Extreme Work / Normal Work: Intensification, Storytelling and Hypermediation in the (Re)construction of ‘the New Normal’

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Published in *Organization*, 22(4): 443-456

DOI: 10.1177/1350508415573881

Abstract

The label ‘extreme’ has traditionally been used to describe out-of-the-ordinary and quasi-deviant leisure subcultures which aim at an escape from commercialized and over-rationalized modernity, or for occupations involving high risk, exposure to ‘dirty work’ and a threat to life (such as military, healthcare, or policing). In recent years, however, the notion of ‘extreme’ is starting to define more ‘normal’ and mainstream realms of work and organization. Even in occupations not known for intense, dirty, or risky work tasks - there is a growing sense in which ‘normal’ workplaces are becoming ‘extreme’, especially in relation to work intensity, long hours cultures, and the normalizing of extreme work behaviours and cultures. This paper explores extreme work via a broader discussion of related notions of ‘edgework’ and ‘extreme jobs’, and suggests two main reasons why extremity is moving into everyday organizational domains; the first relates to the acceleration and intensification of work conditions, and the second to the hypermediation of, and increased appetite for, extreme storytelling. Definitions of extreme and normal remain socially constructed and widely contested; but as social and organizational realities take on ever more extreme features, we argue that theoretical and scholarly engagement with the extreme is both relevant and timely.

Keywords: Culture Industry, Edgework, Extreme Jobs, Extreme Work, Hypermediation, Storytelling, Work Intensification

Introduction

This article provides a critical introduction to themes of extreme and normal work, and we introduce these concepts as something broader, more uncertain, and more disturbing than Hewlett and Luce’s notion of ‘extreme jobs’ (2006). Drawing on Lyng’s concept of ‘edgework’ and informed by a critical engagement with notions of media tropes and storytelling, we explore how our contemporary pre-occupation with ‘extremity’ is both culturally mediated and socially constructed. The interplay between the two processes is examined here as a reflexive process, where dynamics in the material world of employment and the economy, inform and are in turn informed by, cultural understandings of the extreme.

In this context, we argue, the ‘badge of honour’ (Hewlett and Luce 2006) that those involved in extreme activities can claim to have earned, presents itself as a fitting metaphor for an economic and social system which increasingly resembles a war of all against all.

We proceed in the following directions. We begin by examining extremity and its development as a phenomenon in popular culture and organization, building on related ideas such as Lyng’s concept of ‘edgework’ (1990). We go on to highlight the difficulties inherent in defining extreme work, before discussing our understanding of ‘extreme’ as a hypermediated cultural trope. The paper then provides an introduction to the eight articles that make up this special issue, drawing out some of the shared themes as part of what we hope will be a key contribution to the intellectual exploration of extreme work.

Cultures of the extreme

A column of Marine Corps Humvees edges its way through the debris of a war-torn Iraqi town. One of the Marines is using a Sony handy-cam to film a U.S. attack helicopter launching air-to-ground missiles into a building which partially collapses - to whoops of approval from the troops. One of the men shouts:

“Yo, CNN would definitely pay for drama like that, ‘brah. That shit was extreme!”

(HBO TV series *Generation Kill*, episode 2: 28 mins, 0-16 secs)

Warfighting is perhaps the most obvious form of ‘extreme work’. Employment in ‘the profession of arms’ involves near-complete subordination to hierarchy and the reformatting of self-identity. Goffmanesque in their totality, armed forces feature extreme subcultures of a collectively-sustained, hyper-masculinized ‘warrior’ identity (Barrett 1996; Connell 2005; Wright 2009). Storytelling and myth-making – important to all organizational and occupational contexts (Boje 1991) - are especially prominent; military life is replete with folkloric trappings such as insignia and song intended to glorify, commemorate, and give meaning to conquest, battle, victory and loss. Frontline combat roles involve proximity to the horrors of death and killing and the risk of physical and psychiatric injury (Hockey 2009). Forms of organizational control involve physical and psychological conditioning, hazing rituals, threats, bullying, and public humiliation as management tools. Extremity bleeds into the lives of the families of military personnel (Wadsworth and Southwell 2011). War, quite obviously, involves extreme experiences: heroism, fear, rage, sorrow, and what some have described as a quasi-erotic ecstasy of violence and killing (Bourke 1999; Marlantes 2011; Wright 2009). The military industrial complex is at the cutting-edge of technological development and application, including the use of air power; a major feature of war since the early twentieth century (Lindqvist 2012). With this in mind; why might such dramas be considered ‘extreme’?

The producers of the mini-series *Generation Kill* could be making a point about the complex social construction of violence, news media, and entertainment, and the series itself is based on the work of an embedded journalist from *Rolling Stone* magazine (Wright 2009). 24/7 news creates demand for ‘unvarnished’, ‘real’ reporting ‘direct from the front lines’.

New technologies and digital hypermediation allow the proliferation of ‘home-made’ mass media. War is not only a great example of extreme work - it also provides compelling media and cultural content (Malesevic 2010: 1-3). Footage of ‘death from above’ is thus extreme because it is visually captivating, akin to an action movie or video game, more marketable than footage of a soldier clearing up a mess tent, or trying to sleep on a desert floor. But multiple readings exist of what is extreme and what is everyday and mundane (Robinson 2008: 38-9). Amid the chaos, extreme violence, and hypermediation of image, text, sound, and video of the second Gulf War, footage of one helicopter airstrike may seem barely worth recording.

Usage of the term ‘extreme’ has proliferated in recent years, used to signify events, actions, organizations or cultures that are noteworthy for being out of the ordinary, dangerous, and/or exciting and compelling (Valentine et al 2012). Extreme experiences can be a form of ‘edgework’, defined by Lyng as:

‘[a]ctivities that [...] involve a clearly observable threat to one’s physical or mental well-being or one’s sense of an ordered existence. The archetypal edgework experience is one in which the individual’s failure to meet the challenge at hand will result in death or, at the very least, debilitating injury’ (1990: 857).

Edgework involves ‘boundary negotiation along an edge separating order and disorder’ (Lyng 2004b: 27-8). Lyng’s notion of edgework heavily features extreme sports and inherently risky activities such as rock-climbing, motor-racing, stunt performing, drug-taking and skydiving; these experiences are characterised as somehow more real or authentic in a commercialized, rationalised world.

And yet the notion of the extreme seems increasingly to be applied to more mundane settings. Writings on edgework - while mostly emphasising deliberate risk-taking as escapist leisure – also describe ‘workplace edgework’ (Ferrell 2004: 57) in which risky cultures and actions play indispensable roles in contemporary (risk) societies. Such occupations might include traditionally hypermasculinized work such as stock-market trading (Lyng 2004a: 8; Smith 2004), or emergency rescue services (Ferrell 2004: 57; Lois 2004). More than this, however, it appears that the basic contours of a wider range of occupations are become magnified and extended, so that fairly ordinary work might be considered extreme. The most obvious dynamic here is the widely-reported increase in work intensity (Buchanan et al 2013; Green 2004) the growth of workloads, the lengthening of working weeks, and resultant ‘spillover’ into home and family life (Bunting 2004; Gregg 2011; Hassard et al 2009; Hewlett and Luce 2006; Hochschild and Machung 2003; McCann et al 2008; Thomas and Dunkerley 1999).

The normalizing of extremity or the ‘mainstreaming of edgework’ (Lyng 2004) is thus intimately related to cultural scripts and memes circulating wider society (Valentine et al 2012). While much of the edgework literature focuses on marginal and countercultural lifestyles such as extreme sports (Lyng 2004a; Ferrell et al 2001; Robinson 2008) or music subcultures (Harris 2007), extreme cultures and norms seem to have increasingly blurred into

the mainstream. ‘Reality’ TV seems fixated on extreme workplaces and behaviours, and ‘Extreme’ also applies to body or identity improvement projects such as diets, body art, use of anti-ageing products, workouts and body-building (Kosut 2010; Valentine et al 2012). In the world of work and organization we now have ‘extreme leadership’ (Farber 2012), ‘extreme jobs’ (Hewlett and Luce 2006) and ‘extreme action teams’ (Bechky and Okhuysen 2011; Klein et al 2006). Lyng (2004a: 5) proclaims the ‘seductive character’ of edgework, and Hewlett and Luce the ‘dangerous allure’ of the 70-hour working week (2006: 49). What counts as ‘extreme’? What makes extreme work and extreme stories so prevalent and newsworthy?

Extreme and normal coexist in a complex, contested duality. The work of the armed forces, like that of the emergency services, contains plenty of drudgery, boredom, and mundanity, punctuated by extreme, potentially life-threatening or life-changing incidents. But even this truism is not as simple as it first looks. ‘Extreme’ events – emergency callouts, fires, road-traffic collisions, injury, death, and the ‘management’ of distressed family members and onlookers – are normal, expected, and planned for by those who work in those fields (Boyle and Healy 2003; Lois 2004; McCann et al 2012; Palmer 1983). Here, ‘the atypical is typical’ (Scheid 2014: 1; see also Rhodes 2004: 27). Indeed there is an established literature on how emergency services workers actually downplay the extreme or heroic discourses that the public and the media apply to them, preferring self-deprecating narratives of ‘it’s just what we do’, or ‘this is what we signed up for’ (McCann et al 2012; Mannon 1992; Metz 1981). Yet, they also swap ‘extreme’ stories among themselves; not to portray themselves as heroes, but to comment on the absurdity, idiocy, or even comedy of events they have been involved with (Tangherlini 1998, 2000). For the most part these stories are part of the workplace culture of banter and joking, but story-swapping is also to some extent a coping mechanism. Exposure to tragedy, trauma, violence, and long night shifts are clearly not good for employee health (Thompson et al 1993). Indeed, emergency responders are at risk of becoming ‘secondary victims’ as the psychological costs of extreme work mount (Jones 1985). Notwithstanding coping strategies such as self-deprecating stoicism, work involving death, danger, and grotesque injury *is* out of the ordinary – the question is, to what degree; what counts as extreme is context-specific and socially-contested (Lois 2004).

Towards a definition of extreme work

It is impossible, therefore, to provide an absolute definition of what constitutes extreme; one can always imagine a more hazardous task or more outrageously risky cultures and behaviours. ‘Normal’ is equally difficult to define, as tolerance for work, stress, danger, injury and exhaustion varies widely (Luczak 1991). Like a car owner’s dispute with a mechanic or insurer about what is ‘normal wear and tear’ on their vehicle, bitter disputes can ensue about what is a tolerable or acceptable wear and tear inflicted by workplaces on the body and mind. Laurie Graham’s ethnography of a Subaru-Isuzu car plant (1995: 86-9) provides an example of how management (and often their hand-picked clinicians) can

obfuscate and deny the existence of carpal tunnel syndrome and other workplace strains and injuries. ‘Objective’ diagnoses are even more troublesome with regard to psychiatric illnesses and their causes (Rhodes 2004; Schnurr and Green 2004; Scott 2011).

Hewlett and Luce provide a checkbox method of identifying a job as extreme, based on specific job characteristics (2006: 51). Their focus is on the extreme job, but we must bear in mind that occupations that are not by definition extreme *jobs* can quite easily feature extreme *work*. As employers place increasing pressure on staff and individuals push themselves harder, in turn, many extreme workers help to propagate and reproduce extreme work, pushing its boundaries back yet further. Driven, high-achieving perfectionists and workaholic ‘extreme job holders’ do ‘whatever it takes’ regardless of induced pressure or managerial control. This includes workers who enjoy the prestige, variation, discretion, and involvement of their work and the ‘buzz’ it provides (Buchanan et al 2013: 657; Thomas and Dunkerley 1999: 184), or the self-employed who have no managers directly pushing them. Is extreme work foisted on to workers who have few means of resistance, or are extreme workers at least to some extent ‘willing slaves’ (Bunting 2004) who have internalized extreme work hours and associate them with prestige, rather than subjugation? While not everyone accepts or embraces work intensification, there is little resistance; many seem resigned to the view that demands on organizations are rising and employee entitlements shrinking in today’s ruthlessly competitive global economy, and that intensity has been normalized (McCann et al 2008). Extreme has become the new normal.

Both explanations are persuasive and it is likely that the conditions of extremity are influenced by a combination of these two drivers. The example of ‘John’ in haute cuisine kitchens is instructive (Burrow 2015): certainly his abuse of co-workers marks him out as an extreme character, yet he and his colleagues are also trapped in a toxic culture that normalizes and rewards these behaviours. Norms, demands, expectations, and roles feed into and reproduce one another. Moreover, while many would recognize occupational abuses such as long hours, bullying, racism and sexism across various industries, there is also a range of extremity at local levels; one particular workplace might be problematic whereas another is ‘completely warped’ (Burrow 2015). States maintain ‘special’ forces for undertaking particularly risky and demanding military operations, prisons need especially notorious ‘control units’ to raise managements’ sanctions against disobedient inmates (Rhodes 2004). Bond traders develop legendary status as the most frequent pullers of all-nighters, telling stories of being ‘so hard-core’ that they don’t change their shirts for three days (Ho 2009: 91). Wherever one looks, there is always somewhere or someone more extreme.

Whether self-imposed or not, extreme work conditions in all their forms (long hours, repeated exposure to distressing events etc.) are widely understood as damaging or unsustainable (Hewlett and Luce 2006; Luczak 1991; Paton and Violanti 2006). Exposure to extreme stress is unhealthy and is strongly associated with psychiatric and physical disorders, low morale, substance abuse, burnout and work absence (Schnurr and Green 2004). Organizations often turn to the disaster management language of ‘preparedness’ and ‘resilience’ as they try to strengthen their tolerance for extremity and volatility, especially in healthcare, rescue and law enforcement occupations. Discourses of resilience often contain a

spiritual element; they purport to provide a managerialist, evidence-based and secular form of coping in a society where the sacred is profaned (Brenner et al 2010).

Resilience and preparedness are intimately connected to literature on workplace safety, disasters or multiple casualty incidents such as floods, plane crashes, wildfires or acts of terrorism. Notions of ‘situational awareness’, and ‘sensemaking’ come to the fore (Snook 2002; Weick 1993) and ‘the extreme is thus a site where human agency reasserts itself’ (Valentine et al 2012: 1015). In writings on ‘extreme action teams’ (Bechky and Okhuysen 2011; Klein et al 2006) the extreme is to be expected and managed. Disasters can be overcome by forward planning, team-building, shared leadership, ‘dynamic delegation’, risk management and ‘after-action’ debriefings. With effective mind sets and toolkits, extreme job holders can cope and thrive. Indeed, in the most managerialist writings, those facing heavy workloads with high costs of failure (plus demanding non-work commitments) need only learn to *Lean In* (Sandberg 2013) and all will be well. If one can cope with *The Radical Leap* (Farber 2014) or learn the lessons of *In Extremis Leadership* (Holditz 2010) then one can cope with anything. The brand narratives of the high performing professional are those of the superhuman, and superhumans do not need organizational support.

While an extensive literature engages with organizational attempts to risk manage the dangers and traumas of extreme work (Paton and Violanti 2006), in the real world organizational support is often lacking for those exposed to risks (Regeher and Millar 2007). This is because the ‘normal’ parts of the organization face their own challenges; increased demand, reduced resources, and auditing overload. Managers and co-workers suffer from a time famine which restricts their ability to care about their colleagues (Hassard et al 2009; Perlow 1999). Senior leadership’s desperation for results can mean an imposition of extreme working practices that are damaging to its employees and clients and may ultimately be counter-productive. A vivid example was the U.S. security services’ desire to extract intelligence from ‘war on terror’ detainees. Lagouranis and Mikaelian (2007) show how the continual use of ‘Fear Up Harsh’ was simply unworkable as there was no ‘intelligence’ to extract from the prisoners, in the first place (see also Chwastiak 2015, in the present issue). Less dramatically, round-the clock work intensity can drive out creativity and responsiveness, destroy morale, encourage workplace sickness and absenteeism, industrial relations strife and employee litigation. Even in narrow, managerialist terms, extreme work is often self-defeating.

Individually developed or officially encouraged coping strategies help to keep workplace stress from becoming unbearable, but also keep the stressors in place without fixing their underlying causes. The detached professionalism and gallows humour of combat soldiers, for example, may see them through the firefight, only to leave them facing a battle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) once the smoke has cleared (Shay 1994). The ambivalence of coping mechanisms brings extreme work into some common ground with prior research into ‘dirty work’ (e.g. Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Common forms of coping involve mental dissociation from the work or close personal association with occupational identities (Dick 2005). Butchery or slaughterhouse jobs are exemplars of dirty work and their work tasks and wider culture might well be considered extreme (Ackroyd and Crowdy 1990;

Simpson et al 2014). Yet many forms of extreme work are clearly not stigmatized as ‘dirty’; in fact many extreme job holders work in prestigious, highly-paid and sought-after professions. This work can also be deeply challenging and the occupational identities just as strongly-held. Extreme becomes normal in mundane, prestigious, or ‘mainstream’ workplaces as more organizations become overstretched. ‘Extreme’ is common and socially acceptable, and professionals are therefore expected to find a way to cope with or even embrace this ‘new normal.’

Extreme as storytelling, trope and meme

Broader socio-cultural trends filter into the everyday conduct of organizations and occupations – and if ‘storytelling is the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships’ (Boje 1991: 106), it is to be expected that discourses of the extreme within and without work organizations will inform each other. As flows of ideas about extremity coalesce, becoming mimetic and patterned, they become drivers of their own cultural significance: ‘As they broadcast their influence on the world, memes thus influence the conditions affecting their own chances of survival’ (Gleick 2011). In this context, Valentine et al describe ‘extreme’ as both opening up opportunities and shutting them down; extreme has near-endless possibilities as a trope with multiple meanings and considerable ‘discursive power and force as a signifier’ (Valentine et al 2012: 1009-10).

The ubiquity of extreme-as-trope thus conceived is given further prominence when one considers the hypermediation which is often central to home-made pop-culture or ‘extreme’ film-making (Ferrell et al 2001; Palmer 2012). More than ever, home-made pop culture, such as blogging, tweeting, and the uncensored and real-time nature of the internet allows or encourages dysfunctional forms of extremity, such as offensive and sexually threatening messages across social media. Shock (if not awe) is brought to our living rooms and carried around on our smart phones and tablets. It is not so much ‘brought to us’ but developed and sustained by individual citizens. Thus, extreme or total institutions can form without walls, locked doors, or swipe card access, and can be willingly entered into (Scott 2011). Hypermediation can blur the distinction between work and non-work (Gregg 2011), and between work and lifestyle, with individuals developing their own personal branding narratives (Brannan et al 2011) through blogging and tweeting, in order to advance their career.

Exaggerated or not, individuals buy in to extreme as trope by crafting extreme identities or alter-ego as projects of the self, often by exaggerating hyper-male or post-human features. Extreme-as-trope helps to sell merchandising and brand image, especially in extreme sports (see Robinson 2008) but also in the mainstream. American football star Marshawn Lynch created his own ‘Beast Mode’ to be called upon when ‘extreme’ performance on the football field is necessary. Others in high-intensity occupations develop extreme personalities which can alter and confuse personal and social features such as gender

norms, at least temporarily. In the Japanese manga *Hataraki-man* ('Workaholic man') a female journalist turns on her 'man switch' to go into 'hyper male work mode' when deadlines loom (Matanle et al 2014: 482-3). Extreme/normal or edgework thus overlaps with contemporary debates into the 'post-human' (Braidotti 2013), as distinctions between human, technology, and animal species are blurred or erased. If the 'limit', edge, or extreme is socially constructed then there is no absolute limit.

This implies going beyond the boundaries of 'human' capacity, a notion that has long exercised the imagination of popular culture and science fiction. Comic books, cinema, and video games draw on and develop tropes around performance-boosting pharmacological or biotech interventions, from Marvel Comics' Captain America and his 'Super Soldier Serum', to Konami's Solid Snake; his ageing body augmented by his 'Octocamo' suit which 'intelligently' blends with the surroundings. Real world accounts of combat zones describe soldiers swallowing 'black beauties' in Vietnam, heightening their senses and holding off fatigue. This dynamic is never far from exaggeration and parody – how extreme can you get, how low can you go, what's your breaking point? 'Reality' TV shows such as *Toughest Place to be a Bus Driver*, *Lives of Fire*, or *Extreme A&E* introduce contrived interventions to make the 'reality' more lively and intense.

If extreme is a trope or meme, its exaggerative elements can reflect and be influenced by moral panics (Furedi 2002). Here, extreme work is portrayed in metaphors of battle, crisis, violence, and emergency, and everyday life seems infused with a culture of fear; militarized language and practices abound (Balko 2013; Rhodes 2004; Turse 2009). Organizations enact security cultures that assume high-risk relationships between staff and/or customers. Ticket inspectors become 'Revenue Protection Officers'. Administrators work in 'credit capture'. Meteorological offices issue 'extreme weather warnings', and talk of 'weather bombs'. A widely-used email package is the 'Microsoft Threat Management Gateway'. Estates managers of an elite UK university deploy 'Operation Lockdown' when buildings are closed over Easter. Once again seemingly mundane work is acculturated as extreme.

A risk society (Beck 1992) addicted to acceleration (Noys 2013) is portrayed as unstable, perhaps uncontrollable (Virilio 2012a). In the context of the seemingly never ending 'war on terror', politicians have sought extra powers to deal with an expanding range of 'extremism' (BBC 2014). But is this doomsday scenario of extremity and risk accurate? Does it justify the growth in new state, managerial and psychological/therapeutic interventions? Some describe a dichotomous culture of fear and therapy in which vulnerability is cultivated and indeed celebrated, a world dominated by moral panics where everyday life requires psychological intervention (Furedi 2002, 2003). Cultures of extremity may be a form of irrational 'counterknowledge' (Thompson 2008), or conversely, a rational recognition of the hidden violence of contemporary capitalism – its adherence to the Shock Doctrine and its appetite for destruction (Klein 2008: 17).

Considering cultural manifestations of extremity such as 'extreme gardening' or 'extreme ironing' (see Burrow 2015, in the present issue), extremity is obviously negotiable, and the problematic of extreme/normal and limits/possibilities invites a continual pushing at

boundaries. Socio-cultural, technological, and pharmacological interventions seek to extend the possibilities of performance and endurance in sport (Fenn 2014) and even education (Boseley 2014). The boundaries being managed as competitors look to gain an edge by pushing the limits of human capability is truly a form of edgework. One person's 'elite player performance plan' or 'conditioning' is another's cheating or transgression. How far can the boundaries be pushed, both in terms of human endurance and the social norms of acceptability?

With or without chemical or technological interventions, situations can push people into extreme states which transform body and mind. Former U.S. Marine officer Karl Marlantes frequently mentions a notion of 'transcendence' in war that goes beyond identity, resistance, ethnicity or politics. There can be no doubt this is an extreme state involving inhumane practices, yet it also portrayed as connecting to something raw and vital, especially it seems, for young males:

'a black kid, all tangled up in black power politics, almost always angry and sullen. A troublemaker. Yet here he was, most of his body naked with only flapping rags left of his jungle utilities, begging for a rifle when he had the perfect excuse just to bury his head in the clay and quit. [...] He [...] went charging into the fight, leaving me stunned for a moment. Why? Who was he doing this for? What is this thing in young men? We were beyond ourselves, beyond politics, beyond good and evil. This was transcendence.' (Marlantes 2012: 174).

'What is this thing' indeed? We are increasingly accustomed to depictions and discourses of extremity. And yet we see that this very cultural pervasiveness – what we, after Valentine (2012) have called extreme as trope – has actually made it harder to know where normal ends and extreme begins. This intellectual atmosphere of conceptual instability presents us, and our contributors, with the opportunity to begin to solidify the terrain, to begin to map the contours of extreme work.

Extreme work: Emerging foundations

We spoke earlier of the tendency for extreme work to be associated with stereotypically 'masculine' work identities, and this is the starting point for Gascoigne, Buchanan, and Parry's contribution (this issue) on the gendering of extreme work.

Gascoigne et al.'s findings show how the rise of extreme work has impacted on existing gender inequalities. Extreme work, in this analysis, contributes to gender inequality for two central reasons; because it extends the traditional division between home (feminine) and market (masculine), and because it perpetuates the culturally implicit ideology of the 'ideal worker'. Deeply entrenched social patterns such as the emphasis on maternal parenting, and women's domestic responsibilities, means that attaining this 'ideal' status places strains on women's career aspirations. Considerations of gender will be fundamental to the

development of the field of extreme work study. Looked at from the perspective of gender, we are required to question 'extreme work' from the standpoint of how it is culturally and socially constructed in a specific context of inequality. Further, Gascoigne, Buchanan, and Parry ask us to consider whether ideologies of economic growth and competition, which are so central to the understanding of extreme work, should themselves be open to much more critical, and fundamental analysis.

Bozkurt's contribution goes to the heart of the issue of how we understand extremity in relation to normality. Taking as her research context a large UK supermarket at Christmas time, she uses ethnographic data to argue that even in the most apparently mundane of circumstances, extreme work can emerge in unexpected ways. By looking at the industry's narratives of family and fun, as well as the workers' own cultural affect, Bozkurt is able to outline the ways these 'soft' elements intersect with the quantitative increase in workload at Christmas. As the entire industry kicks into high gear, spans of activity, as well as pace and interaction with other staff and customers, increases. The atmosphere in the store takes on a qualitatively different feel as customers drop any pretence to politeness, accosting staff to demand to know the whereabouts of their Christmas 'essentials'. Bozkurt subtly introduces a note, if not of cynicism, then of looking askance at the way the supermarkets seek to position Christmas as both a time of increased workload, and of hale and hearty Christmas cheer. For the supermarket workers, as for many of us, Christmas is a time to suspend cynicism and be swept up in the spirit of festive excess.

As we write, Chwastiak's article on Enhanced Interrogation Techniques could hardly be more topical. Anticipating a story that has been at the top of the news agenda worldwide (Washington Post 2014), she presents an examination of the way torture, as part of the 'war on terror,' has been framed as normal work. The organization of dehumanization has a long history, and Chwastiak draws parallels between post 9/11 dynamics, and those of the Holocaust and the Vietnam War. Organizational and ideological imperatives were used to render what by any standard of humanity is extreme behaviour, as normal and, notably, rational. The management of war continued to be refined after the Al Qaida attacks on America's political and economic centres and a discursive and legal initiative was put into play whereby interrogation techniques could be differentiated from torture. There was, of course, an element of bad faith in this project from the start, with rhetorical notions of 'taking off the kid gloves' and 'doing whatever is necessary' leaving the door open to what would hitherto have been seen as extreme behaviours. In extreme times, sometimes extreme actions are needed, or so we are asked to believe. Chwastiak's paper vividly brings to light the irrationality and extremity that lies behind the most technically and bureaucratically expressed projects.

From one security apparatus to another, Turnbull and Wass's article highlights the power of bureaucratic management to bring extremity to the work of police officers. They explain how the UK government's drive for austerity, together with the targets culture that has taken hold of Britain's public services, has rendered the work of many at the more senior rank of Inspector, extreme. As we saw earlier, both organizational and individual forces can lead to extreme work being normalized, and by this account, 'cop culture' sees the coming

together of an overburdened organization and an internalized sense of duty. In an echo of Gascoigne et al (this issue), Turnbull and Wass highlight a certain *machismo* in the tendency for many inspectors to work 60 – 70 – 75 hours per week. This leads, predictably, to wider expectations, and to a normalisation of very long working hours. Once again, the issue of normal versus extreme is at the heart of the piece. Though we might associate police work with conventionally extreme activities of life and death situations, it is the bureaucratic ‘hassles’ that threaten to overwhelm those in senior ranks. And so inspectors are expected to ‘*step up, not play up*’, whatever the cost to their physical and mental health, and to the sustainability of communities and society more widely.

Remaining with the theme of crime and its consequences, Boddy, Miles, Sanyal and Hartog, explore workplace psychopaths that are typically familiar only through cinematic representations. Once again, we see that the culture of contemporary, neoliberal capitalism can interact with organizational and individual circumstances to create situations of extreme work. Though psychopaths are associated in the popular imagination with murder and sadism, Boddy et al. contend that their ‘conscience free’ approach to life can actually make them appear to be excellent employees, fitting in with the ruthlessness of modern, competitive business. However, the same appointment procedures that pick up on their apparent dynamism and executive capabilities, fail to uncover deeper, more destructive flaws. Reviewing the fast developing field of corporate psychopathy, and taking the case of a global professional services organization as their research context, Boddy et al. show how these flaws create a destructive spiral from suspicion, to disbelief, to outright fear. At first lauded by senior management for their apparently outstanding performances, these corporate psychopaths are ultimately uncovered as manipulators, fraudsters, and bullies. They leave a trail of destruction in their wake – and some employees in fear of their lives; extreme work indeed.

If psychopaths have an inbuilt capacity for transcendence, albeit one which is broadly destructive and irrational in its consequences, Bloomfield and Dale argue that we are on the threshold of a new era of pharmacological and technological enhancement that will allow workers to ‘go beyond’ their normal limits. They show how ‘human enhancement technologies’ (HETs) that were developed for military use, now find their way into civilian workplaces. This is a familiar transition, as the military has often been the source of organizational innovations that later find their way into civilian workplaces. These workplaces, as many of our contributors discuss, are increasingly characterised by higher intensity work and longer hours. What better then, than a drug which can allow, for example, doctors or other white collar professionals to work harder, better, longer? Like torture, once it is seen as beneficial to the aims of those influencing public discourse, drug use becomes renegotiated from deviant and extreme, to productive and normal. The U.S. soldier in Vietnam popping ‘black beauties’ now becomes the truck driver or shift worker ingesting the newer, ‘safer’ stimulant modafinil. This porosity between extreme and normal may already have seen the emergence of a pharmaceutically enhanced ‘extreme worker’, perfectly suited to the era of extreme work – but with major questions around health, risk, and safety, as yet unanswered.

Technology is once again the theme for Pettica-Harris, Weststar and McKenna, who look at extreme work in the video game industry. While Bozkurt examined one occupational group that has become archetypical of the postindustrial age, retail workers, Pettica-Harris et al. focus on a group which is supposedly much better rewarded, both intrinsically and extrinsically. While their work may be fulfilling and highly sought after, Pettica-Harris et al. show that video game designers are, like retail workers, often employed on a highly precarious basis. In this case, they are subject to the perverse dictatorship of 'the project'. Project work is now the 'new normal' in many organizations, and for video game creators, it is infused not only with 'passion' and 'commitment', but with the tensions and stresses summed up in the term 'the crunch'. In this context, the authors relate how the families of video game workers took to social media with blogs such as 'EA [Electronic Arts] spouse' to voice their dissatisfaction with the psychological and physical costs extreme work had on their loved ones. Creative workers such as these continue to push themselves to extremes, but this paper highlights the potential of technology not only to subjugate, but to resist.

Ekman continues our focus on the creative workers who were once touted as the new occupational elite in the immaterial economies. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of how precarious and pressured jobs in the media and creative sectors can be. Making a novel contribution to these debates, Ekman combines ideology critique and discourse analysis to uncover the hidden exploitation behind an industry that thrives on innovation and, once again, 'passion'. Just as financialized capitalism promised a 'win-win' scenario of credit without consequence, so creative work in the media holds out the possibility of never ending self improvement, innovation and challenge. That is, if one is prepared to make a commitment to the corporation and its ideology which is unquestioning – whatever the cost in terms of long hours and stress. Ekman argues that in return for commitment to the needs of the organization – once again projects, deadlines, presentations... employees are rewarded not by improvements in pay and job security, but a seductive promise of reaching one's full potential. When the price of moderation is 'relegation to the proletariat', these extreme workers must search for a 'haven in a heartless world' (Lasch 1976) in the comforting activities of crafting, baking, gardening – which once constituted, and now symbolise, a 'normal' life.

Just as seductive as the concepts of self-development and indispensability discussed by Ekman, is that of leadership, which Burrow explores in his review essay. He critically highlights the contradictions inherent in transposing vignettes of life as, say, an Antarctic Expedition leader, or a frontline police officer, to the more mundane setting of organization management. Books such as these, perhaps, are at least more easily accessible for the time pressed manager – labouring under 'extreme' pressures. For scholars who have not yet succumbed to our own academic version of extreme work, Burrow includes a recent book which uses a critical theory inspired approach to deconstruct managerialist notions of leader-follower dynamics.

Conclusion

Capitalism once promised a leisure society or even, ‘the end of work’ (Granter 2009), and yet it now seems to promise the opposite – the endless toil of extreme work. As stresses and strains within organizations are reflected and amplified by cultural tropes of normalised extremity, this scenario develops its own momentum, greater extremity becomes inexorable.

The extreme, of course, is nothing new; it is perhaps central to the experience of what it is to be modern (Valentine et al 2012). The twentieth century, wracked as it was by war and revolution, has been characterised as the *Age of Extremes* (Hobsbawm 1994). Earlier, the industrial revolution saw extreme poverty, wealth, inequality, and extreme industrial work, all rising on the same socio-economic tide. There seemed to be a sense, however, in the post-war decades (now imbued with the hue of a golden age), that society had developed the organization, and consciousness, to moderate itself. This was also an age, we must not forget, where workers cashed in the political-economic credit earned through co-operation with the war effort, and where they were able to win concessions in the workplace; safety, moderation in pay and conditions. But as we and our contributors argue the rise of neoliberalism saw these trends reversed. Society, if it still existed, entered a new age; quasi Victorian in its inequalities, and on a permanent war footing when it came to competition between producers, let alone ‘rogue states’ and insurgent groups. Although we have traced the definitional problematics of extreme and normal, viewing extreme work in relation to the dominant ideological and economic structures and processes of the era, is key, as our contributions show. Further, the sense that it is historically, culturally, sexually, technologically and organizationally specific is a notable forward move in the conceptualisation of extreme work.

Importantly, our special issue highlights the fact that extreme work is damaging to human individuals, damaging to organizational cohesion, and more widely, counter to living and working in sustainable societies. How does one resist extreme work? Scholarship on reducing working hours and alternatives to heteronomous work under capitalism – on alternative work, in short, has long been a hidden current in organization scholarship (Granter 2009). It offers possibilities, utopian as they may seem. In the meantime, like Peticca-Harris et al’s spouses of overworked and burnt-out game designers, resistance sometimes has to come from concerned relatives or associates, rather than from the extreme workers themselves. Although scholarship can only go so far, resistance often benefits from sound analytical foundations, and it is in that spirit that we present our Special Issue on extreme work.

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