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On Startups and Doublethink — Resistance and Conformity in Negotiating the Meaning of Entrepreneurship

Abstract

Startup entrepreneurship is in the literature, in the discourse of those engaging in it, and in cultural representations of the same presented as both resistance against prevailing corporate logics and as a path towards becoming a corporate entity. Resistance, claimed or otherwise, is here not just a reaction to a perceived outrage or a power imbalance, but *in itself* a constitutive part of contemporary entrepreneurship, particularly as this is culturally constructed. We study this paradox, where a discourse of resistance becomes a productive part of entrepreneurial culture, by way of a case study of a successful startup, analyzing the manner in which people working in the same utilize 'doublethink' to portray the organization both as a resistance to an assumed, more corporate 'Other' and as a budding corporation unto itself. By doing so, we highlight how a discourse of resistance works as a value in and productive element of entrepreneurship culture. In our case, resistance and corporate conformity come together in a way that defies easy classification, one where resistance is culturally pre-determined as an easy-to-adopt position and where doublethink becomes a productive way of dealing with corporate success.

Keywords

Discourse, doublethink, entrepreneurship, resistance, startup culture

Introduction

In the contemporary social imaginary of the market, entrepreneurship is often symbolized as representing a disruptive, even revolutionary force (Anderson and Warren, 2011); one where talk of 'mavericks' (Hall, 1997; Silver, 2012), 'rebels' (Ket de Vries, 1997) or 'disruption' more generally (Christensen 1997; Bilton, 2013; Ries, 2011; Stross, 2012) is ever-present. On the other hand, entrepreneurship is also, when successful, assumed to grow and evolve into a corporate form – symbolizing the opposite of disruption and revolution, namely efficiency and controlled growth (Clarke et al., 2014; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Within contemporary capitalism, then, to present oneself as an entrepreneur is to occupy a complex space betwixt and between the corporation (a form towards which the entrepreneurial organization is growing) and the 'rebel' who challenges the logics of this very same world. Thus, although much of the mainstream discourse on entrepreneurship often involves a normative promotion of taken for-granted entrepreneurial ideals (see Farny et al., 2016; Leicht and Harrison, 2016; Rehn et al., 2013 for analyses of such normative idealization), recent literature has begun to emphasize the paradoxical tensions of entrepreneurship discourse (Dodd, 2014) and how entrepreneurs make use of these to makes sense of their identity within such paradoxes, choosing both sides of the dilemma rather than normalizing one (Berglund et al., 2014). Entrepreneurship can thus, although this is not widely acknowledged in the existent literature, come to signify resistance (for exceptions see Ogbar, 2000; Thorpe, Gold, Holt & Clarke, 2006), but a very complex and at times paradoxical form thereof. Whilst resistance as an oppositional tactic to real or perceived oppression can be seen as a force which destabilizes and even destroys organizations (e.g., Russel & McCabe, 2015; Symon, 2005), it can, as a discourse, also function as something that builds and

develops the same – even when it insists it isn't.

This paper will explore this often unacknowledged and understudied paradox of resistance in entrepreneurship and attendant 'doublethink' by way of a case-study based on a highly successful startup venture, SoundCloud. At SoundCloud both the founders and the employees struggle to negotiate their positions between being a successful company within an obvious corporate growth discourse, and having an organizational identity that emphasizes resistance to the former. In both their discourse and their acts, employees at SoundCloud attempt to highlight how working in a startup represents resistance to assumedly more restrictive and less ethical forms of corporate engagement, yet they are embedded in discourses of contemporary capitalism such as market share, growth, valuation, return on investment and the likes, and to a great extent it is this embeddedness that makes it possible to continue upholding a resistance discourse. By identifying both general organizational and specific individual contradictions – or more specifically what El-Sawad, Arnold & Cohen (2004) refer to as "double-think" – derived from the way in which employees attempt to negotiate and make sense of these conflicting cultural forms (startup versus corporate), we show how even paradoxical resistance is central to the entrepreneurial (and in particular startup) identity. This discourse of resistance is also a key element in how startup founders identify with their role, as well as being a means to establish a culture where members/employees often over-perform due to the perception that what they are doing is more of a calling than a job (cf. Örtqvist, Drnovsek & Wincent, 2007). Resistance, claimed or otherwise, is then not just a reaction to a perceived outrage or a power imbalance, but *in itself* a constitutive part of contemporary entrepreneurship, particularly as this is culturally constructed.

What we aim to do, in other words, is to highlight the way in which modern

discourses of entrepreneurialism (Down & Reveley, 2004; Jones & Spicer, 2005; Malach-Pines, Levy, Utasi & Hill, 2005; Ogbor, 2000; Zilber, 2007; Steyaert, 2007) contain a complex and fundamentally contradictory relationship between resistance and conformism, and how this plays out in the lived practices of a startup venture. By paying attention to the contradictions that emerge when a company attempts to hold on to an image of being an outsider whilst being aggressively courted by mainstream industrial dynamics (including but not limited to raising several rounds of venture capital and winning industry awards and similar accolades), we in particular responds to Dodd's (2014: 192) call for more research into "a paradox theory approach to entrepreneurship". We therefore see entrepreneurship as a social rather than an economic phenomenon (Popp and Holt, 2013; Steyaert and Katz, 2004) and demonstrate the manner in which resistance can be a pre-determined part of a cultural figuration, highlighting the conflicts this can bring to entrepreneurial identity formation.

On the packaging of resistance – the discursive construction of startup entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship has long and somewhat routinely been identified as a key element of capitalism (see e.g. Wadhwani, 2012), and this nigh-on ritual valorization of the concept has positioned it as a moral good in society (Bryant, 2009; Clarke & Holt, 2009; Clarke & Holt, 2010). What is often forgotten in such accolades, however, is that entrepreneurship can only in the most abstract sense be considered to be one, singular thing, and should for analytic purposes always be contextualized and understood as a figuration with a specific history and specific relations and symbolizations (Steyaert, 2007; Steyaert and Katz, 2004).

Any description of entrepreneurship is, by necessity, a discursive construction (Berglund et al., 2016; Cohen & Musson, 2000; Down & Warren, 2008); one building upon the language and the pre-occupations that are in play at the time of writing (see e.g. Steyaert, 2007). In other words, the manner in which we describe entrepreneurial success is also a product of its time (Anderson & Warren, 2011; Chiles, Bluedorn & Gupta, 2007; Haveman, Habinek & Goodman, 2012). In itself, this might be seen as rather an academic point, with little to no impact on entrepreneurship itself. However, studies of media and popular culture (see e.g. Rehn, 2008; Rhodes & Parker, 2008) have long argued that the discursive construction of specific categories do in fact influence action, since they form the framework within which phenomena is understood, and that the valorizations inherent therein can become internalized by the audience that consumes the narratives created by the discourse.

This, we argue, becomes particularly pronounced in the case of the specific form of entrepreneurship colloquially referred to as *startup entrepreneurship* (see Rotefoss and Lolvereid, 2005). While the term 'startup' has been used as far back as in *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare, the OED places the first use of the term in reference to an entrepreneurial venture to 1976, when it was used in *Forbes,* and even though it was used sporadically in the 1980's, it rose to more public prominence during the first dot-com boom/bubble of 1997-2000, and more markedly during the long boom in the internet economy that followed and continues to this day. Originally used to refer to the notion of a very small team starting an entrepreneurial venture with limited capital (as separate from e.g. a capital-rich entrepreneur starting another venture), the success of a number of these ventures has given rise to an entire 'startup culture', one which

is both accepted by the community as part of the cultural makeup of startup organizations, as well as aggressively commodified through books, conferences and assorted social media engagements.

This, together with the expanding influence and media visibility of startups, has led to the solidification of a set of communicated values that are seen as foundational for this specific form of entrepreneurship. As institutional actors (such as Harvard Business Review) and various political agents have come together to valorize startup culture, we can see how a number of choice phrases and oft-referenced books and/or thinkers have created a vernacular that the cultural field of startup entrepreneurship draws upon. Although it is impossible to detail all such influences, a few examples stand out. The success of a limited number of startups – including Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and SnapChat – has established a pattern that many strive to emulate (see for example Bilton, 2013). The notion of 'the lean startup' as detailed by Steve Blank (2013) and Eric Ries (2011) has become extremely popular, and is disseminated through an array of workshops and seminars. A set of stock phrases, such as 'minimum viable product', 'execution is everything', 'move fast and break things', together with endless references to issues like 'scalability', 'big problems', 'freemium', 'go-to-market strategy', 'customer acquisition' and 'user interface/experience' creates a language that reinforces the feeling of a shared culture. This is further strengthened by the tendency to follow the same thinkers on Twitter (@ThisIsSethsBlog, @garyvee and @Tferriss are all popular), and attend the same 'must-do' conferences (SXSW, TechCrunch Disrupt, LeWeb and Web Summit being just four).

In the confluence of these elements, we can see the emergence of a startup

culture, one with shared values (working 'lean', celebrating an assumed difference to other ways of doing business), shared mythologies (such as the story of Facebook) and heroes (such as Elon Musk), as well as a shared language ('MVP', 'burn rate', 'runway', 'seed round', 'stealth mode', 'alpha' and so on), all contributing to the perception of community (Hopp and Stephan, 2012). Central in all this is the notion of shared values, the assumed principles that set startup ventures apart from their more traditional counterparts, and it is to a definition of these we will now turn.

Resistance as a value in startup culture

The literature of resistance has traditionally focused on binary power-relations, more specifically ones where the positions are well known and vertically antagonistic (see e.g. Barley & Kunda, 1992; Deetz, 2008; Fleming & Spicer, 2008; Gabriel, 1999). Much has been made of the power dynamics between labour and management (Fleming, 2007; Fleming & Sewell, 2002; Fleming & Spicer, 2007; Knights & McCabe, 2000), of that between unions and corporations (Spicer & Böhm, 2007; Real & Putnam, 2005) or at industry-level more generally (Russel & McCabe, 2015) and of that between oppressive institutions and individuals (Iedema, Rhodes & Scheeres, 2006; Martí & Fernández, 2013; Quirke, 2013). Here, resistance is directed towards agents that are seen as already directing power towards the resisting party, and resistance is often portrayed as an attempt to protect an identity (see e.g. Chreim, 2006; Johnsen, Muhr & Pedersen, 2009; Muhr, Pedersen & Alvesson, 2013; Symon, 2005; Weiss, 2005), such as 'the proud working man', 'an authentic self' or 'the steadfast union'. Looking at a smaller subset of the work that has been done in this field (e.g. Dick,

2008; Mumby, 2005; Thomas & Davies, 2005), we see a questioning of this simple binary, as well as a call for more research into its transgression – i.e. alternate ways to understand resistance. In this paper we take up such call, but do so by going away from analysing resistance at the level of subjectivity otherwise strongly represented in the field (Meriläinen et al., 2005) and turning our attention instead to how discourses of resistance also makes growth and belief in the organisation possible.

What we are interested in here, then, is to understand not entrepreneurship *as* resistance (as Dodd, 2014 for example does), but how *ideas* and *discourses* of resistance play a role in how entrepreneurs understand their own role(s) (Berglund et al., 2016). The roots of this can be found in the traditional view of entrepreneurship. Early commentators such as Joseph Schumpeter (1934) and Frank Knight (1921) made clear that the figure of the entrepreneur was qualitatively different from that of the mere businessman, and that the creative destruction and risk-taking that defined the former were characteristic of entrepreneurship generally. To be an entrepreneur, then, was in at least some form antagonistic to business as usual, and signified a form of resistance against the latter.

Although the exact nature of what sets the entrepreneur apart has been debated at length, with suggestions ranging from the capacity for a specific kind of judgement in economic affairs (Casson, 1982) to the very question being moot (Gartner, 1988), even the more radical approaches to understanding entrepreneurship (see e.g. Hjorth, 2007; 2013; Steyaert, Hjorth & Gartner, 2014) have at least implicitly juxtaposed the concept with an assumed more corporate business logic. In fact, we might say that the very establishment of a field of

entrepreneurship studies, as set apart from business studies more generally (Shane & Venkatamaran, 2000), is a symbol of this often unacknowledged notion of entrepreneurship as being a breed apart.

As entrepreneurship rose in media prominence during the first and second boom in internet business, this theme became more explicitly stated in the field. By latching onto various media representations and performances – including but not limited to Apple's famous '1984' advertisement, the public statements of young and successful startup entrepreneurs, and books celebrating the same – members of the startup culture started presenting themselves as standing apart from a mainstream corporate culture increasingly populated by 'dinosaurs' (Ismail, Malone & van Geest, 2014) or 'zombies' (Haque, 2011). Reading a fairly typical book in the field (David Kidder's *The Startup Playbook* (2012)), we come across the following advice for the fledgling entrepreneur: 'Be ten times better' (p. 16); 'Follow your own path' (p. 18); and 'Ruthlessly focus on your biggest ideas' (p. 15). Through these, and other similar statements that are typical in this field, the notion of resisting a supposedly mediocre and tepid corporate logic is established.

To be a startup person, then, is to be a 'pioneer' (which is the word the venture capitalist Reid Hoffman uses in his foreword to Kidder's book) or a 'revolutionary' (Kawasaki with Moreno, 2000). Remaining in the corporate world is presented as being a failure or, as Pamela Slim (2009) suggests in the subtitle of her book, a 'corporate prisoner'. This view is then often bolstered by claims that human beings are natural entrepreneurs (Hoffman & Casnocha, 2012). By way of relentless repetition, media representations of startup entrepreneurship thus codify it as oppositional to corporate life, a form of

working and behaving that is presented as both unnatural and hidebound.

What is important to note here is that this kind of pre-determined and valorized resistance is directed at several different targets. The startup entrepreneur is seen as resisting both the assumed lack of freedom that comes from working in a corporate setting (being a 'prisoner') *and* the failings of the same corporations as business ventures. It is this latter part, however, that makes the resistance displayed in the discourse of startup entrepreneurship somewhat paradoxical. Whilst the *impetus* for engaging with startup entrepreneurship is to resist mainstream corporate logic, the valorized *result* of the same is the establishment of the very same kind of institution that was originally resisted! The most admired companies tend to be the ones that grow the fastest. Post-dot.com-crash startups that have managed to become valued at over one billion dollars are adoringly referred to as 'unicorns' while the title 'super-unicorn' is given to companies that grow even bigger and faster than this. What this results in, then, is a kind of doublethink where a startup is presented as something always already resisting mainstream corporations, while simultaneously aspiring to become a corporation and to conform to their logic.

Thus, we argue that whether one accepts that the resistance that startup culture refers to is 'real' or not, it represents a discourse where resistance is strongly present, and where this assumed resistance affects people's behaviors. Our case, to which we turn next, presents what might be called paradoxical (even hypocritical (see Brunsson, 1989)) resistance, where one resists something that one at the same time attempts to become or turn into. This kind of resistance is, as yet, understudied in entrepreneurship studies and could generate novel theoretical avenues into the inherent internal tensions (as called for by Dodd,

2014) of modern entrepreneurship.

Methodology

To get rich data on the way in which employees within a startup culture engage with resistance and negotiate its inherent contradictions, we conducted an ethnographically inspired study of the startup company SoundCloud. We applied ethnographic methods of observation and interview, but since the participant observation in the organization was only conducted over ten days, we do not claim this to have been even close to a full ethnography (e.g. Van Maanen, 1988). Still, the basic principles of ethnography – e.g. thick descriptions of (organizational) cultural interaction – have been the focus in our study (cf. Bryman and Bell, 2007; Geertz, 1973). To undertake organizational ethnography is to seek 'ethnographic insights in the course of [...] everyday lives' (Watson, 2012, p. 15) but, importantly, it is also to 'make sense of them by analysing how they relate to the overall culture of the organization' (Watson, 2012, p. 17). As Misco puts it, we 'move beyond the "fetishism of words" to a greater appreciation of the complexity that is going on behind the face of' the phenomenon of study' (2011, p. 301). Therefore, the combination of interviews and observations was crucial to investigate not only organizational and individual discourses of entrepreneurship (Zilber, 2007) but also the cultural context in which SoundCloud and its employees are embedded (Watson, 2011).

Because we seek to investigate the contradictions and negotiations arising from the influence of two strong popular discourses, our aim is not only to obtain positive and 'authentic' descriptions. Rather we aim for what Forester (1992) and Thomas (1993) call critical ethnography, in which the intention is to

'dig through the layers of cultural meaning' (Svensson, 2014) in order to be able to understand the 'thickly layered texture of political struggles concerning power and authority, cultural negotiations over identities, and social constructions of the "problem" at hand' (Forester, 1992, p. 47).

Research context and assumptions

SoundCloud is a social networking service for musicians and music lovers that was originally started in Stockholm by Alex (Alexander) Ljung and Eric Wahlforss (although it almost immediately relocated to Berlin). It was designed to allow musicians and music industry actors to share recordings with each other, but it quickly became a wide-reaching publishing tool bringing together musicians, other sound creators and fans. SoundCloud allows musicians and non-musicians to share sounds with particular users or with the community at large, and to get feedback on even the smallest detail of their work. From a creator's perspective, it distinguishes itself from other music websites by its ability to 'replicate the kind of back-and-forth spontaneity that musicians need to feed on' (Van Buskirk, 2009). From a user's perspective, again, it distinguishes itself through its interconnectivity with numerous different platforms and social media that span the web. For example, SoundCloud users can add a widget to their own website or blog that automatically tweets every song uploaded; or directly upload sampled sounds from iPhone apps (Van Buskirk, 2009).

When it launched in October 2008, SoundCloud immediately challenged the dominance of established music website MySpace and continued to grow rapidly. Shortly after our empirical study began in 2011, SoundCloud announced that it had amassed over 10 million users (Wortham, 2011). SoundCloud was

thus hitting the mainstream and growing rapidly, with offices in three countries and winning awards for innovation. Further, the founders were repeatedly being named as the men of the moment in online tech magazines. Most telling of all, SoundCloud were beginning to get large rounds of investment – over $60 million in investment from venture capitalists, including Hollywood star Ashton Kutcher. What's more, people other than early adopters were starting to notice the company – SoundCloud links were appearing in ordinary people's Facebook status updates. The company was, in the language of the startup-world, 'getting traction' and was set to become 'the YouTube of audio' (Olivarez-Giles, 2011).

This development makes SoundCloud an excellent case through which to investigate the interplay between the contradictory discourses of startup entrepreneurship as representing resistance and conformism to traditional corporate logic of growth and economic success. During two stays in SoundCloud's headquarter in Berlin, the first author of this paper (from now on referred to as 'the researcher') conducted interviews as well as observations with this purpose in mind.

Data collection

Divided into two stays in October and December 2011, the researcher spent ten days and two additional evenings/nights observing and interviewing SoundCloud's founders and employees at work and play in Berlin. Before the first research trip we had all read what we could find about the organisation in the media, spoke to users of its web platform and the researcher had become a member herself. As a member of SoundCloud, the researcher was able to observe user interactions on the site. This happens mainly through the commenting

function where users can comment on the sounds and music that other users have posted. Membership also gained us access to the organisation's blog, which is used extensively to communicate with the user community. During the trips to Berlin, the researcher spent full working days in the SoundCloud offices, observing conversations and other interactions between organisational members in their ordinary work lives. The sort of interactions ranged from daily chit-chat to all-hands meetings and briefings. The researcher spoke to individual employees about themselves and their lives in and out of work, sometimes privately, during formal interviews but also more publicly during lunch breaks, at the coffee machine and at the company Christmas party. In summary, empirical material consists of:

- **Secondary data** in the form of:
    - Press – various magazine articles mainly from online tech and startup magazines
    - Emails, blogs, videos and press releases generated by SoundCloud

- **Netnographic observations** of user interactions on SoundCloud's web platform

- **Interviews** with:
    - SoundCloud Users
        - One semi-structured skype interview lasting 30 minutes, which was recorded and transcribed
        - Three informal conversations, which were recorded via field notes
    - SoundCloud Employees
        - Fifteen semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, with thirteen different employees. A thematic interview guide was used to steer conversations but in general, respondents were free to talk in their own words about their work. Interviews were recorded, with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim.
        - Numerous informal, private and public, conversations during work and non-work time. Conversations of interest were recorded via field notes.

- **Observations**, which were recorded via field notes, were conducted

during, for example:

- Ordinary work time in both of SoundCloud's Berlin offices
- A weekly-recurring all-hands progress meetings
- A fortnightly pizza party where one employee shares information about a personal hobby with other employees
- Numerous lunch breaks with small groups of employees at cafés and restaurants
- SoundCloud's Christmas party
- The set-up of the Christmas party venue prior to the party

Data analysis

As highlighted previously, the culture of startup entrepreneurship can be said to contain pre-determined resistance discourses, in which it becomes important to highlight how being part of this culture involves *not* being part of a corporate logic. Early on during the study, it became clear to us that when employees at SoundCloud talked about what their work was and what it was not, they invoked these two opposing interpretations in order to emphasize the differences between traditional or 'real' corporate organizations and startups such as SoundCloud, which are seen to resisting the logic of the former. Just as in El-Sawad et al.'s (2004) study, these contradictions did not seem to be experienced as uncomfortable or fake by the research participants. Nor were they representative of a processual development from one discourse to another, so that a person would early on refer more to resistance but 'come around' to using a more corporate language. On the contrary, the two discourses co-existed in parallel, to the point where an interviewee could refer to one of them in one sentence, and switch over to the other a few moments later.

To analyze this we will draw on El-Sawad et al.'s (2004) notion of doublethink, which implies that a contradiction is not acknowledged or reflected upon and, as such, does not obstruct the way in which individuals navigate the

discourses (see also Willmott, 1993). By moving from the term 'contradiction' to the term 'doublethink' we stress that the contradicting utterances of entrepreneurship are not misunderstandings or misrepresentations, but rather constructions of meaning that draw simultaneously on contradictory discourses. It should be noted here that we are not claiming that what we identify as doublethink corresponds to a clearly defined psychological state or process among the individuals we're studying. Rather, we see it as a specific discursive move, one where ignoring paradoxes and contradictions becomes a constitutive part of how startup identities are communicated. Whether this is a conscious strategy, unconscious distancing, or something else entirely cannot be conclusively proven within the scope of our study.

When the data collection was finished, we all read the material and, working in collaboration, thematized it according to the different ways doublethink between the two discourses appeared in the material. In the first close reading, we began to look for words, which signified the two discourses, and in the second reading we began to cluster these words into 'doublethink pairs'. The result of these two readings can be seen in below extract of the table for 'Christian' (all names are synonyms). The actual data analysis table for Christian is three times as long, thus too large to reproduce here. A similar table was produced for each interviewee.

Insert table 1

After several of these close readings and allocation of words into doublethink pairs for each interviewee, we found that the startup versus corporate

doublethink pairs naturally fell into 5 groups, each with a common overarching theme that implied a belief about the nature of startups. Each of these themes tells us something about how SoundCloud employees understand the startup culture and place it in opposition to, at the same time as it exists within, contemporary capitalist discourses that emphasize mainstream corporate success. We named these overarching themes as follows:

1. Moral good versus making money (i.e. startups do moral good while corporate organizations make money);
2. Community versus customers (i.e. startups have communities while corporate organizations have customers);
3. Organic versus strategic action (i.e. change in startups occurs organically and is not strategically planned, as it is in corporate organizations);
4. People versus power (i.e. startups value their people and aren't caught up in power games, like corporate organizations are);
5. Small versus big (i.e. startups are small and flat while corporate organizations are big and hierarchical).

In the table below, we show how each person's individual instances of startup versus corporate doublethink were allocated into one of the five overarching doublethink themes:

Insert table 2

Case analysis: Five doublethink themes at SoundCloud

In this section, we explore each of the five overarching (startup versus corporate) themes in detail. We explain and discuss the five themes as well as showing explicit instances of doublethink. The specific examples are drawn solely from our interview material, with material from observations and secondary data being used to contextualize the themes. This compliments the

methods developed by El-Sawad et al. (2004) by showing how doublethink permeates organizational level discourses and understandings as well as conversations on an individual level. To emphasize the doublethink pairs in the descriptions of each theme below, the contradictions in the SoundCloud employees' own vocabulary are italicized.

Moral good versus making money

Employees at SoundCloud understand the (almost political) goal of startup entrepreneurship as doing *morally good* work; *creating* rather than just *consuming* value, as their corporate counterparts do. Startups are framed as resisting business as usual by *giving away original, magical* ideas and products that are *changing the world*. In order to bankroll these revolutionary activities, startups must be *frugal* and their employees must suffer *low salaries* and long hours. Working in a startup is seen as a quasi-*religious* calling and most SoundCloud employees professed to strongly resist the very idea of working for a *corporate* organization**,** which would surely be full of *corporate thinkers doing business.* Here the activity 'doing business' draws on traditional or mainstream corporate discourses and invokes explanations that include words like *competition, promotion* and *controlling customers* through practices such as *marketing* and *selling* standardised, *out-of-the-box* solutions in order to *extract material value (money/cash)* from them.

This overarching doublethink theme – moral good versus making money – was emphasised by Nick when he described his work. Although Nick doesn't have a sales title, the work he does is essentially that of a sales person. If he worked in what Kevin refers to as a 'real company', Nick would almost certainly

be called a salesman. At SoundCloud, however, where sales is 'a bad word' because '[t]he pursuit of money is not in line with the religion' (Roger), Nick explains his role as follows:

> *We just announce use-cases and announce people and what they're doing and where they're from and personalise it basically. […] It's all very lovey-dovey.* (Nick)

When describing his work Nick, like most of the SoundCloud employees the researcher talked to, resists corporate words that would insinuate making a profit from startup entrepreneurship. The *moral good versus making money* theme was generally invoked to differentiate startup entrepreneurs from the 'corporate thinkers' (Roger) that work at corporate organizations. Startup entrepreneurs were generally depicted as being 'passionate' (Martin) people who see their work as more than just a job, as highlighted here by Roger:

> *You can expect to hire people who are going to treat it like more than a job. […] It's almost like a religion in some senses. It's like a very religious feeling in the office sometimes.* (Roger)

SoundCloud employees specifically opposed themselves to employees at more conformist corporate organizations, whom they constructed as working 'nine-to-five' (Kevin, Roger) in a 'cubicle' (Roger, Christian) while 'wearing suit[s]' (Christian), on projects that they 'don't have any interest in' (Christian, Roger) and being motivated only by 'how much bonus' they would make (Christian) – i.e. motivated by making money (an assuredly corporate discourse). In contrast, they constructed their own work as 'changing the world' (Christian) and thus as morally good, as emphasised here by Kevin and Jonathan:

> *Why should I go do a nine-to-five, out-of-the-box software kind of thing […]*

if I can go and contribute to something really big that nobody has ever done before? (Kevin)

I'm personally passionate about the fact that we're shaping, sort of, humanity in a way. We're shaping behaviour for the whole planet. (Jonathan)

In this way, startup entrepreneurship is seen as more than just a job, and the products created more than just products; they shape behavior, shape humanity. It should here be noted that these are themes that are also prevalent in the literature directed to potential startup founders and workers, as well as in the blogs and conferences that cater to the same.

The doublethink that goes on when the employees try to explain SoundCloud as both a corporate success and an organization whose main goal is to create a better world can also be seen on an individual level. As an example, let us look at Roger. Although he is being slightly ironic, Roger exhibits doublethink when, in the same sentence, he talks negatively about SoundCloud being traditionally corporate (and conforming to a capitalist logic) when it 'takes' money from people (see left column) but at the same time stresses that this is the business they are here to do (see right column). In making the point that making money is the point of any business, Roger naturalizes the earlier judgmental statement.

It's ***so corporate,*** that we want to take money from people. (Roger)	[Y]eah, that's a ***business.*** (Roger)

Roger also explains that he thinks that many SoundCloud employees are secretly hoping that SoundCloud will get bought out by a large, rich corporation and that

their sacrifices (long hours and low pay) will be rewarded with a large dividend payout. However, this kind of motivation belongs not to startup entrepreneurs but to corporate thinkers, those who are motivated by 'how much bonus' (Christian) they will make. SoundCloud employees should therefore subsume this desire and 'pretend' (Roger) that they don't have it. In order to encourage this doublethink, if one employee accidentally lets such a corporate and money-driven desire slip out in conversation, they are subtly sanctioned by co-workers.

Community versus customers

The second overarching theme through which doublethink manifested itself we labelled *community versus customers.* When talking about their *customers, community* was a very important word for SoundCloud employees. SoundCloud is seen as a community of *members* that is almost democratic in nature. The SoundCloud community is understood as being built on *genuine communication* and open *debate*, which engenders *authentic loyalty*. The SoundCloud community is constructed as non-antagonistic and completely different to the normal relationship between businesses and their customers. *Businesses manufacture* or *buy loyalty* and *convince* or dupe customers into parting with their money through dishonest practices such as *advertising, branding, marketing* and *promotion*. Businesses *message* target groups while SoundCloud *talks* with members of its community in a *transparent* way.

In order to emphasise this different way of thinking about customers, employees are encouraged to refer to them as *members* or *users*, never *customers* or *clients* – something they have to make a conscious effort to do. Internal titles are important too and so SoundCloud has *evangelists* instead of *managers,*

spiritual advisors instead of *lawyers*, a *community* team instead of a *marketing* team and runs *people operations* instead of *recruitment* or *human resources*.

Key to this theme is the idea that building a community and allowing it to flourish unmanaged (startup entrepreneurship discourse) is the exact opposite of trying to control how customers think, feel and act with marketing, advertising and/or branding (mainstream corporate discourse). When they were told that the interviewer was a branding researcher, most interviewees quickly denied their involvement in or even knowledge of branding and advertising, thus emphasizing their resistance to corporate practices and ideas.

> *I'm definitely no brand expert.* (Jonathan)
>
> *[W]e've never done advertising. […T]here's never been a specific advertising campaign*. (Louise)
>
> *No. Never. No. I never thought about brand.* (Christian)
>
> *I don't think there's any sense [within SoundCloud] that brand can have a meaningful existence within an organisation.* (Peter)

If branding was talked about at all, it was done almost with shame. Most employees changed the focus instead to community and explained that SoundCloud takes its 'community really serious[ly]' (Kevin). By this they seem to imply that the community is *democratic* and *unmanaged* and that community members take care of themselves with easy access to *help* from SoundCloud. The focus is on 'talking' rather than 'convincing' (Jonathan) and 'debate' rather than 'acquiescence' (Martin). '[...Members] feel like they are being heard and they can talk to someone' (Kevin) if they need to but otherwise they are merely given 'the playground and the tools so [they] can form a community' (Christian). In this way, building a community is seen as more 'true' (Chris, SoundCloud user), more

'genuine' (Lara) and more 'authentic' (Peter, Christian) than branding.

There is a lot of doublethink at work when SoundCloud employees talk about branding and marketing. These are activities that conformist corporations do and are therefore things that most SoundCloud employees are very keen to resist. As an example of this, we turn to the interview of Nick. When asked about SoundCloud's brand, Nick claimed that he did not know what branding was (see left hand column). However, later in the same interview he revealed that he used to work in the marketing department at another organisation and went on to use quite sophisticated branding terminology to respond to less direct questions about brand (see right hand column), leaving his initial assertion to not know 'what brand is' sounding rather odd.

[T]hat's a really hard question because ***I don't really know what brand is***. Maybe if you explain to me what I should be grasping at. (Nick)	What we're trying to be is the YouTube of sound [...T]here is the potential for SC to really ***project and position itself*** as THE sound brand: (Nick) Our brand is very much our player [...] That's definitely a clear ***differentiator*** to anyone else. (Nick) We should just ***get back to the brand*** and how we can associate ourselves with sound. (Nick)

But it is not only around branding that SoundCloud employees exhibit a doublethink born out of adopting a discourse of resistance to corporate logics. They also exhibit doublethink more broadly when they describe their 'community work' in extremely similar terms to the way that more corporate organisations would talk about marketing. For example, Nick (who at first claimed not to know what a brand is) explained that the community is part of SoundCloud's brand, and an incredibly cost effective part (corporate discourse)

at that:

> *Part of the brand is community; nice community feeling. [...] That's incredibly cheap marketing. They [the community] are doing it for us. It's incredible.* (Nick)

Even Christian, who speaks very strongly about the community, reveals doublethink around the *community versus customer* contradiction. Christian insists that the community at SoundCloud is natural and unmanaged, and that they are not controlled (left hand column). He also claims that SoundCloud does not try to create or install a certain culture among its members (left hand column). However, when he goes on to describe how he works with the community, he talks about setting 'rules and behaviours', 'defin[ing] a philosophy', and 'call[ing] out bad behaviour'. The community team even sets examples for the community of how to behave on the platform by picking and exemplifying a model member every day. Christian explains this has an impact on the community and thus it could well be argued to be management.

You can't control the ***community.*** (Christian) You don't want to pretend that you have a culture. And it's not something you install, it's something that **evolves.** (Christian) It's not us building a ***community*** and it's ***not us managing it*** somehow. It's you. (Christian)	SoundClouder of the day. ***We pick*** one SoundClouder and elevate them above everyone else. You do that once, it probably won't have any effect but if you do it everyday since one and a half years, ***it becomes this brand inside a brand.*** (Christian)

When Christian is confronted by the interviewer about whether this 'community' action is not in fact management, he answers:

> *It's managing in a new way. Yeah. That's why it's called community management but I don't really like the management part of it because we're not managing people. (Christian)*

In this way, he actively and deliberately resists the word management, which he 'doesn't like'.

Organic versus strategic

In our third theme, planning and strategic thinking are contrasted with a more natural approach to building an organisation – i.e. allowing the organisational culture to emerge organically. *Planning* and *strategic* thinking are not activities that typically characterise a startup, according to SoundCloud employees. They are contemptuous of organisations that *plan* for and *model* their growth rather than letting their direction *emerge naturally* or by *accident* from within the community of users; with the highest contempt being reserved for those organisations who attempt to *install culture* instead of allowing it to *emerge organically.* While this *organic* approach is sometimes blamed for a sense of *chaos* at SoundCloud – with idealistic founders being compared to *excited gamblers* hoping to *get funding* rather than *shrewd businessmen making money* – this seems to be largely preferable to the *strategic planning* undertaken by corporate organisations, which is seen as controlling and inauthentic.

As SoundCloud grows and tries to become more *scalable,* ways of working inevitably change and become more formalised but employees still claim to work with *gut feelings* rather than *rational* decision-making that is *brain*-driven. They talk a great deal about focusing on the *product* – which represents *what they do* – rather than the *brand,* which represents *who they are*. In this way, they are not

selling themselves or selling out but providing solutions and *informing people*.

This theme is related to the *community versus customers* theme in that marketing, branding and advertising are seen as being symptomatic of strategic planning and therefore are seen to be corporate rather than something that startup entrepreneurs should engage in. Organic growth or 'natural progression' (Nick) is constructed as an opposite to advertising and therefore the opposite to strategic planning, as highlighted by Louise in the following quote:

> *[T]here's never been a specific advertising campaign. There's never been any sort of specific messaging. SoundCloud was built incredibly organically.* (Louise)

Both Tom and Nick exhibit doublethink when answering direct questions about SoundCloud's branding strategy – the expansion of the brand to encompass sound as well as music. Nick explained away the branding strategy as something accidental; a 'natural progression' that stemmed from the actions of the users (right hand column). But directly beforehand, he quickly corrected himself when he was about to describe the same process as more directed and controlled using the words 'they wanted' (left hand column).

SoundCloud, at the time, was very much a music-sharing platform and ***they wanted***... (Nick)	Well, it was a ***natural progression*** to move into being an all-encompassing audio platform. (Nick)

In the following quote from Martin, the doublethink seems even more obvious: it was a 'conscious effort' from the organisation but yet users are latching on 'naturally'.

We made a ***conscious effort*** a while ago to […] focus very much on 'sounds' and this kind of associated terminology. (Martin)	And people are beginning to latch on to that I think. It's really nice when you see people do it ***naturally***. (Martin)

People versus power

In our fourth theme it is important to note that SoundCloud employees see themselves as an *exclusive* group of *authentic* individuals who *help* and *support* each other to *work together* rather than *leading* or *managing* or *commanding* one another. It is important to them that SoundCloud is seen as *flat* and *non-hierarchical* rather than *controlled* from the *top-down* as in a more traditional organisational structure, even if this ideal doesn't always seem to be realised in everyday decision-making. Here the startup versus corporate opposition is manifested in the idea that in traditional corporate organisations *power* rules, while in startups *people* are more important.

SoundCloud employees understood this particular contrast between startup and corporate in a very simplistic way. Almost all employees emphasised the 'flat' (Marsha) or 'horizontal' (Roger) structure, as evidenced by obvious things like the open-plan working spaces and the fact that everybody at SoundCloud is 'on a first name basis' (Roger). This kind of power structure was contrasted with more corporate 'traditional leadership' (Louise) where employees are assumed to be told, 'we're going to do this and that' (Louise) and to be managed with an iron fist—or a whip:

> *We are very free. At the end, the work has to be done […but] I can set my own schedule. […] There's no one standing behind me with a whip saying, 'You have to be there at nine in the morning and you may not leave before*

six.' So we have basically every freedom we could have. (Marsha)

Given that they are not micromanaged, SoundCloud employees presume themselves to have every freedom possible. Doublethink here can be seen as a strategy for employees to deal with the *people versus power* contradictions that seem to be more problematic as the organisation grows and as some kind of structure has to be put in place. Peter described the problem:

> *There aren't 6 people. And 6 people are a cohesive group. 6 people are a family. And 85 are like lots of cousins. And 150 is a small school. And beyond that, we are a company.* (Peter)

There was a suggestion, by some employees, that structures and formality were actually being put in place stealthily. Roger explained that while structure was clearly necessary in the growing company, SoundCloud's management team were said to be wary of communicating this to the employees due to it not being in keeping with the startup identity.

> *Leadership hasn't made any rules because it seems corporate but they want it to become more structured but they don't want to say that it became more structured. So [it's] a really funny roll out of process and structure where it's not being communicated.* (Roger)

In the following quotation, we see Martin employing doublethink on an individual level when he talks about SoundCloud being the kind of organisation without commanding leaders (left hand column) but later explaining that a conventional (corporate) hierarchy has been established (right hand column).

I certainly wouldn't see myself as a ***commanding style leader*** [I just…] provide the guidance	We've kind of established a ***management tier*** and something of a ***conventional hierarchy*** that I think is going to give us a good sort of

and the support [that] my team needs. (Martin)	foundation to start building out those areas and those competencies a little bit more (Martin)

Christian too, appears unaware of a similar doublethink when he first claims that he is not a top-down manager, and then later describes exactly that kind of management when he explains how he works to bring high-level plans from the founder down to the foot soldiers via the management teams.

No, I don't want to be the top-level, ***top-down*** manager. (Christian)	Alex [the founder] presents really ***high-level*** plans [...] And it's up to us as a management team to ***trickle-down*** and say, 'This is what it means for you in your day-to-day work'. (Christian)

Small versus big

The fifth and final theme we have labelled *small versus big.* This theme encompasses ideas about big organisations, which are thought to be more corporate and conformist, and small organisations, where being small is thought to be essential to resisting corporate trappings. This theme is significant because SoundCloud is growing both in terms of its number of users and its number of employees. It has far greater overall turnover than it did previously, not to mention more offices, thanks to venture capital investments. This is problematic for the startup culture discourse because being *small, agile, niche* and even *poor* are central concepts in startup culture. This is what differentiates them from *real companies* or *corporations,* which are, on the contrary, constructed as *large, bloated* and *bland.* While *small* startups remain *underground* they can be *eclectic* and *diverse* and focus on the *details* of their products. Getting *bigger* and moving

into the *mainstream* is associated with getting *richer,* which is seen as a good thing, but this comes at a cost. Getting bigger is also associated with a demand to divert their attention away from *fun* things like *personal communications* with the community and focus on the *wider public* and strategic *decision-making.*

Despite this clear construction of small, agile and poor as positive characteristics and big as negative, SoundCloud's long-term aim is to continue to grow its membership and its business and ultimately to become what its employees revile. This dilemma is described by Martin when he talks about the balance between being agile and growing.

> *[T]here's always this balance between what you need to do as a startup to be agile and to be able to grow fast and make decisions quickly but also beginning to develop the processes and the organisational structure that help you to do so.* (Martin)

The same dilemma is invoked by Peter when he laments that being exclusive is incompatible with being a larger company.

> *[I]t's the same with everything we do – we need to find ways to make things scalable and unfortunately, exclusivity isn't particularly scalable. By its very nature.* (Peter)

This dilemma is problematic and uncomfortable enough that direct questions about it are unwelcome and avoided by some, such as Lara in the following excerpt of a conversation with the interviewer:

> *Interviewer: Getting bigger, getting more users; is that how people see success?*
>
> *Lara: I don't know if I want to answer that one if that's okay.*

Doublethink can also be seen directly at work when SoundCloud employees try

to reconcile the idea of becoming a larger company with the idea that being small is essential in order to remain resistant to the negative trappings of corporate conformism. On one hand, employees insist that 'large corporations' (Kevin) and 'corporate thinkers' (Jonathan) are antithetical to the ways that startups work. On the other hand, they talk about learning 'from people who've been in larger organisations' (Louise) as an essential way to grow their business skills and confess to admiring people with MBAs, the very hallmark of corporate thinking!

At an individual level, e.g. Christian could be said to exhibit doublethink when he first explains that he has issues with 'the big corporate world' (left hand column) but then, moments later, explains that SoundCloud is a company that wants to grow (right hand column), which means doing many of the things that are negatively associated with corporations – such as planning ahead and being structured.

There's the startup and the corporate world. And I still have my issues with the ***big corporate*** world. (Christian)	[W]e're a company that ***wants to grow*** [...] And that means [...being] faster and more structured and more planning ahead and all that stuff. (Christian)

Jonathan too exhibits doublethink around the *small versus big* theme. He claims that people who want something bigger do not fit in at SoundCloud, and would not be hired into the organisation (left hand column), but yet he also claims that he wants the organisation to be 'bigger than YouTube' (right hand column), which is a subsidiary of the Google corporation, one of the biggest corporations in the world.

'We haven't hired […] anybody who feels ***corporate*** or feels that they want to be part of a ***bigger*** or more organised structure. [It wouldn't] work out. (Jonathan)	SoundCloud ought to be ***bigger than YouTube*** (Jonathan)

Concluding discussion

What we have attempted to show is how a startup culture utilizes both culturally pre-determined discourses of resistance and a form of doublethink in order to negotiate the complex demands set upon a new venture; by idealized entrepreneurial culture on the one hand and the markets demand for growth on the other. What is interesting in our study is that such paradoxical tension do not occur as either/or contradictions for our respondents; but rather as a productive form doublethink making both/and-thinking possible. In fact, both discourses – despite their contradictions – seem to be important for the culture we've studied as tools to make sense of entrepreneurial life. As such, resistance towards a corporate logic in fact enables the organization to retain a culture in which employees can communicate that they are achieving something greater than merely running a business, while doublethink simultaneously enables them to run it as specifically that. Discourses of resistance makes it possible for branding professionals to deny knowing branding whilst all the while excelling at it, and for 'growth hackers' to disallow any interest in growth while relentlessly pursuing the same. It would be easy to draw the conclusion that this is a sign of confusion or 'phantasmic attachment' (Jones & Spicer 2005), but to us this would be an over-simplification. Instead, we would suggest that both resistance and doublethink at SoundCloud should be understood as constitutive parts of a entrepreneurial culture, one where the former bestows belief in a higher calling

and the latter structures the organizational action necessary for growth.

This would indicate an alternative to the view of entrepreneurship as based on a clearly defined collective identity story as argued by Wry, Lounsbury & Glynn (2011) and, in its place, suggest that a culturally given and at times paradoxical resistance is a more apposite framing device, as also argued by for example Berglund et al. (2016) and Dodd (2014). We add to the studies of Berglund et al. (2016) and Dodd (2014) by investigating further into the paradoxical tensions of entrepreneurship and argue that not only is it not necessary for entrepreneurs to choose one discourse over another, meaning can in fact be constructed through resistance discourses and attendant doublethink – mobilizing both sides by resisting an unwanted corporate discourse whilst not completely denying the same.

The manner in which these intertwined discourses are constructed in startup entrepreneurship is at the very heart of why we believe that the theoretical lens of resistance has much to offer entrepreneurship studies. Thomas & Davies (2005, p. 700) have called for a 'generative understanding of power and resistance' and, in doing so, have emphasized how resistance give actors the possibility to contest meaning (p. 701). What we have tried to show is that in a startup culture resistance is not necessarily used to actively contest, but rather exists embedded in the ways meaning is *constructed* in the field. Through the resistance discourse the startup employees of SoundCloud create meaning out of their often very conformist corporate actions, leading us to look beyond how counter-discourses (Symon, 2005) produce resistant practices, obstruct meaning and direct attention to necessary counter-measures (Russel & McCabe, 2015), and instead focus on how culturally pre-determined forms of resistance

enables organizational growth within a culture which states that it resists growth and traditional forms of economic success. Thus we do not see the differing discourses in SoundCloud as necessarily 'competing' as Russell and McCabe do, but rather as a form of doublethink where two contradictory discourses end up supporting and re-inforcing each other.

The central tenet in our analysis, then, is that the employees of SoundCloud do exhibit a measure of resistance, but also show resistance to this resistance. Where among others Spicer and Böhm (2007) and Goss, Jones, Betta & Latham (2011) see resistance as something active and conscious involving collective agency, we see the resistance at play here as something more complexly negotiated – partly as a performance of specific cultural norms, but also as something that can then be resisted anew through the doublethink we have illustrated. What we find is more line with the findings of Thorpe et al. (2006), i.e. that entrepreneurship is constrained by the cultural impetus that defines it. The notions of resistance that are inscribed and invoked in startup culture emphasize a standing apart, but when these discourses enter into the lived practice of entrepreneurship, they quickly mutate from the prescribed towards the inscribed and is in this reinterpreted. As a member of a startup, one *has to* exhibit resistance, as this is what the culture 'says' startups always already do. In other words, as employees in SoundCloud identifies as being part of the 'startup tribe' they *have to* exhibit this resistance in order not to step outside the culture. The discourse on ideal entrepreneurship culture has in this way normalized SoundCloud employees resisting "anything corporate". At the same time, the complexities of late capitalism casts this culturally pre-determined resistance as a resource, a way to ensure that the wheels are kept greased, and that the

'radicals', the 'revolutionaries', and the 'mavericks' do not lose sight of what's important. The discourse of resistance, then, acts as an *ethos* for entrepreneurs, becomes a resource for capitalism – and thus ultimately a way to conform.

Our case represents a classic, albeit uncommonly successful, startup story, but our findings and general argument can be extended beyond startups to entrepreneurial identity more generally. In the public and popular discourse, entrepreneurship is always already aligned with themes of resisting corporate or institutional behemoths, symbolized through images of freedom, self-realization, and individualism. It would therefore be possible to study entrepreneurial identity formation beyond startups with much the same framework, inquiring into how notions of resistance to established orders collide with dreams of becoming part of the same, and the attendant doublethink that may go into establishing this in an entrepreneurs narratives of self. By not shying away from such paradoxes and contradictions, entrepreneurship studies might gain better insight into the manner in which popular narratives regarding entrepreneurship affect identity formation, and a better understanding for the often challenging project of entrepreneurial image, caught in between images of revolution and pressures to conform.

In the end, one of our respondents, Jonathan, might have put it best. On one hand, he formulates his work in a manner most revolutionaries would see as overwrought, yet clearly believes in the logic of resistance and progress he espouses: 'We're shaping behaviour for the whole planet'. At the same time, what is the desired endgame for such a lofty goal? '[T]o be bigger than YouTube'.

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