

## The Exclusive Party, the Job Fair and the Internet: Interactions in the Knowledge-Creative Economy. A Reply to Preda's Comments

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Published: May 8, 2019

### Abstract

The authors reply to Alex Preda's comments on his essay titled "The Functions of Social Interaction in the Knowledge-Creative Economy: Between Co-Presence and ICT-Mediated Social Relations."

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We thank Preda very much for his comments on our text as somehow it forces us to an operation of formalization of the concepts we have used, allowing us to reflect further on these issues.

First of all, in our text, we reflected upon types of relationships that exist among creative professionals and their functions for the professional life: this has meant dedicating all our efforts to observing the “minimum reference unit” of professionals’ social capital, as, so to speak, the atomic dimension of social capital: that is, interactions. This does not mean that the structure, namely the social networks, has no importance for us: we are well aware that “underpinning these dynamics [the clustering of workers needing contacts], however, are [...] network structures that are constructed through such contacts” (Storper, & Venables, 2004, p. 3).

If we observe, therefore, the interactions as the basic unit of actors’ sociality, we can then build a vocabulary in which we will have social networks made up of ties that are made by interactions: weak ties will be built by infrequent, superficial interactions with very distant (physically, relationally or socially) people; on the contrary, strong and bonding ties will be the result of frequent, in-depth interactions that generate trust, affections and so on. In turn, the set of ties generates networks. Focusing on interactions means using a very powerful magnifying glass when observing sociality and, of course, favoring a (small) part for the whole.

One type of structure we would like to focus on is what has been called *buzz environment*: that is, a context which allows and multiplies the spread of interactions (Storper, & Venables, 2004). Storper and Venables, who formalize this concept, use it to explain the dynamics of agglomeration of professionals in some specific places, referring to what Jacobs (1970) defined the advantage of cities. The concept of buzz is able to hold together qualitative and functional elements, quantitative components and finally the spatial dimension of social interaction: it is a property of environments (physical, but it may also be stretched for virtual ones) which stands for “intensive social interactions in a compact [urban] space, predominantly through physical face-to-face contacts” (Arribas-Bel, Kourtit, & Nijkamp, 2015, p. 190); in the new economic geography buzz is defined as a form of agglomeration that originates from the advantages deriving from communications and face-to-face interaction (Bathelt, Malmberg, & Maskell, 2004). We can therefore consider buzz as the outcome of a myriad of social interactions created by the co-presence of many people and economic activities. These social interactions tend to form very weak ties, but very dense networks, localized on the environment where they take place. Using the terminology of economic sociology, we could say that buzz is a localized social network based on a myriad of weak ties. In this sense the advantage that the actors draw from it is similar to the strength of weak ties of Granovetter (1973) and, from the spatial point of view, to enjoy these advantages it is sufficient for the actors to be there; better, to “be in the loop” (Storper, & Venables, 2004), that is to be recognized as part of those who are there.

As Preda highlights, traditional economic sociology has privileged the study of networks over interaction: despite being accounted for, interactions are often treated as a means to an end, meaning as “tools put work” to the aim of achieving a certain outcome which derives from accessing the network. Digital-based relationality seems to, at once, raise this question further as well as delink the nature of relationships and interaction even further. We are glad that Preda see our article as a helpful contribution in disentangling this difference — this goes straight at the heart of how social relations and relationality in contexts of work are being affected by technologies, such as social media, that enhance — using Preda’s words — a Goffmanian distinction between cognitive and social relationality. Preda quotes Goffman to say that “Relationality implies ‘cognitive recognition without social recognition’ (Goffman, 1971, p. 228)” and notes that digital technologies are helpful in providing relationality signals to others. This is, arguably, a key component in the role digital technologies play in the job-seeking dimension (as one of the authors argued elsewhere, with this specific focus, albeit with a different theoretical perspective, see Gandini, 2016). Yet this is a question that remains of interest beyond the scopes of our article and of the limited range of action of the creative economy. Ilana Gershon, in her book *Down and Out in the New Economy*, argues that Granovetter’s classic theory of the “strength of weak ties” should be revised in that “new technologies have changed the kind of problems people face when searching for a job” (2017, p. 19). The problem, Gershon continues, “is no longer (...) discovering that the job opening exists” — which is what weak ties are for — but rather to ensure that someone in a position to hire you notices you. This is valid for the corporate economy Gershon studies as well as the creative economy at the cen-

tre of our work: cognitive and social recognition have become two sides of the same process — they are complementary, again following Gershon (2017, p. 20) as to when and how information circulates so as to ensure the signals are transmitted properly, and received by others timely. Rather than strong or weak ties, therefore, it appears as though in the creative economy a key role is played by self-branding practices; the construction of a reputation, also mentioned in our paper, is not so much pointed at constructing a strong or weak tie but rather amounts to creating the conditions for one's recognition in the 'network that counts.' Creative workers in other words use interactions to generate the conditions for their (cognitive and social) recognition by others. In a Goffmanian sense, this maintains a key element of "performance," which raises a question as to whether a certain "authentic" relationality takes place or instead if interactions become ancillary to networks in the formation of this professional scene.

Yet, literature goes further, and, above all through empirical evidence, notes that this type of interactions also has specific functions that tend to be particularly favorable to the economy linked to creativity, art, knowledge and culture in general (Currid, & Williams, 2010; d'Ovidio, 2016). This is what makes an exclusive party very similar to a business fair, yet, it makes it more functional than the fair for the cultural and creative scene. The party is an environment where the buzz character is particularly accentuated, where social actors are not only there, but they are recognized as being in the loop and they can profit of all that functions derived by the myriad of weak ties that create the buzz. Professionals attend parties because they want to profit of the buzz, and they are very conscious about it, so much that an interviewee told us:

I took a break from job for one entire year, I needed a sabbatical, because I was burned out.  
No work activities, no more parties at [name of the place], only holidays!

On the contrary, the formal character of the fair limits the buzz, in that it tends to make (some) interactions stronger and therefore to reduce the quantity and the density of weak ties.

A final point about the extent to which creativity is shaped by all these interactions: Harvey Molotch's brilliant book *Where Stuff Comes From* goes exactly in that direction, pointing out that sticky notes, surgery tools, toasters, cars, and many other things come to be how they are because of interactions (Molotch, 2003). Molotch considered physical interactions among people and between them and the (urban) space; very few is said about the combination of on-line and off-line interaction when creativity is concerned, and we agree with Preda that an avenue is now open for research.

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