

Mark Deuze

Author of *Well-Being and Creative Careers*

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Mark Deuze is a professor of media studies at the University of Amsterdam's Faculty of Humanities. His primary objects of study are media management and production, new media and society and mental health and well-being.

What inspired you to write *Well-Being and Creative Careers*?

What opened my eyes to all of this was an invitation by my university in 2019 to take on a project that would benefit people across campus. In the years leading up to that, numerous reports came out about a growing mental health crisis among students around the world. Earlier, in 2015, faculty and students occupied campus buildings of the University of Amsterdam to protest budget cuts and other austerity measures planned by management. Dissatisfaction, vulnerability and a growing awareness about the consequences of an increasingly alienating working and studying environment fuelled people's participation.

Considering a project to engage with, I picked the issue of student and faculty well-being, asking myself the question: next to addressing problems, how can the university improve people's happiness across campus? The happiness project at my university made me aware of how all the questions I used to ask of media professionals during my various earlier research projects – about how they 'made it work' and what managing their careers entailed – were always also questions about how they felt, how they languished and prospered and how the particulars of their work played a role in it all.

From there, I started collecting reports, mapping health-related initiatives in the media around the world, contacting professional associations, unions and charities in the field, conducting interviews and reviewing the literature. This felt like opening a Pandora's box, with each report, survey, series of focus groups or manifesto unearthing the dark side of doing what you love.

How does this book differ from your previous work on media and creative labour?

In various books – *Media Work* (2007, Polity), *Managing Media Work* (2011, Sage) and *Making Media* (2019, Amsterdam University Press) – I tried to map and document what it is like to work in various media industries. I always tried to establish an analysis cutting across the various professions (journalism, advertising, music and recording, digital games, film and TV, and so on). However, in all this work I never systematically focused on health and well-being. Looking back, this seems such an obvious and blatant omission.

How do you define 'well-being' in the context of creative careers?

Broadly speaking, well-being is a combination of feeling good and functioning well. It consists of several elements that can be seen in dependent relation. An important element is hedonic well-being: having fun, being satisfied with life (and work) and chasing happiness. Hedonic well-being is unsustainable without eudaimonic well-being, which refers to doing what feels virtuous and morally right, staying true to oneself and engaging in meaningful activities and work.

Next to such individual feelings and resilience, people's well-being is also linked to the communities they are part of and the positive quality of relationships therein. Especially in the media, the team or crew you are part of (and the kind of support you get from peers and leadership) makes a genuine difference in how professionals feel about the work, how well they are able to cope with stress and keeping going 'all in' on the job.

Beyond hedonic, eudaimonic and social aspects, an energy component can be included related to people's engagement, vigour, and flow. Creative careers can be said to thrive on such individual or shared experiences of being in a flow, going all-in on a project and pushing through without rest to the detriment of other aspects of life.

A fifth and final element to consider when exploring well-being at work is the material context of the work, from concrete contractual arrangements, fair pay and workers' rights to the physical design of the working space, protocols regarding one's safety and privacy and being able to participate in inspiring (or just fun) work-related events and activities.

All in all, a comprehensive focus on well-being at work – in all its hedonic, eudaimonic, social, energy and material dimensions – contributes to a better understanding of the composite of people's job satisfaction, affective commitment and work engagement.

What are the most common misconceptions people have about creative work and mental health?

A common misconception is that turning your creativity into a career is a romantic and inevitably noble pursuit. I would argue that while being creative can be a crucial part of what gives life meaning, pursuing one's creativity professionally requires serious self-investigation, investment in emotional and mental health literacy and a critical understanding of how the business and management of media, cultural and creative industries work.

In your view, are creative workers more vulnerable to burnout than other professionals? Why or why not?

Creative workers can be both more vulnerable and more resilient when it comes to work-related stress, burnout and depression, given their intrinsic motivation for the work. In other words: the intrinsic motivation that people share for turning their creativity into a career can become a weakness if it inspires self-exploitation and a willingness to accept unfair or otherwise problematic working conditions. However, the labour-of-love that fuels a creative career can become a strength when workers find common cause and collectively use their passion to transform the industry to become a healthier and more inclusive workplace.

Do you see any generational differences in how creative professionals approach work-life balance?

While more senior professionals tend to struggle with balancing the demands of work with family and home life – as well as often feeling discriminated for having caring responsibilities – creative practitioners in all life phases indicate experiencing difficulties with setting boundaries, saying 'no' or choosing life outside of work.

How do platforms and social media affect the well-being of creatives today?

If there is one thing pretty much all professionals across the various fields and industries wholeheartedly agree on, it is their resentment and frustration about the demanding and relentless nature of 'visibility work' in social media. Time spent self-promoting and managing an expectation of permanent availability online stand out as the least preferred aspect of the work – for influencers and vloggers as much as for game developers, advertising creatives, musicians, actors and journalists.

What can organizations, unions or institutions do to better support well-being in creative fields?

First, I want to acknowledge the hard work and sincere efforts by so many unions, professional associations, charities and non-profits in the various media and creative fields worldwide. For my research, I relied extensively on their various worker surveys, project documentations and interviews. Over the last decade or so, every sector sprang into action, in part propelled by the global economic crisis of 2008 onward, various social movements such as MeToo and BlackLivesMatter, the pandemic and the impact of generative artificial intelligence to the process and livelihoods of creative workers.

What I hope this book establishes is a shared narrative for people in creative careers across industry and professional boundaries: a way to collectively organize and move forward together. Some organizations are already doing so, such as the Media Entertainment and Arts Association (MEAA) in Australia, British union Bectu, the Safe to Create cross-sector initiative in Ireland, as well as in various projects by the International Labour Organization (ILO). In doing so, we can find common cause and develop tactics and strategies to focus on industry change, professionalization of management and individual resilience. In conjunction such developments can contribute to sustainable transformation across the media, cultural and creative industries.

Are there best practices or personal strategies you recommend for individuals navigating these challenges?

On an individual level, it is critical to remind yourself that, regardless of all your motivation, love and passion invested in the work, it is still 'just' work. In Ben Steel's (founder of the Australian mental health organization Screen Well) documentary *The Show Must Go On*, he interviews famous actor Sam Neill, who says it best: 'this is not who I am, this is what I do.'

Do you believe systemic change is possible in how we value and structure creative labour?

Absolutely, and this belief informs and inspires my book. In fact, I argue that the passion so many professionals feel for their creative work can also inspire affective mobilization for meaningful change. In other words: as love is a transformative force – people do things out of love that they would normally never consider – we can utilize this love to push for industry-wide change toward more empathic leadership, inclusive management, individual and shared mental health literacy and accountable structures for transparent decision-making.

How do you hope this book will impact policy, education or public understanding of creative work?

Hopefully my work contributes to media professionals and those pursuing a creative career to find common cause (despite their profession and work being distinct and different), develop a shared narrative for a healthier industry and jointly advocate for improved working conditions. If the book can support the normalization of conversations around mental health and well-being at work in the media, reducing stigma and breaking taboos, that would be wonderful. It is, fundamentally, about making people feel seen and acknowledging the critical role that professional storytellers play in our society.

Finally, what message would you most want readers to take away from *Well-Being and Creative Careers*?

No one should have to be exploited, manipulated, bullied or otherwise mistreated to have them do their work. It is common sense, perhaps, but necessary to say (and hear) across the various media, cultural and creative industries: if creativity, innovation, talent and on-time, within-budget productivity is so important, the best way to achieve all these goals may quite simply be to keep investing in talent, reward workers fairly and treat everyone with dignity and respect. I cannot imagine that anyone, anywhere in this industry would think it is good business to consistently bully workers into submission, to run a company, team or production based on fear or to claim commitment to creativity and innovation yet act scared shitless at anything resembling a challenge to the status quo – including a genuinely diverse workforce. Things should be different and I hope this project contributes to the fact that they will be.



*Well-Being and Creative
Careers: What Makes You
Happy Can Also Make You
Sick*

By Mark Deuze