Mind the Gap: the corrosive impact of the 'production'/'editorial' divide in UK television.

Intro [SLIDE 1]:

Production managers (commonly referred to as PMs) play a vital role in British television production. The ability of a company to bring in a project on-time and on-budget, while realising the vision of its producers, largely depends on production management. Yet PMs (together with the associated roles of heads of production, line producers, production coordinators and production secretaries) consistently head the lists of shortages reported by employers. The industry struggles to recruit to the role: more significantly, it fails to retain the experienced PMs it has.

And I have to acknowledge here the unusual nature of the current context. Over the past year a near-shutdown of commissioning, particularly in unscripted, has left some three quarters of freelancers out of work (according to Bectu). This means there is no shortage of available PMs at the moment. However, experience suggests that the current down-turn will see more experienced workers leave the industry and as programme-making resumes, previous skill shortages will, if anything, have become even more problematic – meaning that this research will become more pertinent.

[SLIDE 2] For those unfamiliar with the structure of TV production, this slide gives you an idea of where PMs sit**.** Crudely speaking, those in editorial roles are regarded as 'creatives', providing the 'vision' for a project while those in production are responsible for….in effect, everything else.

 [**SLIDE 3**] in the case of drama and high end factual, of course the picture is rather more complicated – with the list of 'creative' roles expanded, in scripted shows particularly, to include a multiplicity of departments – camera, lighting, costume, etc – all enabled by the production department.

So what does a PM do?

> **[SLIDE 4]:** 'the production manager is responsible for the day-to-day logistics of a film or TV drama production……'

PMs rarely receive anything resembling a job description, but Screenskills offer a definition of the role as that is all encompassing: 'the production manager is responsible for the day-to-day logistics of a film or TV drama production', with key skills including: 'Prioritisation [...] Negotiation […] Awareness of law […working knowledge of] Technology [both office-based and for filming …] Interpersonal relations […] Financial management'. This is everything that might surround the

(apparently) more important 'creative' role(s) in TV, while also facilitating legalities (whether contracts, access or rights), facilitating the wider team, along with supervising the production office, answering to those in management, being across the logistics of filming in studio or location, and making sure the budget is adhered to. It is an enormous job, and it is a job of transformation: PMs and their teams are the people responsible for managing the realisation of an idea.

In our recent British Academy funded project, we surveyed and interviewed nearly 800 PMs (and former PMs) about their experiences of working in the UK television industry.

We asked about what attracted them to the role, what kept them in the role and what, in a significant number of cases, made them leave (or seriously consider doing so). Their responses revealed a key underlying issue in a **structural and cultural 'divide'** between 'production' and 'editorial' staff working on television projects. While by no means universal, this 'divide' is reported to be common across the industry.

> [SLIDE 5] *Production Management is like being in an abusive relationship with Editorial. (SP.681)*
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> *a lot of the editorial counterparts I have worked with simply don't believe we are on a similar status - this is shown with the way they talk and act on production and the lack of value they place in our roles and knowledge. This is not applicable to all editorial staff of course but still far too many. It's tiring and frustrating. (SP.644)*

Critically, this is not a divide between equals but a weighted one in which one side is devalued, and which has very real negative repercussions for the lives of those working in the devalued spaces. This divide, however, is not intrinsic to the two "sides": production and editorial, when functioning properly, are separate but complementary constituents of a productive partnership. The problematic 'divide' we discuss here, is one that has developed over time and is sustained by a combination of structural and cultural factors in the modern industry.

The historical roots are complex and beyond the scope of this project – although there are notable parallels between the situation of our predominantly female PMs and that of the "script-girls", and other under-valued women described by Erin Hill in her 2016 history of women's work in Hollywood – women recruited to take care of the extensive 'details and non-creative work that, [in her evocative words,] swirled around creative endeavours'.

What *is* evident however, from our research, is that the contemporary divide is keenly felt by most PMs as part of their working life. Our participants' experiences suggest that the editorial/ production divide is implicated not only in discontent and resulting retention issues in the production management workforce, but also in compromised productivity, contributing to poor planning and resource management, poor communication, toxic work cultures and failures in the talent pipeline.

 [SLIDE 6]: **This 'divide' is manifested in a number of ways: the invisibility** of and ignorance about the role of PMs; **a hierarchy of** values that lionises (and indeed monetises) a certain kind of creativity; **the power dynamics** within and around productions which tend to limit the ability of production management to contribute to critical decision making, leaving them instead to fix the fall out; **and a lack of respect for** both the production team and their, routinely undervalued contribution, to the project, which is too often encultured and effectively 'taught' to junior editorial staff.

All of these factors are inflected by the feminised nature of production management (with women filling some 85% of production management roles). All of them are interrelated – and here we recognise John Caldwell's conception of the rhizome as a metaphor for production culture, where 'ecosystems […] have far too many variables to reduce to clean causalities'.

In this paper, then, we will focus on providing an insight into the PM experience of the 'divide' through the testimony of production management professionals, past and present. This is drawn from both the long-form, semi-structured interviews that the team gathered in the spring and summer of 2023, and the survey that preceded it, which contained a number of free text options allowing participants to elaborate on their multiple choice answers.

So: what do PMs say ?– how is this divide expressed?

> **[SLIDE 7]** *People don't really know what a production manager does now. And they don't get, they don't get the best out of you. Because they don't use you in that way. They just think that you're either the person that they need to get to shout at folk, or to magic money somehow, that they don't want to ask commissioning for.*

"*People don't really know what a production manager does*" – to be clear the reference here is to 'people' who work in TV! The undervaluing of their role and a lack of

recognition for their contribution is the single biggest complaint we heard from our respondents - And most PMs, it seems, are happiest when used to their capacity.

> *Sitting with a writer, chatting to a writer who's got an idea, who then puts a 120-page document in front of you. And taking that, and literally breaking it down to the nth degree, scheduling it, creating it, budgeting it, and then walking on set on the first day, and you've put it all together.*

> *I like going in and making changes and improving and making a difference to what's happening in either a business or on a production… I'm a deliverer, I like to see things deliver. Gives me a sense of satisfaction.*

Most PMs find great satisfaction in the successful completion of a project, to which their role is so central. However, for many, job satisfaction is articulated in terms of creative interactions with other people and of day-to-day problem solving. (taking a writers ideas from script to shoot…. making a difference to a production – 'delivering' what the team require)

> **[SLIDE 8]** *I enjoy being across all elements of it… getting everything squared off. Everyone's sorted out by the end of the day. You know, they're all sleeping in the right place and they've got what they need*

> *I just really love facilitating someone's vision, I just really love executing the dream, to the best of my ability and getting everyone on board to do that, to the best of their ability. I just really love making it happen. There's nothing better than… a six week prep. And then you turn up [after] scrambling every day… And then you arrive, shoot day one, and you're like, yeah, come on, it's here. We're all here… It's really very, very rewarding.*

There is an inherent selflessness to the role: if the team are safe and happy (*sleeping in the right place with everything they need*), the PM is happy. And the greatest satisfaction comes from working with that team to *facilitate someone's vision* – executing the dream – being part of that greater creative whole.

> **[SLIDE 9]** *It's frustrating how hard I have to work in order to have a good relationship with other people and they don't work anywhere near as hard to have a good relationship with me. But I need to keep it going because, at the end of the day, I want to steer them in the direction that makes sense. (P.161)*

> *the sense of satisfaction in bringing a programme in on time and on budget. But probably more than that, partnership with editorial I had when it worked well and I always, there was always this sort of 'production management aren't creative' narrative but I always positioned myself as part of the sort of senior team that made decisions because any logistical financial decision is also a creative decision.*

But: A caveat starts to appear, in the narrative: the relationship dynamic with the wider team is as critical to maintaining this sense of job satisfaction, as it is to effective

fulfilment of the role. And while responsibility for this seems to fall to the PM, given the power dynamics of the editorial/ production divide, the effectiveness of the partnership, and thus the working experience of the production team, is often in the gift of editorial staff.

While editorial and production theoretically work in parallel - in actuality there is slippage as the creative input of editorial is recognised and valued more than that of production (– even though, as this participant notes, *any logistical financial decision is also a creative decision*)

> **[SLIDE 10]** *it's being the linchpin, without anyone recognising that you are the linchpin, and that you're keeping everyone going (P148)*
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> *I find there is there is a lack of recognition of the role that is done by production management. […] It was on one of my Amazon shows and we were filming on an island in Panama and on our last day of production, this personality said to me - I was production manager at the time - and he said to me: 'well, I mean, what are you complaining about? Like … all you do all day long is just book taxis for people.' And I think that that is a bit of the perception that there is of the role, that we book taxis. We are there as an assistant to an entire team.*

Notwithstanding the critical part they play, the undervaluing of production staff was a common theme discussed by our respondents, who routinely reported a lack of recognition for their role among colleagues ('i*t's being the linchpin, without anyone recognising that'…..)* Some experience more extreme examples than others - (here a TV star tells the PM: *'all you do all day long is just book taxis for people.')*– a particularly egregious example of professional ignorance – but alas not a particularly uncommon one.

> **[SLIDE 11]** *the undervaluing of this community, if people are being made to feel not valued and seen and heard, and that's again down to that relationship with editorial […] Then I know so many people that are leaving because they just had enough. They've had enough of not being given any credit and I don't even mean financial credit. It's just, you know, they were as much part of delivering the production as their executive producer counterpart who goes to the Baftas and picks up the award. (P23)*

This lack of recognition for their work by their peers is frequently cited as a key contributory factor to the production management 'brain drain'. People have '*had enough of not being given any credit …….* A lack of recognition until recently perpetuated by the emphasis of award ceremonies. Bafta, for example, failed to recognise production until 2022 – and even then somewhat grudgingly made provision for PMs or line producers to be mentioned alongside editorial colleagues on nomination forms, only once the former have been fully represented.

[SLIDE 12] *When I worked on Strictly Come Dancing, [they'd] do a little skit every week, a little VT about someone who works on the show. So it'd be like the warm-up guy, and I'm watching what he does. And there would be the music researcher and what they do, there would be the floor manager and what they do. And like we would just laugh about it and be like, wouldn't we make a fun VT? …. But you know, they never made a VT about production. Not in all the 20- odd series, they never made VT about that…*

PMs feel further devalued when their work is also rendered invisible *on* television by 'behind-the-scenes' VTs : here the programme makers '*do a little skit every week about someone who works on the show... the warm-up guy, the music researcher, the floor manager …but never production* – and this, ironically is an extremely complex show - melding live and pre-recorded footage, fast-turnaround, innovative multi-platform engagement, high-level celebrity, physical risk and multiple locations - where good production management is integral to success.

[SLIDE 13] *PMing is so much about soft skills it's not that the same level of quantifiable… So, it just seems to be like it's an overlooked or undervalued role, not just from audience members or people who are thinking about coming into the industry, but also within the industry and the people that have the power themselves.*

I find it challenging sometimes that people, I think probably, because it's always predominantly been women that work in production. There's almost like this kind of responsibility almost like mothering role. Like, I should be responsible for somebody, and I think, well, we're all adults here

In part, the invisibility of production management is because of the relatively obscured nature of the 'soft' skills that are integral to the role (and as this participant notes, not easily *quantifiable…)*

Arguably these skills are further devalued when undertaken by women on the basis that they simply constitute 'natural' (often maternal) faculties, and thus hardly count as work at all (again one is reminded of the multitasking secretaries, script girls and d-girls who propped up the male heroes of Hollywood for much of the last century)

[SLIDE 14] *you're not recognized for the role, and at the same time it just feels that every time that there is anything that's added, as you say, legislative new thing - name it, COVID, name it, Brexit, name it, new visas to go to Europe or whatever is it, it always falls on the production management realm and no one recognizes that. (P43)*

And it's the - you know, it's the absolute blood-boiling frustration of getting a minibus back from a shoot and it pulls up outside your office and all of editorial empty out and walk up to the office and all of production are there picking up the kit with the runners to take it back up to the office (P.148)

The unquantifiable nature of these skills also contributes to the tendency to continually add additional elements to the role without commensurate resources or

compensation. In addition to the requirements of Covid, Brexit, GDPR and other external pressures - industry-specific good practice requirements such as the Albert sustainability scheme, and engagement with the Film and TV Charity's Mental Health Toolkit have tended to become the responsibility of the PM, along with policies designed to increase inclusion or reduce workplace bullying and harassment. This is despite the fact that these roles and measures are primarily on set requirements, whereas the PM is office-based – so the PM is remotely responsible but unable to ensure adherence – which makes these additional tasks particularly frustrating…(and once again it seems that, as this participant notes, *no one recognizes* the implications)

Meanwhile there is too often a general expectation of production to 'mop up what everyone else has no time for' - particularly colleagues in editorial - although, as one participant plaintively observed, 'there is no one to mop up for us'. *This* respondent describes *absolute blood-boiling frustration* – others have described late night despair and panic attacks as once again they are left to deal with the fall-out of 'creativity'

> **[SLIDE 15]** *it's turned round on people, and you're told they're not resilient or robust enough. Oh, you just can't. You're just maybe not cut out for telly. You know, I've had that before. You know, where it's like, oh, you're just probably not, when I was managing like four projects at the BBC at one time. And I complained to my boss about it. She was like, hmm you're maybe just not very good at portfolio management. And I was like, No, this is an untenable workload is what this is, like, who could manage this? And if they could do it, tell me, because I can't do it. It's, there's a lack of honest conversations happening. Because nobody wants to be the one, because you might not get hired if you say it. You might not get hired*

Often, the additional work is combined with the requirement to manage multiple projects at once, known as 'portfolio management'. The success, or otherwise, of these roles is individuated - individual PMs are '*told they're not resilient or robust enough'* and fear for their jobs if they challenge the impossible demands placed upon them. ('*nobody wants to be the one' who challenges the untenable workload 'because you might not get hired if you say it.* The ultimate deterrent in a precarious industry: *You might not get hired)*

While tighter budgets put pressure on professionals across the UK industry, the divide between editorial and production, and the widespread ignorance of, and lack of respect for production management work makes PMs especially vulnerable to this kind of overloading.

> **[SLIDE 16]** *The issues with pay parity are also something that I know have caused a lot of my colleagues to leave the industry. (SP.005)*

Rates are so far behind that of editorial teams - how is a junior producer paid the same as a production manager? Why are we keeping good co-ordinators on the same starting salary of a researcher? (SP.118)

Another example, is on opening credits of high end documentaries… very rarely are Line Producers credited… they may work between 1-2 years on a series, and yet the DOP who worked 3 weeks in total on filming alone will get credited in the opening titles, as will an Editor, a Composer, Producers,… yet the longest running member of that production team was probably the Line Producer who had way more responsibility for the series, and will have been a huge part of the decision making on the series as a whole… (SP.658)

Several of our participants pointed out the way in which the unequal value placed upon their work is reflected in (and reinforced by) a lack of pay parity between editorial and production staff with similar degrees of seniority and responsibility. *(thus an experienced production coordinator might be paid the same as a junior researcher - an entry-level job in editorial)*

Others mentioned credits – again a very visible marker of the value (or otherwise) ascribed to *their* contribution to a programme, compared with those of their colleagues. (Here *the Director of Photography who worked 3 weeks in total on the film is credited in the opening titles*, while the Line Producer who worked of the show for maybe 2 years isn't.)

Most of our respondents, however, focused on their day to day working experiences of this unequal divide – and their accounts accumulate into a description of a job that is so diffuse in its daily tasks as to be almost invisible, yet is one of overall responsibility, where everything outside the "creative" – whether logistical, financial, social or legal – is placed at the PMs door. *This* is the most impactful manifestation of the fundamentally unequal 'divide' that lies at the heart of television work in the contemporary UK industry.

Ways forward

[SLIDE 17] *'the best times are when it's a collaborative experience, when you're not just treated like the person [who is] the angry one. It's like, when you're actually brought into… when you're a collaborative member of the team, and you're all pushing in the same direction, is when I've had the best time.*

In our forthcoming article on this subject we undertake a thematic analysis of the ways in which the editorial/ production divide operates, the ideology that underpins it and its wider impact. But, here, we have tried simply to present a cumulative narrative about the working lives of PMs, their lived experience of the editorial/

production divide, and how that contributes to the industry's difficulties in retaining production staff.

It is clear is that PMs struggle to negotiate the hostile territory created a by television workplace characterised, as Anne O'Brien has it, by 'masculine practices of long working hours, a rigid separation of career and life, and a lack of workplace flexibility'. There is nonetheless potential for good practice, where satisfaction at work is engendered by collaboration and inclusion as this participant demonstrates…….

As Joan Acker reminds us, "**advantage is hard to give up**" meaning that any effort to bring about structural or cultural change, designed to address inequities, is liable to meet with resistance. By the same token, however, any such effort will necessarily 'increase the **visibility of inequalities**' (to quote Susan Milner and Abigail Gregory) and thus 'create possibilities for disruption' by countering 'the taken-for-grantedness of privilege.'

Here, in rendering visible the *felt*, as opposed to the datafied, inequalities at the centre of TV production, we intend that they can be recognised as inherently problematic, and as neither 'legitimate or inevitable [to quote Milner and Gregory again], but rather the product of interrelated, specific practices within the industry' that can be countered and rectified.

[SLIDE 18 – report details]

And for those of you who are interested in some of the practical ways in which that might be achieved I refer you to our recently published report which includes a number of recommendations to industry aimed at addressing the production/ editorial divide and improving the working conditions and thus retention of production managers in UK TV.