programmer, no caring responsibilities, ID 7).

'At present I am building the company up, - the harder I work the more I enjoy it'. As a Director, at present, the company's interests come first.' (man, aged 25-34, project manager and localiser, on average working 74 hours a week no caring responsibilities, ID 13).

'Well, I'm in a start up role at present and we have been expanding a lot so I'm still trying to get structures in place. Last week I worked about 70 hours but this will go down. I aim to work standard hours. I do aim to 'get a life'. But work is part of life

- I enjoy it. The company is covered by the Working Time Directive and they agree with it.' (woman, aged 25-34, manager, no caring responsibilities, ID 39).

Many of those unhappy with the current volume of work had considered expanding the number of employees or utilising freelancers more intensively and one company in particular had expanded dramatically over the year. There was also some reluctance to expand. Taking on more people created new problems, including ensuring a sufficient flow of work and monitoring quality, given that there was little formal accreditation for skills in this sector. There was also concern that growing beyond a 'reasonable size' would lead a loss of control and a qualitative change in their working lives.

'We plan to expand to about the size of 25 -30 after that we would have to think carefully about the costs and benefits of further expansion. If we expanded too much it would change the atmosphere. We might set up another company instead.'
(man, aged 25-34, database design and management, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 15).

This perspective confirms the image of new independent operators as a 'cross between employer and day labourer, self exploiter and boss on their own account... with the objective of moulding their own lives rather than conquering world markets' (Beck 2000: 54-55). Having control over their work was important, as explained below by a respondent, previously earning £100,000 p.a. with a London company, now paying himself only 25% above the minimum wage (having allowed for dividends):

' well its like prostitution isn't it. I set up my own company so that I have freedom and can control what work I do.' (man, aged 25-34, E-commerce developer - no caring responsibilities, ID 53).

In several cases, there was a desire to escape from office politics and from male power structures. Having been independent one female respondent found that:

'after a while you can't go back - you think why should I be doing this for them and they aren't doing it very well anyway. Power has to be earned by respect for

competencies - not imposed. The IT world is still a very male world and some men have difficulty in treating women as equal.' (woman, aged 35-44, Internet PR, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 12).

For this woman working independently enabled her to escape the glass ceiling, which she had continued to experience in the new economy (see Stanworth 2000).

For employees, the situation of long working hours was more problematical and employees were often treated in a rather paternalistic way. Employers, just as owners, faced unpredictable volumes of work and tight deadlines and although they could, and in fact did, take on temporary or freelance workers, this could not always be done at short notice, so existing employees found themselves working extremely long hours. One company as a matter of policy required employees to voluntarily opt out of the EU Working Time Directive, but if employees did work long hours they were compensated by time off in lieu and also by special bonuses.

'If they 'throw an all nighter' {work through the night} I pay for them to have a 'stressbuster - at the Grand' {a one or half day special massage and health treatment at a major hotel}. (man, aged 25-34, project manager and localiser, no caring responsibilities, ID 13).

Another small company provided a free breakfast at 8.30 a.m. because

'It encourages people to be here on time and so we can start work fairly promptly at 9 a.m.' (man, aged 35-44, manager and internet marketer, some caring responsibilities, ID 43).

Thus echoing the concierge strategy of Microsoft (Chaudhuri 2000). This company also had various bonuses such as company outings to social events or long weekends away and a company football team, but was also in conflict with employees over the implications of the EU Working Time Directive for paid holiday. In fact, there was a curious mixture of concern for employees' well-being on the one hand, although in practice these perks would not be equally accessible to all employees given their differential home responsibilities, but an unwillingness to endorse regulations to enhance employees rights on the other.

Time is especially important in new media, where skills and knowledge need continual updating and networking is necessary to find out about contemporary developments and to acquire work. The vast majority of companies stated that they provided time at work for employees to engage in self-learning via magazines and the Internet. Some also had informal systems of work shadowing and workshops for exchanging ideas. Single operators would clearly have to provide this time for themselves. Some employees also saw their time with an organisation as a period in which to acquire new skills prior to setting up on their own.

'I have always worked long hours - it is self imposed I have a tendency to be a workaholic. When I worked for an organisation, I was trying to gather work experience. I would stay late to work with the software experimenting etc. At home I would no longer want to see a computer - I tried to incorporate study hours into the working environment but it was difficult - you were often so busy - working every minute. Different projects would dovetail with one another it was like a continuous production line - I wanted to get away from feeling a cog in a process I wanted more autonomy.' (man, aged 25-34, web design and multi media, caring responsibilities, evenly divided, ID 35).

Work life balance

The most striking finding was that the vast majority of people surveyed liked their work, with (80%) strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement that 'generally speaking I am very satisfied with the nature of my work'. Gender differences were not very marked except that the 10% that disagreed with this perspective were all male. The following quotations encapsulate this perspective:

'I enjoy work - the barriers between work and non work are very blurred.' (woman, aged 35-44, web designer, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 12)

'Work and life merge - work is my hobby work is myth.' (man, aged 45-54, web designer, no caring responsibilities, ID 9).

'Work excitement and pressure are opposite sides of the same coin.' (man, aged 35-44, Internet consultancy and web designer caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 24).

People clearly enjoyed and were 'personally very much involved in their work (75% strongly agreeing or agreeing with this view and 90% thinking about work when they were not there (see Figure 4). Nevertheless, work was clearly very demanding, with just under 50% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement that 'my work takes up time beyond a reasonable working day that I would rather spend on other activities'; 57% strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement: 'I am often too tired when I get home from work to do other things' and 64% often taking work home. Interestingly in relation to the first of these views, women and people with pre-teen children living at home were less likely to agree with this view than those with opposite characteristics. This was also consistent with the finding that people without caring responsibilities expressed some concern that they were perhaps becoming rather one dimensional and spent too much time working.

While people were almost unanimous about enjoying the work itself they were divided over the question of work life balance. About 50% either strongly agreed or agreed (54% men and 47% of women) with the statement that 'generally speaking I am very satisfied with my work life balance' while one third of men and 40% of women either disagreed or strongly disagreed, as did just over 40% of people with pre-teen children living at home. The reasons underlying the negative response differed between women and men. A higher proportion of men than women were dissatisfied with the amount of time they spent at work and in the home providing some empirical support for a renegotiation of the gender division of labour between paid and unpaid work. These differences were not statistically significant but were consistent with the interviews in which men, in particular, expressed concern that they spent too much time at work. On the other hand, women, and especially those with pre-teen children living at home and some men in similar positions, basically felt time starved and often felt very torn between the competing demands on their time. They would have liked to have more time to spend at work and at home

'I have to cut down work in the school holidays because I cannot do that much when the kids are around. I feel very torn.' (woman, aged 35-44, web page designer caring responsibilities, major role ID 1).

'I only managed to take one day off with my daughter during the whole her Summer holidays.' (women, aged 35-44, web designer- caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 12).

Another woman, a single parent running her own company and working on average 60 hours a week, when asked what happened if her school-aged child was unwell replied, 'I'm sodded big time' (woman, aged 35-44, Internet PR, caring responsibilities, sole responsibility, ID 54). When asked about what could be done to improve her situation she replied, 'I'd like to find myself a good wife'. As a manager she was however able to take the child into the office.

Flexible working

Flexible working and home working, neither of which affected the volume of work, were practiced to organise working time around domestic responsibilities, or vice versa. Working in the evening, at night and during the weekend was also inevitable, in cases where the number of hours worked exceeded a standard day.

Only a minority of people in the survey regularly worked standard hours and women were less likely to do so than men. Over two thirds regularly worked flexible hours and only 2% never did so. Nearly 60% of people regularly worked evenings and 35% did so sometimes and just under a quarter of people reported that they regularly worked at night (between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. in the morning). Relative to their representation in the survey, women expressed a slightly higher tendency to regularly work in the evening and a lower tendency to work at night than men. However, the proportion saying that they worked at night sometimes was relatively higher than for men. Nearly half of the people reported that they regularly worked on a Saturday and Sunday with only 25% never doing so.

Just over 40% of the sample had pre-teen children living with them, but only 20% had an evenly divided, a major role or total responsibility for their care (see Figure 2). None of the respondents had responsibility for elder care. Where the partner of the interviewee had major responsibility for childcare, which was more likely the case for men rather than women, working hours followed a similar pattern to those with no caring responsibilities, corresponding to the general tendency in the UK for fathers to work very long hours (Ferri and Smith 1996; Harkness 1999) and for their caring responsibilities to be carried out by others (see Neuberger and Murgatroyd's (1998) time budget study, reported in Perrons 1998 which rather exposes the myth of the new man). Of the fourteen people who worked over 50 hours a week, 5 had dependent children living with them including two women, one a single parent and sole carer and one whose partner took major responsibility for care. What is striking is the relatively small proportion of the sample who had any major responsibility for care and this is not explained by age, as 60% of the sample were over 34 years and the remainder were between 25 and 34, which covers the most frequent period of childbirth. Clearly,

this raises doubts about the extent to which this sector, in its current form, provides an opportunity for those seeking to balance work and care.

For those with senior positions or running their own companies even when the hours of work are long the pattern can be arranged so as to enable them to spend some time with their children as one respondent explained:

'I would like to be able to spend more time with the children'. 'Being an MD {managing director} however enables me to work flexible hours so I can go to school events.' (man, aged 35-44, new media productions, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 36).

Another man with three young children regularly spent the time between 6 and 8 in the evening having dinner with and helping his children with homework, but this was just about the only time, other than a few hours on Sunday and sleeping that he spent away from his computer:

'all I do is work, I have no concept of not working'..... The job rules me - I started as a programmer but I am now a manager, lawyer and marketer. All the pressure is on me and I don't pass it on. I don't have holidays or any social life.... 'I absolutely hate it' (man, aged 25-34, E commerce and web application, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 14).

Some people found the current pressure of work incompatible with family life.

'We have no intentions of starting a family until we can get to grips with the business' (man, aged 35-44, project manager, no caring responsibilities, ID 10).

For some people, especially mothers, being able to work flexibly was critical given the continuing low level of publicly provided and high cost of private childcare in the UK, despite recent initiatives.

'During school holidays its a bit tricky, but otherwise after dropping kids to school, I do 0.5 hrs housework and then work through until I pick the children up at 3 p.m. Then I will work in the evening, sometimes at night and usually one of the weekend days.' (woman, aged 35-44, web page designer, caring responsibilities, major role, ID1).

But even so she went on to point out that:

'The school hours limit my day - it ruins concentration. I would like something like an au pair to pick up children from school. The children go to an after school club (open until 6 p.m.) on two days a week but it does not always work and it costs quite a lot - £8 for the two children for each session.' (woman, aged 35-44, web page designer, caring responsibilities, major role, ID 1).

home working and work life balance

Of those working from home either some or all of the time (63%), most (58%) felt that it enabled them to combine work and family life. Some were extremely positive in this respect and the proportion of women expressing this view was greater than men; 55% of women who worked from home viewed homeworking positively in this respect compared to 44% of men. One respondent was particularly enthusiastic:

"IT's WONDERFUL!" {her emphasis}

'As I own and run my own business in the home, my work/life balance could not really be improved. I have the flexibility I need which is why I set up the business in the first place.' (woman, aged 35-44, web design and specialist software, caring responsibilities, major role, ID 46).

Another respondent (similar to ID 1 above) commented on the way school hours can interrupt the flow of thought but also pointed out the value of children.

'you just get motoring on a project and you have to pick them up on the other hand sometimes the enforced break is needed. I enjoy looking after them - I don't resent it.'

He went on to say:

'I don't mind if they (the children) come in the office I sometimes work there while they play - children do not need a high input all of the time they just like you to be there. People in the west worry too much. I think children like to see you working and being with you - the notion of a special period of childhood is a particularly western concept.' (man, aged 25-34, web design and multi media, caring responsibilities, evenly divided, ID 35).

This comment was unusual, more often mixed responses and tensions between home and work were reported together with strategies for overcoming them:

'You need to create a workspace, then working at home is enjoyable. If the job is difficult then being at home can be difficult - if she cries and my partner is looking after her its hard to concentrate and not to interfere..... Otherwise at present I enjoy the flexibility because I can take her to the park etc and be around.' (woman, aged 25-34, web designer, caring responsibilities, major role, ID 28).

'Home work does create some tensions with the children but I don't feel isolated - I have increased the number of contacts through the web.' (man, aged 45-54 consultant and trainer, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 31).

This comment also reflects the way in which the web itself has become an important medium for social contact, one respondent having met her partner via a chat room, although this view was by no means universally shared (see ID 1 below). For other respondents the tensions created by homeworking were quite severe:

'I work from home, so am continually kicked out of the office and accused of ignoring my family and being a workaholic and preferring the computer to real people. 'It's too easy to just go in for 30 minutes and spend 3 or 4 hours without noticing the time slipping away.' (woman, aged 35-44, Internet PR, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 12).

There were also tensions for the homeworkers themselves, as they could never really escape from work even when they wanted to.

'Even when I do have some spare time, I sometimes find it difficult to relax in my home as I associate it with work and the PC and the 'to do' list always beckoning.' (woman, aged 25-34, web designer and writer, no caring responsibilities, ID 34)

'after working at home I was a wreck ...it is not healthy there are enough pressures at home already - it is much better now - when I close the door I can forget work. I would never do it again - not as a business - I worked longer hours at home

'because it is quite compulsive - you are constantly reminded of work, - you could never escape it.' (man, aged 25-34, web designer, no direct caring responsibilities, ID 18)

Some respondents also reported that home working was positive from the point of view of managing a work life balance but had negative effects in terms of the work itself.

'The main problem with working from home is both social and work isolation - there is no one to bounce ideas off. Otherwise working from home enables me to combine work and family life and have a higher net income than if I worked elsewhere. There are tensions though and I can't always concentrate when there are piles of washing lying around for example.' (woman, aged 35-44, web designer, caring responsibilities, major role, ID 1).

Other respondents reported that although much could be done through the internet, face to face meetings were vital both to convince potential clients of their own merits, considered difficult from the home, and so that they too would have some idea of who they were dealing with.

'I moved into the studio because I needed a space to meet clients -I could not meet them in my flat because it was too small. Face to face contact still matters so I need a space in which to meet clients so to convince them that you can do the job.' (man, aged 25-34, specialist web programmer, no caring responsibilities, ID 7).

Other home workers met clients in the numerous cafes or hotel restaurants in the town, thereby facilitating the necessary face to face contact without disclosing the actual size of the company. Contemporary telephone technology can also be used to divert calls or provide an answering service that also provides a professional image for small organisations.

This study really confirms that there are mixed responses to homeworking, and whether it enables people to manage their work/life balance is really contingent on their overall context. The key difference between this sector and others forms of homeworking is that potential incomes are significantly higher as the new

technologies allow single operators to operate very efficiently in highly professional ways from home as one woman explained.

'The Internet - this is just what I was waiting for.' I can now run my own business from home and have much more flexibility and control over my work than when I was a free lancer.' (woman, aged 35-44, web designer, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 12).

Conclusions

The new media sector in Brighton and Hove provides one small illustration of the way some aspects of the new economy materialise in practice. In some respects, the new economy and use of ICT has enabled people, and especially women, to combine work with family life. Some women had found it very difficult to obtain work in companies, given their age (perceived to be too old for this sector), and lack of formal qualifications. Setting up their own companies had provided the necessary flexibility and control over their working time, even though tensions between work and life remained. With a small number of exceptions, both men and women owners, managers and self-employed had few concerns about job security or their ability to acquire work. In general, the problem was more likely to be over work arising from its unpredictable nature and flow, and even that in part was seen as an intellectual challenge. There was also a strong sense of community, in terms of the physical location, Brighton and Hove, and in terms of physical and virtual networks, thus casting some doubts on the ideas of insecurity and fragmentation that have been associated with the new economy. There also appeared to be little concern with questions of health and safety, despite long hours spent at the computer. Earnings, especially for women, considering the hours worked, their qualifications and experience appear comparatively low but these are quite hard to assess, especially in the case of independent operators. The vast majority of people enjoyed the nature of their work and found the boundaries between work and life rather blurred. About half of the people surveyed were satisfied or highly satisfied with their current work life balance. For some, the new economy, especially the Internet and the way it extended the temporal and spatial boundaries of work really had enabled them to manage their work life balance more effectively, and some fully encapsulated the positive image of teleworking in the global economy, as in the case of a woman working from her front

room and sub contracting some of her work to a programmer in India. For those dissatisfied with their current work life balance reasons varied, with more men than women expressing a desire to have more time to spend at home and women expressing a strong desire for more time for both.

Of particular concern is the gender imbalance, in the overall under representation of women and the lower financial rewards as well as the low proportion of people with direct responsibility for care. The study therefore provides only limited support for the hope that this sector might form a means of addressing gender inequality and enabling people to obtain a satisfactory work life balance. It was clear that it is possible to enter this sector from a wide range of educational backgrounds so the main constraints seem to lie with finance and time. Some short to medium term financial support for equipment and especially income to sustain a livelihood during the early phases of development would be helpful, as these companies are too small to attract the interest of banks, let alone venture capitalists and there were some suspicions of gender bias. Certainly, the women owners of larger companies were in the older age group and had finance from a previous working life. A continuing constraint for women seems to lie in the uneven division of domestic work and caring which limits the amount of time they can devote to paid work. This finding echoes previous work and suggests that the government needs to look beyond the work place to wider systems of social support for caring and some way of resolving the unequal availability of time for paid work between women and men in order to resolve persistent gender inequality and provide a better work life balance for men as well as women.

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- i An example of a new web based interactive digital product would be the development of a web site for a virtual pop group which people can visit, ask questions and interact with the virtual pop stars, another would be a virtual work life advisor.
- ii The research reported here financed from a very small LSE staff allocation has now been extended via support from Leverhulme to cover the wider dimensions of work in the new economy.
- iii This data comes from the Wired Sussex database - this database is regularly updated, registration is voluntary and free - so is likely to be an under rather than overstatement. In total about 3000 people are employed with a turnover of about £300m.
- iv Since carrying out this initial study of new media workers, I have been given funding from the Centre for Economic performance at the LSE from their Leverhulme project on the Future of Trade Unions to carry out a local labour market study in Brighton and Hove, in which I intend to explore the divided nature of the new economy in more detail.
- v The firms were identified from the Wired Sussex database and invited to participate in the study by email. A 25% response rate was obtained.
- vi For calculations about company size I have changed the gender of one company from female to male because the interviewee was neither the owner nor manager. Chi-square was significant at the 5% level.
- vii chi-square was significant at the 1% level.
For example 58% of women (n = 10) earned less than £15,000 p.a. compared to 43% of men (n = 16) and 22% of men (n= 8) above £50,000 compared to 11.8% (n = 2) women, but the differences were not statistically significant.