GROWING A SUSTAINABLE WORKFORCE

A response to the DCMS Committee's Call for Evidence for its inquiry into the 'Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors'

Richard Wallis
Christa van Raalte

Faculty of Media & Communication
Bournemouth University

June 2020

In this submission, we offer the committee a perspective on the creative industries, highlighting some underlying vulnerabilities within the sector, that have been exposed by the Covid-19 crisis. We focus on what we see as being the lessons of recent events, and the key issues that must now urgently be addressed to ensure a more resilient and sustainable future workforce.

INTRODUCTION

The effect of the Covid-19 crisis on those working within the Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs) was immediate, and for many, catastrophic. In April 2020, a letter to the UK's chancellor and culture secretary from the Creative Industries Federation signed by over 500 'leading creative figures', was warning of the loss of half of the country's creative businesses, and the prospect of a future 'cultural wasteland' (Creative Industries Federation, 2020).

Other industries had, of course, been hit hard by the crisis. But the speed and magnitude of the devastation to certain of these industries, and the challenges that they now face as they try to rebuild, has highlighted certain structural and operational features particularly related to employment practices, that have made many of these sectors especially vulnerable. In this submission, we wish to highlight three discrete but related employment practices, that require urgent reform if we are to rebuild a more sustainable industry sector. Taken individually, these three features of CCI employment may seem fairly innocuous in themselves, and indeed, are so deeply ingrained as often to be presented as entirely inevitable – as many subjects of our own studies in this area have told us, it's 'simply the way the industry works'. Yet, unless this sector finds a way to work differently, these will never become more than fair-weather industries.

The features that need addressing are: widespread **over-reliance on 'freelance' labour**; **lack of investment in workforce skills and continuing professional development**; and normalisation of **non-standard recruitment practices.** We discuss each of these with particular reference to the screen industries (since that is our area of professional interest and scholarship) but the principles apply to many other CCI sub-sectors, where similar examples can be found.

'FREELANCE' LABOUR

'Freelancer' is an informal umbrella term widely used within the sector to imply an independent, and usually temporary, relationship with an employer. The term suggests a level of professional autonomy on the part of the worker, who has the freedom to choose when to work, and what to work on, with all the benefits that this implies. As such, for many, it is one of the attractions of working in these industries. Many of our own graduates aspire to be freelance for just this reason, discovering only later in their careers, some of the drawbacks (as research, including our own, has shown). According to the Creative Industries Federation, 47% of creative workers in this sector are self-employed, compared with 15% across the UK's workforce as whole: 'The sector is built on an army of talented and skilled freelancers – from the film director to the games designer, the potter to the sound engineer' (Easton, & Cauldwell-French, 2017: 4). The army simile is only appropriate, however, if thought of as a force of individual mercenaries: few of the characteristics of a standing army apply. Short-term hires come with minimum obligation on both sides. As the most common tax status of a freelancer is self-employment, the employer is freed from the responsibilities and commitments associated with PAYE and standard employment rights (such as holiday allowance, sick pay, parental leave, termination of employment terms, and so on). By contrast, the freelancer's 'freedom' comes with the hidden constraints associated with necessarily shouldering the full burden of risk. In studies of our own graduates, the 'freedom' of being

3

freelance was more of an ideal than a reality, and a psychological mechanism for rationalizing irregular and insecure work. In good times, this may seem like a deal worth making. But as most modern nation states have long recognised, the 'flexibility' of a mercenary army comes at a price. It has little to recommend it where resilience, sustainability, or consolidation are required.

The onslaught of Covid-19 laid bare the degree to which CCIs have become over-dependent on their freelancers, particularly since the regulatory interventions of the 1990s and the major structural changes introduced at that time (Born, 2004). The extent to which the preponderance of risk has been borne by these industries' most precious commodity – its workforce – has revealed a widely unrecognized malaise. The fact that the crisis was experienced so immediately, in such an unmitigated way, and in a form which has left up to half of these industries' workforce without recourse to any material or psychological support, indicates how uniquely vulnerable this sector has become. There was already widespread consternation about a 'skills shortage' (an issue discussed in more detail below) well before Covid-19, and high levels of attrition by mid-career (Wallis, van Raalte, and Allegrini, 2019). This skills shortage is now likely to get a great deal worse, as the industry becomes more dependent than ever on young entrants.

LACK OF INVESTMENT IN SKILLS AND CPD

Whilst standing armies are more expensive, there is a reason that they are generally more expert and effective than the alternative. CCI investment in skills training and continuing professional development, so necessary for long-term planning, has been significantly lacking. The screen industries are a case in point. Stories of production work in peril for want of suitably qualified and experienced talent have been widely circulated in industry circles for the past five years: the Production Manager who unsuccessfully followed-up 15 contacts looking for a first assistant director (Screenskills, 2017); the film project unable to secure a suitable

production accountant; and the camera technician that had to be flown-in from Italy because nobody available in the UK was up to the job (MacNab, 2017). There has been a growing consensus about a 'talent pipeline crisis' across these industries, despite a paucity of credible evidence about where precisely these skills shortages lie (an issue that we hope will begin to be addressed with the recent establishment of a Creative Industries' Policy and Evidence Centre led by Nesta). This skills crisis is frequently blamed on the education sector, and framed as reflecting a shortage of suitably qualified graduates. In his *Independent Review of the Creative Industries* (2017), for example, Peter Bazalgette states:

> Growth and greater productivity in the talent pipeline for these industries are held back by two main factors: social and informational barriers to entry; and quality, consistency and availability of post-secondary education and training, which includes further and higher education, and continuing development. (42)

Bazalgette's report, then, defines the sector's skills crisis as being primarily a problem at entry-level, reflecting inadequate 'quality, consistency and availability' within the education system. Yet, the idea that these industries have been brought to their knees for want of new entrants with relevant entry-level skills, is in sharp contrast to a significant body of evidence indicating that the CCIs generally, and the screen industries in particular, have long been characterized by stiff competition, over-supply, and high levels of wastage. Far from an entry-level 'talent shortage' as claimed, these industries have had a continuing supply of ambitious young talent from undergraduate and post-graduate industry-oriented film schools and university media programmes; from an extensive range of (non-media related) science, humanities, and social science degree programmes; and from direct entry routes, through placement opportunities and targeted schemes of various kinds, including from a number of specialist secondary education providers. The talent pool has been vast, and competition for entry-level positions has long been extremely high (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2009; Wallis, van Raalte, and Allegrini, 2020).

5

The skills gap across this sector has been primarily a reflection of the void of adequate continuing professional development and training: a gap between entry level talent and the roles they aspire to. Within the film and television industries, despite substantial increases in the amount of production work taking place in the UK over recent years as a result of tax incentives and 'the Netflix factor', there has not been a commensurate investment in talent development. Entry-level supply has steadily continued, and the only area in which entry-level demand is outweighing supply, seems to be in certain STEM-reliant areas (such as games development). The most credible explanation for shortages in this area being that graduates have far better employment prospects in other fields. Indeed, evidence has continued to suggest that those who are ultimately successful in acquiring entry-level work in film or television, and sustaining it, are expected to be willing to undertake the most menial of work, be subject to insecure (often informal) contract arrangements, and work long hours, in exchange for poor (and sometimes even no) pay.[1] Yet such is the allure of these industries and the attraction of work associated with creativity and self-actualisation, the unremitting stream of highly-motivated young people, willing to self-exploit and be exploited in the pursuit of work in this sector, never ebbs. These are unlikely symptoms of a labour market suffering a crisis of entry level under-supply.

Those who fit the bill for the specialist roles most commonly identified as being in short supply (such as the fabled unfillable vacancies for production manager, first assistant director, and production accountant), would hardly be recent graduates. As one of our own graduates recalled:

> 'I think you leave [university] after your three years thinking that "I'm a director", or "I am an editor," or "I am a camera maestro." And then

---

[1] This is a feature of media employment evident from the reports of our own graduates' experiences of transitioning into work as long ago as the mid-1990s (see Wallis, van Raalte, and Allegrini, 2019).

you go into the big bad world and they're like, "Yeah, you're not a director, you're a runner!"'

(Interview with Bournemouth University graduate, unpublished)

As the producer of a large production company told The Work Foundation: the 'single biggest problem is career progression' (Carey, Crowley, Dudley, et al 2017: 25). The talent pipeline crisis has been a direct consequence of long-term under-investment in continuing professional development and training, and where it exists, is often 'confusing and fragmented' (27). Moreover, as Bazalgette and others have illustrated by their insistence on skills shortages being primarily an entry-level problem, this is not just a gap in industry provision, but one of industry consciousness.

ACCEPTANCE AND NORMALISATION OF NON-STANDARD RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

CCIs tend to eschew standard recruitment practices typically expected to include notification of a vacancy (through a job advertisement, or equivalent), a shortlisting stage, and an equitable and transparent interview process. In the screen industries, the recruitment process is both partial and opaque, and it is normal for a job offer to be based on 'people that you know': 'That's how the industry works – personal trust, we work very much on the basis of personal trust' (Baumann, 2002, p.36). These networks of 'personal trust', based on first-hand knowledge of a person's work and the recommendations of people 'who can be relied on' (Baumann, p.37) have long been the *modus operandi* of the screen industries, particularly since the decline of the strong internal labour markets of the studio system (in film), and the large producer-publishers (in television).

In their study of film and TV employment practices, Grugulis & Stoyanova reported that: '…informants claimed most jobs were gained through friends and friends of friends' (2012, p.1317).

7

Having to 'resort to …people you don't know' is considered to be a problem by employers, and assumed to be the symptom of a skills gap (Carey, Crowley, Dudley, et al 2017: 20). In such an environment career progression depends as much on social and cultural capital as it does on technical skills or creative talent: new entrants who do not fit a particular mould – for example in terms of socio-economic background, ethnicity or gender – or those who feel they simply lack the right kind of personality (Wallis, van Raalte, & Allegrini, 2019) may become casualties of the 'leaky pipeline' notwithstanding their education and potential. 'Excluded from an almost exclusive informal recruitment system' is, for example, the first of the reasons given for women leaving Ireland's TV sector, according to Carey, Crowley, Dudley et. al (2017: 9) extrapolating from O'Brien's (2014) industry study. The reliance on networking within these industries exacerbates systemic class barriers, and inequalities determined by gender, ethnicity, disability, and their intersection (O'Brien et al, 2016). In the Work Foundation's study, culture and attitudinal barriers were highlighted by focus group attendees as negatively impacting upon their ability to access opportunities and progress within the industry: 'A number of participants from ethnic minority backgrounds stated that when they went for a job, they were quite often offered traineeships / professional development despite in some cases having over 15 years industry experience' (Carey, Crowley, Dudley et al, 2017: 15).   For certain individuals and groups, it is a system that constitutes an almost impenetrable wall between themselves and the work that they seek.

A SYSTEMIC PROBLEM WITH CONSEQUENCES

Whilst many industry commentators have gone out of their way to draw a distinction between the 'gig economy' (epitomised by companies such as Deliveroo and Uber) and creative freelance work, the vulnerabilities exposed by the Covid-19 crisis suggest that

the gig metaphor may be entirely appropriate.[2] These three related features of employment in the CCIs have been pervasive within this sector for many years, and their consequences were being felt well before Covid-19. As described above, these include the frequent skills shortage crises, high levels of attrition among workers (particularly by mid-career), and the sector's seemingly intractable diversity problem. The latter has been especially evident within the screen industries: 'Women, disabled workers, workers from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds, carers and individuals living outside London/South East England are significantly less likely to establish and maintain a career in the UK screen sector' (Research Institute for Cultural and Media Economies, 2018: 6). Despite more than two decades of hand-wringing about this lack of diversity, there has been little effective action. Interventions focused on attracting under-represented groups have not resulted in much long-term change, as the underlying issues remain unaddressed. In a review for the BFI on the subject of diversity, CAMEo's report summarised the situation thus:

> Particularly powerful obstacles to workforce participation are the screen sector's reliance on personal networks for allocating work and business opportunities; a 'white, male, middle class'-dominated industry culture; working conditions characterised by long working hours, flexible and mobile working and income insecurities; and an underlying acceptance of these conditions as diversity-unfriendly but necessary and unchangeable.

> (Research Institute for Cultural and Media Economies, 2018: 7).

Far from being necessary or unchangeable, the Covid-19 crisis demonstrates that, if these industries have any hope of becoming sustainable, facing-up to root-and-branch change is now inescapable. Investment in simplistic 'solutions' (like entry level recruitment drives) obfuscates the seriousness and systemic nature of the real challenge. What is needed across the sector is an agreed set of **industry-specific standards related to the**

---

[2] Indeed, this direction of travel in the characteristics of work and employment in CCI's within the UK economy was anticipated by some scholars long before the term 'gig' economy had even been coined (see McRobbie, 2002).

conditions and practices of employment (which include a commitment to continuing professional development) to be implemented across the sector, with carrot-and-stick incentives for employers.

One of the reasons that these long-term employment issues have remained unchallenged relates to the fragmented nature of these industries, dependent on many small and independent businesses. 89% of creative businesses employ fewer than five people. This being the case, there has been little appetite for sector-wide agreement on employment practices of any kind (and a particularly strong resistance to anything that could be construed as 'red tape'). Nevertheless, this is the nettle that must now be grasped if we are to establish a more resilient and sustainable future for the sector.

One way in which the Government might initiate action on this front is by commissioning a citizens' assembly-style approach within the sector to identify alternative ways of operating, perhaps through the facilitation of an organisation like the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). Robust forms of deliberative decision-making have been shown to be a good basis for these kind of changes. Individual creative businesses cannot prioritise the long-term needs of the sector above their own immediate and short-term survival, and nor should they be expected to. Change will require broad-based agreement on the boundaries of what acceptable employment practice should look like, and what short-term, project-based employment ought to constitute. It will need to include consideration of: recruitment practices and processes; the way in which rates of pay are negotiated and set; a commitment to, and agreement about the terms of 'internships' (where work experience extends beyond a period of four weeks); family-friendly flexibility of working arrangements; provision for parental absence, sick leave, and pension contributions; a coherent system of continuing professional development and skills (re)training; and employment policies related to other aspects of equity and diversity. This will not be an easy nettle to grasp, but the *status quo* is simply no longer viable.

10

REFERENCES

Baumann, Arne (2002) Informal Labour Market Governance: the case of the British and German media production industries, *Work Employment Society* 16 (27)

Bazalgette, P. (2017) Independent Review of the Creative Industries. Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-the-creative-industries [Accessed: 17 October 2018]

Born, G. (2004) *Uncertain Vision: Birt, Dyke and the Reinvention of the BBC*. London: Vintage.

Carey, H., Crowley, L., Dudley, C., Sheldon, H., & Giles, L. (2017) *A Skills Audit of the UK Film and Screen Industries*. Report for the British Film Institute. The Work Foundation (Lancaster University).

Creative Industries Federation (2020) Over 500 leading creative figures warn of the UK becoming "a cultural wasteland" unless government provides urgent financial support for the creative industries. Press release: April 27, 2020 https://www.creativeindustriesfederation.com/news/press-release-over-400-leading-creative-figures-warn-uk-becoming-cultural-wasteland-unless [Accessed: 1 June 2020]

Easton, E. and Cauldwell-French, E. (2017) *Creative Freelancers*. London: Creative Industries Foundation.

Grugulis, I. & Stoyanova, D., 2012 Social Capital and Networks in Film and TV: Jobs for the Boys? *Organization Studies* 33(10) 1311–1331 DOI: 10.1177/0170840612453525

Grugulis, I. and Stoyanova, D. (2009) 'I don't know where they learn them': skills in film and television. In: Smith, C. and McKinlay, A. *Creative Labour: working in creative industries.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

MacNab, G (2017) BFI launches £20m plan to tackle UK skills shortage, workforce diversity. Screen Daily: 28 June 2017. Online: https://www.screendaily.com/news/bfi-launches-20m-plan-to-tackle-uk-skills-shortage/5119499.article. [Accessed: 21 September 2018].

McRobbie, A. (2002) Clubs to companies: Notes on the decline of political culture in speeded up creative worlds, *Cultural Studies*,16:4, 516-531, DOI: 10.1080/09502380210139098

O'Brien, A. (2014) ''Men own television'': Why women leave media work, *Media, Culture & Society*, 36 (8) 1207–1218

O'Brien, D., Laurison, D., Miles, A., & Friedman S. (2016) Are the creative industries meritocratic? An analysis of the 2014 British Labour Force Survey, *Cultural Trends*, 25:2, 116-131, DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2016.1170943

Research Institute for Cultural and Media Economies (CAMEo), 2018 *Workforce Diversity in the UK Screen Sector: Evidence Review*. University of Leicester. https://www.bfi.org.uk/education-research/film-industry-statistics-research/reports/workforce-diversity [Accessed: 28 Nov. 2019].

Screenskills (2017) HETV: Skills Research, October 2017. Online: https://www.screenskills.com/media/1564/hetv_skills_research_detailed_debriefkehg-1.pdf [Accessed: 17 Oct. 2018].

Wallis, R., van Raalte, C. and Allegrini, S., 2019. The 'shelf-life' of a media career: a study of the long-term career narratives of media graduates. Creative Industries Journal. DOI: 10.1080/17510694.2019.166409

Wallis, R., Van Raalte, C. and Allegrini, S., 2020. The value and purpose of a Media Production degree from the perspective of mid-career graduates. *Media Education Research Journal*, 9 (2).

THE AUTHORS

Dr. Richard Wallis is Principal Academic within the Department of Media Production at Bournemouth University, and formerly Executive Producer at Twofour. His research has focused on media education, and the experience of working in the media industries.

rwallis@bournemouth.ac.uk

Dr Christa van Raalte is Deputy Dean for Education at Bournemouth University. Research interests include constructions of gender in science fiction and action films, narrative strategies in complex TV, and workforce diversity in the media industries.

cvanraalte@bournemouth.ac.uk

Faculty of Media & Communication
Bournemouth University
Fern Barrow
Poole BH12 5BB