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Minding the gap: production management and the corrosive impact of the ‘production’/‘editorial’ labour divide in UK television

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ABSTRACT

Production managers (PMs) play a vital role in television production. The ability of a company to bring in a project on-time and on-budget, while realising the vision of its producers, depends on production management. Yet PMs and related roles consistently head the lists of shortages reported by employers in UK television whenever the demand for content is high. The industry struggles to recruit to the role: more significantly, it fails to retain the experienced PMs it has. Our British Academy funded project surveyed and interviewed PMs (and former PMs) about their experiences in UK television. The survey identified the three most commonly cited reasons for leaving or contemplating leaving production management: feeling undervalued and disrespected, an ‘always on’ work culture, and being overloaded and under-resourced. Interviews further highlighted a growing structural and cultural divide between ‘production’ and ‘editorial’ staff, which exacerbates dissatisfaction and retention issues. This divide, while not universal, is widespread and contributes to compromised productivity, poor planning and resource management, toxic work cultures, and failures in the talent pipeline. Our research aims to better understand this divide and explore alternative approaches to television production that could improve productivity and working conditions by bridging the gap between production and editorial teams.

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Introduction

The work Production Managers (PMs) do reveals much about conditions and change in television production, whether culturally, technologically or in better understanding the lived reality of freelancers.¹ This is because PMs play a vital, but so far under-researched 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 - the department responsible for the day-to-day

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logistics of programme-making, and in which PMs sit. Yet PMs (together with the associated roles of Heads of Production (HoPs), Line Producers (LPs), Production Coordinators (PCs) and Production Secretaries (Prod Secs)) consistently head the lists of shortages reported by employers in the UK television industry whenever the demand for content increases (BFI, 2022; ScreenSkills, 2022a, 2022b). The industry struggles to recruit to the role; more significantly, it fails to retain the experienced PMs it has.

Despite their centrality to the making of TV and the strategic urgency to attend to the role's attrition, there has been little research into the lived experience of PMs in either Television Studies or the broader field of Production Studies.² Indeed the low profile of this area of work within the academy reflects its equally low profile in the industry. For example, academic studies have emphasised the emotional work of producers in making television (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008), while ignoring that of production managers. Meanwhile, work exploring the 'unmanageable' (gendered) inequalities of the industry (Wing-Fai, Gill, & Randle, 2015) and the particular challenges experienced by mothers in television (e.g. Berridge, 2019; Dent, 2020; Liddy & O'Brien, 2021; Wreyford et al. 2021) make little or no mention of PMs, notwithstanding the predominance of women in these roles.

In our British Academy funded project, we surveyed and interviewed PMs (and former PMs) about their experiences of working in the UK television industry. Their responses revealed a key underlying issue in the structural and cultural divide between 'production' and 'editorial'³ staff working on television projects. While by no means universal, this divide is reported to be common across the industry.⁴ This is not a divide between equals but is weighted, one side being devalued with negative repercussions for the lives of those working in the devalued spaces. Neither is it intrinsic to the two 'sides' we describe: roles in production and editorial, when functioning properly, are distinct but complementary constituents of a productive partnership. Nevertheless, this counterproductive divide has developed and become increasingly acute over time. Understanding its manifestations and repercussions in the quotidian experiences of PMs both represents a significant contribution to Television Studies, and has the potential to inform and progressively transform television practice.

Our interviews evidence that the editorial/production divide is keenly felt as part of our participants' working lives. Their experiences suggest that this divide is implicated not only in discontent and resulting retention issues for the production workforce, but also in compromised productivity, contributing to poor planning and resource management, poor communication, toxic work cultures and failures in the talent pipeline. We argue that better understanding the divide contributes to the potential for alternative approaches to television production work - approaches that in helping to close the gap, might improve both productivity and working conditions in the industry.

Industry context: the dynamics of value and 'creativity' in television work

Production management is an enormous job, and it is a job of transformation: PMs are the people responsible for managing the realisation of an idea, and the role

requires great flexibility and creativity of thinking. However, PMs' creativity is largely unseen, arguably because it does not adhere to the masculinised stereotype of the auteur, crafting a singular vision. In an industry where creativity and value are all but synonymous, this has a significant impact on perceptions of the role and on the lived realities of those who undertake it.

ScreenSkills, the skills body supporting the UK TV and film industry, currently defines the job of the Production Manager in all-encompassing terms as: 'responsible for the day-to-day logistics of a film or TV ... production'. They are required to be skilled in prioritising tasks in 'a fast-paced, changing environment', 'negotiating and managing a wide range of deals and contracts', managing a number of legal processes including 'health and safety, data protection legislation, contractual rights, compliance and copyright requirements', familiarity with technologies used both on location and in the office, managing 'interpersonal relations' and 'looking after the welfare of people working on the production', 'financial management' and 'delegation' (where they are fortunate enough to have the support of a production team) (ScreenSkills, n.d-a). The actuality of the work, therefore, is legion in its possibilities, because of the myriad variables that come into play on any one project and the adaptability and skillsets of PMs are concomitantly enormous.⁵

By contrast, the description of the director's role on the same site is relatively straightforward, beginning: 'Directors are the creative leads of the film. They hold the creative vision throughout the whole process, from pre-production through to the final edit' (ScreenSkills, n.d-b). The comparatively brief description emphasises a singular vision, alongside the capacity to delegate, as opposed to the multiplicity of tasks required of the PM, coupled with a catch-all ability to accommodate all that is requested of them. It is notable that descriptors and skills-sets listed for other key editorial roles, both in scripted and unscripted television (i.e. producer, producer-director and associated positions) all feature creativity as a key requirement, whereas the term is absent from the entries for production management roles.

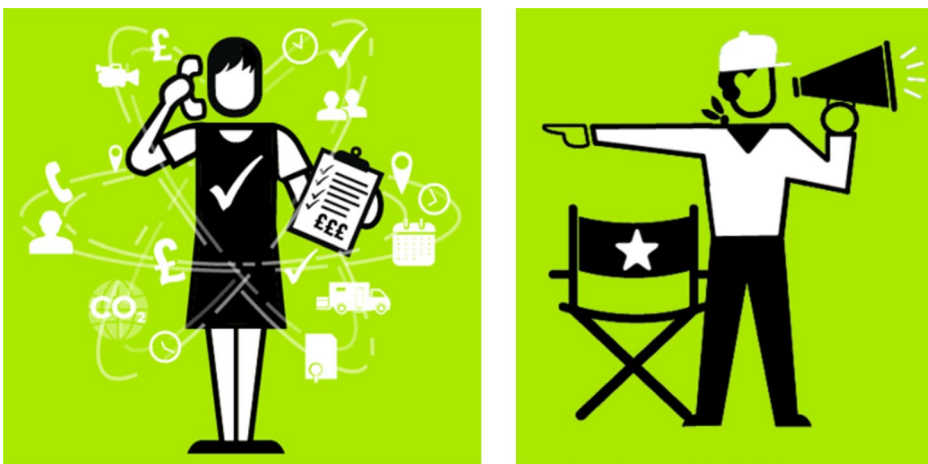


Figure 1. The ScreenSkills illustrations for production management (film and TV drama), and director (film and TV drama) (images taken from <https://www.screenskills.com/job-profiles/browse/film-and-tv-drama/>).

The stereotypical feminisation of production management (in contrast with higher status and more 'creative' roles), so aptly illustrated in [Figure 1](#), has repercussions for all who work in this department, regardless of their own gender. Erin Hill has described how women were historically recruited to lower paid, lower status roles in media production, in order to manage the 'details and non-creative work that swirled around creative endeavours' (2016, 4). The expectations of such roles, she argues, were extended to include an ill-defined set of 'service requirements' including 'emotional labour' considered appropriate to women 'based on a set of age-old assumptions about their "natural" qualities and skills as pleasers and domestic caregivers.' (2016, 7). Notably, when jobs previously done by men were taken over by women (typically where shifts in the industrial landscape led to less favourable pay and conditions, and a commensurate drop in status), these roles were reframed to fit a feminised template including 'greater components of emotional performance and detail work, compelling their own forms of creative service' (2016, 165). Hill notes that in the contemporary industry, work historically associated with women, even where it is now more gender-integrated, retains 'the stigma of having been women's work in the past, an association that contributes to continued low pay and poor working conditions.' (2016, 5) Modern PMs, in this respect, would appear to have inherited the mantle of the 'script-girls' and 'd-girls'⁶ who, as Hill demonstrates, played essential, yet almost universally under-valued, parts in the film industry of their respective eras.

The devaluing of the non-'creative' is central to the weighted divide we identify in British television work. Here the evolution of conceptual divides can be traced in the historical record. In his seminal study of the BBC in the 1960s and 70s, Tom Burns describes it as a place where conceptual divides between creatives and administrators (and the nomenclature of both groups change as the history goes on), roughly distinguished between those with ideas and those who facilitate the realisation and exhibition of those ideas (Burns, 1977). Indeed, this was true even when there was relative unity of purpose as to what the function of broadcasting should be, at the BBC under Reith (Carter & McKinlay, 2013). Fissures in this unity subsequently fractured and further fractured with the advent of commercial programming, the creation of Channel 4, the expansion of the independent sector and 'Producer Choice' at the BBC. These shifts in the broadcasting, and therefore the production landscape, have had myriad repercussions on the working environment of the people who make television programmes. What they also do is introduce competing ideas of what work should be. Thus as the creative and administrative divide persists, in varying forms, throughout the history of broadcasting, there are instances where the idea of additional value comes into play – for example with the advent of commercial television, when 'companies had, of necessity, to tempt BBC staff away with more money and with the offer of more "freedom"' (Burns, 1977, 51). The nature of this 'freedom' is unspecified, but it is an idea loaded with the potential of what might be – a notion prevalent in television work, which is closely aligned with the idea of 'creativity' and arguably drives inequities (Aust, 2024). The potential of creativity, in turn, is to deliver greater value, and it therefore becomes the *site* of value. This delineation of creativity and value assignment, which fails to recognise the creativity of those facilitating the ideas generated by others, is transferred to the quotidian minutia of work and devalues those outside the slipstreams of this 'potential'. This is where PMs reside: outside of the value

ascribed to those *perceived* as more creatively important, and those perceptions manifest in the actuality of unequal pay, unequal recognition and a far wider range of tasks included in respective roles. This is the lived reality of the divide we explore below.

Methodology

The research underpinning this article was undertaken over the course of 2023, beginning with an online survey which ran for three weeks in the spring of that year, followed later by a series of in-depth interviews.⁷ Designed with the input of a range of industry stakeholders,⁸ the format of the survey combined multiple choice questions with optional free-text boxes allowing participants to expand on their answers. It was distributed and promoted through a variety of relevant industry platforms, blogs and social media, with an emphasis on formal and informal groups representing people (such as people of colour and disabled individuals) often minoritised within the industry.⁹ Respondents were encouraged to share the survey widely, particularly with contacts who had left the industry as these, we anticipated, were likely to prove relatively hard to reach. The survey was completed by 765 respondents across the United Kingdom, with a demographic profile which, based on available indicators, seems to reflect that of the role: 84% female; 73% aged between 30 and 50; 86% non-disabled; 91% white and 62% based on London and the Southeast.¹⁰

Our respondents also represented a wide range of industry experience, with 65% having worked in the industry for more than a decade, and 27% for 20 years or more. Seventy eight percent were working in production management at the time of completion, with 11% having moved to other TV roles and 11% having left the industry altogether. Of those currently working in production management, 38% worked predominantly as PMs, 39% in more senior roles and 23% in more junior positions (see [Figure 2](#) below).

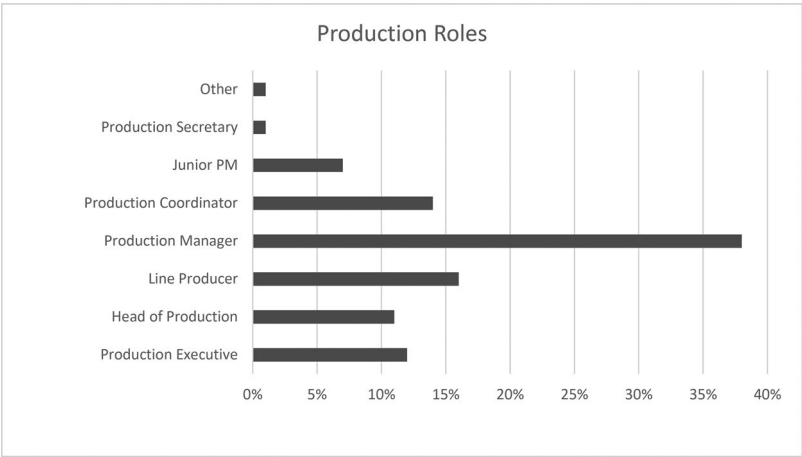


Figure 2. Distribution of roles among those currently working in production management.



Figure 3. Why people currently working in production management consider leaving.

We asked our respondents about what attracted them to the role, what kept them in the role and what, in a significant number of cases, made them leave. Where they had left production management (22%) or seriously considered doing so (75% of those remaining) we asked them to rank a number of possible contributing factors identified in our consultation phase (see [Figure 3](#) and [Figure 4](#) below).

At the end of the survey we asked for volunteers to take part in interviews, and from those who completed this section we selected 30 individuals who broadly represented the demographic profile and experience of our wider set. Between June and October we conducted semi-structured online interviews of approximately an hour each with this cohort, asking them about their work histories and experiences to date, their longer term ambitions, and, in particular those factors impacting their decisions to leave, to try to leave, or to remain in production management roles. The interviews were transcribed, coded, along with the free-text responses in the survey and analysed to identify key themes in the narratives. To protect their anonymity, our survey participants are identified in this paper with the initials SP and their number in the full list of anonymous responses, while interview participants are identified with the initials IP and their number in our original list of volunteers.

Findings and discussion: living the divide

Our survey revealed that while most production managers like working in television (90%), find their role rewarding (87%) and feel it is well suited to their skillset, three quarters of those currently working in these roles had seriously considered leaving. The main reasons cited were that they felt undervalued or not respected by colleagues (94%), that they felt under pressure from an 'always-on' work culture (94%) and that they found themselves to be over-loaded and under-resourced (94%). Long and inflexible hours were also a key concern (89%), as were the number the extra responsibilities that had been added to their role over the period of their careers (86%).

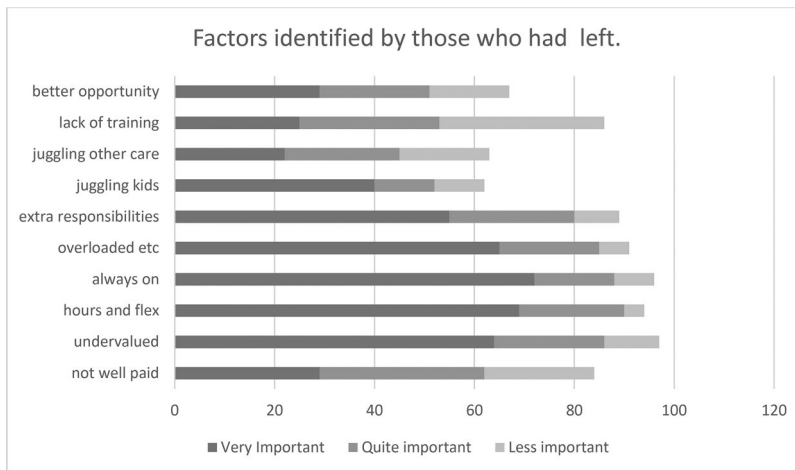


Figure 4. Why many of our respondents have left production management.

For those who had already left the industry, their responses were very similar, with respondents most commonly citing hours (90%), with the ‘always-on’ culture (87%), and the issues of disrespect (86%) and overloading (86%) coming close behind, followed by the ongoing accumulation of extra responsibilities (80%) (Figure 4).

From the free-text responses and the interviews a much more nuanced narrative emerged, in which the corrosive production/editorial divide was a recurring theme. As one contributor commented, ‘Production Management is like being in an abusive relationship with editorial.’ (SP.681) This divide appears to be implicated in most of the concerns outlined above – either as the prime cause or as an exacerbating factor. Thus, a lack of appreciation for PMs’ contribution on the part of editorial staff, and a startling ignorance of what it is PMs actually do, manifests not only in disrespect but also in a tendency to contribute to overloading and unreasonable expectations. It becomes clear that, to a significant extent, the quality of a PM’s working experience (as well as their ability to do a good job) is largely dependent on the quality of their relationship with editorial colleagues. Meanwhile a hierarchy of values that lionises (and indeed monetises) a certain kind of creativity, and the resulting power dynamics within and around productions, tend to limit the ability of PMs to contribute to critical decision making, leaving them instead to fix the fall out:

People don’t really know what a production manager does now. And 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, [money] that they don’t want to ask commissioning for. (IP.249)

The diffuse scope of what a PM ‘is’ and what tasks are included in their role increases job dissatisfaction and erodes the potential for creative collaboration, because PMs are busy doing so many things that were previously assigned to more junior staff, such as everyday travel bookings. This speaks to the erosion of budgets for television production and the subsequent ways in which junior production roles (such as production secretaries) are often enveloped into those of a supervising PM, resulting in the ‘extra responsibilities’ and ‘overloading’ apparent in Figure 2 above. This overwork corrodes the potential for job satisfaction as well as impeding productivity.

Job satisfaction and creative collaboration

As has been noted, despite the concerns described, most PMs still report that they enjoy their work the majority of the time. They find great satisfaction in the successful completion of a project, to which their role is so central. They take pride in the skills they bring to day-to-day problem solving and to creative interactions with other people:

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. (IP.251)

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. (IP. 31)

Many of our respondents are highly motivated by taking care of the crew: if the team are safe and happy, the PM is happy:

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 (IP.375)

But the greatest satisfaction comes from working with that team as part a greater creative whole, to transform a vision into a reality:

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. (IP.77)

However, a caveat appears in this narrative: the relationship dynamic with the wider team is as critical to maintaining job satisfaction, as it is to effective fulfilment of the role. 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. Some PMs recount positive experiences in this respect:

I have been very fortunate.... I've had loads of really great directors and producers who have taken me along the journey and have included and asked for my input on things (IP.110)

For others it has proved more of a battle:

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)

And for many, the relationship with editorial could be one of the most challenging aspects of the job:

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)

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. One explained 'it's being the linchpin, without anyone recognising that you are the linchpin, and that you're keeping everyone going.' (IP.148) while another described, as an example, an encounter with a presenter who told her 'all you do all day long is just book taxis for people.' (IP.43).

It is clear that this lack of recognition and the continued (seemingly wilful) professional ignorance that underpins it, is closely associated with the understanding of 'creativity' that fuels the editorial/production divide:

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. (IP.23)

Thus strong-minded PMs have managed to maintain a position at the creative core of the wider production team (and with it their sense of professional pride), but this must be constantly fought for and cannot be taken for granted within a role that is so often undervalued in this respect.

How PMs are made invisible

The restrictive definition of, and additional value placed upon, 'creativity' is the crux of the production/editorial divide. It is worth noting here that those deemed to be 'creatives' in the context of the television industry are employed in a very small number of editorial roles, skewing the weight of value towards those who inhabit this privileged 'creative' space. This skew echoes the way in which the industry privileges the very small numbers of on-screen "talent" over the army of those whose work delivers them there (Atalla, 2023). This privileging is a foundational part of learning to 'be' in TV, which has tangible detrimental effects.

Our respondents were very clear that lack of recognition within this hierarchy of creativity was a key factor contributing to the production management 'brain drain':

people are being made to feel not valued and seen and heard, and that's again down to that relationship with editorial ... 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. (IP.23)

The lack of recognition is formalised through industry awards – or lack of them. BAFTA failed to recognise production management at all in its awards until its 2022 ceremony (Talent Manager, 2021). Even then provision was somewhat grudgingly made for PMs or line producers to be mentioned *alongside* editorial colleagues on nomination forms, with current guidelines stipulating that this can be done only once

the former have been fully represented (BAFTA 2026, 7). While the Royal Television Society inducted a dedicated Production Management Award in 2022 (Creamer, 2022), the organisation Women in Film and TV have always recognised production management in their awards, indicative of the role's historic and continued gender skew.¹¹ For the television industry, awards are an important indicator of value attributed to both product and producer in a busy and complex marketplace. The lack of inclusion of PMs in nominations, or even in invitations to awards ceremonies, makes a clear statement about the lack of value ascribed to the role.

A similarly public statement is made when senior production staff are excluded from the opening credits of high-end television shows where, for example:

the DOP who worked three weeks in total on filming 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)

PMs feel further devalued when their work is also rendered invisible *on* television by behind-the-scenes 'VTs', short filmed inserts to factual entertainment formats that have become increasingly common in recent years. One respondent recalled her experiences of two extremely complex shows, melding live and pre-recorded footage, fast-turnaround, innovative multi-platform engagement, high-level celebrity, physical risk and multiple locations – shows where exemplary production management is integral to success, and yet apparently remained unseen by the creative teams responsible for these segments:

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 I 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 a VT about that....[and] when I was on *Bake Off* they would do all these incredible, you know, behind the scenes with *Bake Off*. Let's talk to the Home Economist. Let's talk to the floor manager. Let's talk to this. Let's talk to that and never talk to production. No, [they] don't want to talk to us. (IP.148)

While irked by this level of invisibility in the public realm, however, for most PMs it is the apparent invisibility of their work to close colleagues in editorial roles that most impacts their day-to-day experiences:

a friend of mine is a series director now, he said to me, 'I'm not being funny, but I actually really don't understand what you guys do because you're almost like an enigma. I'm only ever really aware of production management when something goes wrong'. (IP.110)

Thus, PMs find themselves in something of a double-bind in terms of their relationship with editorial colleagues, who lean heavily on the support provided by production, while simultaneously undervaluing and under-using their skills:

We're seen as responsible and safe plate catchers, there to chase and remind endlessly and ensure that we just meet that deadline [and yet] there's little respect for the skills we have. (SP. 197)

Thus PMs often find themselves treated as personal assistants, with Series Producers' out-of-office replies 'regularly directed to the PM rather than to their teams' producers' (SP.197), while at the same time being held responsible for any and all failures in the production process:

Mistakes coming from a PM are always unacceptable while the editorial team is allowed to make them, and the production management teams usually are there to fix their mistakes. (SP. 291)

When programmes go well people think you have just done your job. If programmes go wrong, it is laid at [the] PM's door. (SP.784)

The editorial/production divide was reinforced by working protocols and structures that tended to pit departments against one another so that editorial staff perceived production input as negative:

I think there is a common misconception that the PM team do not add value to what is on screen, only that they put restrictions on editorial teams' aims. (SP.777)

In an industry where the directive to put the money on the screen is axiomatic, this same logic is reflected in PMs remuneration:

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 starting salary of a researcher? (SP.118)

While rates of pay were, in themselves, a concern for some of our respondents, for most the key issue was the lack of pay parity between editorial and production staff with similar degrees of seniority and responsibility. Unequal pay was understood as an indicator of unequal value – of the undervaluing of PMs work – reinforcing the sense of a *weighted* divide.

Persistent overloading and the 'always on' culture

Ignorance of production management responsibilities, together with a general lack of respect, seem to contribute to PM's experiences of being overloaded and under-resourced. One key factor here would appear to be the inconspicuous nature of the 'soft' skills that are integral to the role – skills, as one respondent notes, that are not easily quantifiable:

PMing is so much about soft skills it's not at 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. (IP.231)

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 reminiscent of the multitasking secretaries, script girls and d-girls who propped up the male heroes of Hollywood for much of the last century):

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 (IP.114)

There is a distinctly gendered dimension, moreover, to the common expectation that production will ‘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’ (SP.625). Another is more forthright about being left to deal with the fall-out of ‘creativity’:

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 (IP.148)

The anger expressed here is less about the work itself than the attitude of the editorial team. This attitude, our following respondent fears, is being passed on to junior editorial staff by their seniors, whose lack of professional respect for production staff reinforces the cultural divide and sets a poor example for their teams:

And we were about to have a massive, massive, massive day of filming and obviously, you know, it’s quite a big deal. But one of the contributors was in A&E for an allergic reaction.... They got there without informing me. They sat there without informing me. They were treated without seeing me. [Then the Series Producer] called me to book a taxi to get them out of there! ...and we were about to do like an 18-hour day. My alarm was going to go off at 5:30, but they called me at 4:15 to book a taxi. And it’s like, you know, ... I mean, that person was a particular case in point of genuinely believing that production was sub-human, but, you know, that behaviour was also seen by other people and not stopped.... and younger members of the team saw that behaviour and probably thought it was fully appropriate. (IP.148)

The current culture in TV [...] has an actively hostile attitude towards production management which is tolerated and at times enourgaed by Senior Management. (SP. 836)

The all-encompassing, seemingly unquantifiable nature of the PM’s skills ironically contributes to the tendency to continually add more elements to the role without commensurate resources or compensation. In addition to the requirements of Covid, Brexit and GDPR, there are numerous other external pressures – often industry-specific good practice requirements such as the Albert sustainability scheme, and even (ironically) engagement with the Film and TV Charity’s Mental Health Toolkit, along with policies designed to increase inclusion or reduce workplace bullying and harassment. This kind of additional responsibility tends automatically to fall to the production management team. This is the case, even though these roles and measures are largely on-set requirements, whereas the PM is office-based – so the PM becomes remotely responsible but unable to ensure adherence, making such tasks particularly frustrating, and (once again) rendered invisible to outside observers:

you’re not recognised 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. (IP.43)

Increasingly PMs find themselves required to manage multiple projects at once, known as ‘portfolio management’. The responsibility for success, or otherwise, of these roles is individuated and many fear for their jobs if they challenge the impossible demands placed upon them:

it's turned round on people, and you're told they're not resilient or robust enough... You're just maybe not cut out for telly. You know, I've had that before... 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... 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. (IP.249)

It seems that the more PMs take on, the more they are subsequently expected to take on, while an inverse proportionality is at play: as work increases, the value of that work is eroded. The bloated workloads indicate the PM's diminished status as they are expected to take on everything that 'creatives' are exempt from – and if a PM cannot fulfil the requirement, however unreasonable, it is their own fault. Here, as elsewhere, the buck stops with the PM. Fundamentally, the lack of recognition and respect afforded PMs in too many of their relationships with editorial colleagues sits in stark contrast to the degree of responsibility they are expected to shoulder.

The consequences of the divide... and hope for the future

The failure to retain production management staff is an ongoing loss to the industry of experience and knowledge. It is clear that an excessive and escalating workload, together with an 'always-on' culture that is fundamentally inimical to a healthy work-life balance, are critical factors driving previously committed people to leave.

'Production management people are usually a particular kind of breed of person who take responsibility above and beyond and take things seriously and would never, you know, they're normally the kind of person that wouldn't want to let anyone down. And I think employers probably have just traded on goodwill, but they haven't seen that the long term consequence is that people get burnt out and just ditch it, or get burnt out and just go. (IP.77)

While tighter budgets put pressure on professionals across the UK industry, endemic ignorance of the role among editorial teams, manifested as a lack of clarity around what production managers do and a failure to have coherent expectations of the job, makes PMs especially vulnerable to these kinds of pressures. For many, meanwhile, the lack of respect for production management from the other side of the editorial/production divide constitutes the last straw, adding insulting treatment to injurious working conditions. Hardly surprising then that PMs leave the industry, as one respondent reflected 'If I had felt like a valued team member who was respected and developed it would have been very different' (SP.85)

Meanwhile, for those who remain, the cultural divide – often expressed in the exclusion of senior production staff from the early stages of decision-making and in poor communications later on – impedes their ability to do their best possible job. Apart from creating tensions across the team, the editorial/production divide can thus result in poor planning, particularly in pre-production, which risks inflating the final costs of a project.

Fortunately, although common, this counter-productive cultural divide is not ubiquitous and is sometimes challenged. Many of our respondents reported also having

had positive experiences of working partnerships when they had been treated as valued collaborators in the creative process. One contributor conjured up an evocative image of the challenging task of programme making as performed by a well-coordinated team:

Have you ever seen the film, *The Mission* with Robert De Niro? Right, you know, he's carrying that bloody thing up that hill, right? That's the vision I have of production, you've all got to carry that fucking thing up the hill together... I don't need hot air blowing up my arse. I just need to be not blamed for shit that wasn't my fault. Not exposed, not thrown under the bus to save somebody else. When it's worked well, it's because everybody has worked as a team, whether it's a small team or a big team. And it's come from the top down. (IP.249)

The final emphasis here on leadership is significant, and picked up by another respondent who offers a specific example of good practice in terms of senior editorial staff enforcing a respectful working culture:

.... the other day, one of the PC's [production coordinator] was on the phone to this really arsey cameraman. And we could hear her trying to be like really 'oh okay' and but basically we could hear this bloke shouting, and then A. said to her, after 'who were you talking to?' I mean, this is the Head of Science coming to this PC. She knows who he is. But, you know, it's quite daunting. And she said 'Oh, no, no, no, it's fine. It's, it was just a cameraman' and he said, 'but who was it? Cause he shouldn't be talking to you like that'. And I thought that's a really good message. (IP.447)

Such positive experiences offer foundational models of good practice and therefore hope for the future of the industry, as do the optimistic perspectives of many PMs and heads of production who are determined to strive for improvements, protecting more junior production staff as they do so. They do not depart easily, as this survey entry says, 'I am passionate about making telly, I don't want to leave. I want to be a part of the change.' (SP.42)

In contrast with the findings of Willment and Newsinger (2025) that many disillusioned television workers remain in the industry only because they are loathe to abandon the personal investment they have already made, most of our participants still felt their work to be worthwhile and potentially rewarding, demonstrating the 'can do' attitude typically associated with the PM role in their determination to strive for improvements.

Conclusion

How, then, can the clear value of work PMs do be understood, when their tasks are so diffuse, varied and ill-defined? The absence of defined roles is endemic to television work, but is particularly pertinent to the feminisation of production management. This gendering, as we have seen, has a history: the 'female-dominated occupations' described by Hill, where 'typically, the necessary skills or competencies for that service are not formalised in any way' (2016:7), and the work itself may encompass almost any activity that 'swirls around' the endeavours of the 'creatives'. In effect, PMs are defined in the negative: they do everything that the 'creative' editorial staff do *not* do, facilitating everything *to realise* the idea. They sit 'under' more typically creative

staff in a hierarchy that privileges the originating idea. This conception overlooks the creativity necessary for the interpretation and realisation of ideas. In so doing, it gives rise to an unwarranted disparity in the value assigned respectively to different members of a production team. It is this disparity that leads, in turn, to the demoralised, attrition-ridden workforce in evidence here; it is this disparity that requires balancing so fulfilling careers can be enjoyed and skilled programme-makers retained.

Good production management is critical to successful programme making and can offer a highly rewarding career; nevertheless, the television industry has often struggled to recruit and retain experienced staff in this area. Our research has shown that a significant factor impacting both the production management skills gap, and the tensions and inefficiencies that can undermine individual production projects, is the structural and cultural divide between editorial and production staff. This divide embodies and amplifies a hierarchy of value predicated on particular constructions of 'creativity', within which the contribution of PMs is routinely underestimated, undervalued and rendered invisible.

The accounts reported here collectively describe a job that is diffuse in its quotidian tasks and is also one of overall responsibility, where everything outside the 'creative' – whether logistical, financial, social or legal – is placed at the PMs door. PMs, therefore, exist within a culture of accountability that has central to it the tendency to blame individuals, despite it being – ostensibly, at least – a collective endeavour. PMs are the people on whom the success of a project rests, but who rarely receive recognition when a project is successful. These levels of dissonance, as well as being plainly demoralising, represent a prevailing lack of respect for or understanding of the PM role and contributes to the overloading of PMs and to their under-resourcing of their teams.

To address these issues there needs to be a renewed focus on closing the contrived gap between production and editorial. What is needed, in place of this destructive divide, is collaboration and partnership. A partnership model that involves senior production staff in decision making from the start not only ensures that productions are effectively planned, resourced and managed, but makes all participants feel valued. Value is key to wellbeing, and the maintenance of wellbeing in the workplace will improve both retention of key staff and the performance of the teams in which they work. Simple changes, such as job-descriptions to clarify expectations, would induct a shared understanding of the production management role and consequentially expectations of the production department. This would encourage adequate resourcing and would allow PMs to fulfil their role without the creep of expanding responsibilities from elsewhere.

There has been industry effort to address this lack of clarity, such as Bectu's Eyes Half Shut and Life Behind the Len¹²s awareness campaigns, or the BFI's Work Wise programme which aims to bring clarity to the legalities of television work – all endeavours demonstrative of an awareness of need but yet to have discernible effects. Still needed is a move towards pay structures that appropriately reflect seniority and responsibility, credit policies that reflect levels of input and decision-making, and awards that acknowledge the full range of skills that contribute to a programme's success.

Meanwhile work has also been taking place to raise the profile of PMs within the industry – the inaugural WFTV PMs networking event, held at Netflix, was instituted

in response to the research reported in this article, and has since become an annual fixture, while UKTV are piloting some guidelines developed with the research team, and underpinned by our research, to support more equitable and productive working practices.¹³ But this work needs to continue. This project did not address the differences in PMs work by genre, for example, which are considerable: what does focusing on those differences tell us about conditions and if there are specificities that need addressing? Would this, for example, help halt attrition? As a collaboration between industry and academia, this project has had discernible successes, but those wins need to be sustained.

Effort to bring about structural or cultural change designed to address inequities, is liable to meet with resistance. As Joan Acker reminds us, 'advantage is hard to give up' (Acker 2009, 213). Yet, the persistence of practices that fail to 'mind the gap' in this respect will not serve the (already precarious) UK industry well in the long term, whilst a new determination to improve the working conditions of PMs has the potential to significantly contribute to a more sustainable workplace for all who make TV.

Notes

1. There is a history of Production (as a department) and Production Managers, both pre-digitalisation and/or across the shift to the production pluralities of the streaming era that can reveal much of how television is made and how it feels to "be" in TV. Additionally, the roots of the divide we discuss in this article are worthy of (at least) another project in itself: we cannot hope to determine them here. To use John Caldwell's conception of the rhizome as a metaphor for production culture, these 'ecosystems [...] have far too many variables to reduce to clean causalities' (Stauff and Caldwell, 2015, 56).
2. The work of PMs has not received a comparable focus to above the line roles, such as directors and producers, or even editors and cinematographers (works are too legion to cite here). The foundational Production Studies works of Caldwell, Mayer and others (Banks, Connor, & Mayer, 2015; Caldwell, 1995, 2008) do not look at PMs, nor do the prominent analyses of creative industries labour (Banks, 2017; Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor, 2020; McKinlay & Smith, 2009), despite the sometime focus on gender (Connor, 2015). Some television scholarship obliquely addresses the hierarchy we examine, such as Georgina Born's work on the BBC (Born, 2005), or the many memoirs of prominent executives, which illuminate the ways in which executives can embody TV's intellectual aspirations and become 'creative' centres of cultural power thereby setting the tone for an industry. This kind of literature indicates the ways in which academia should be sceptical and interrogative of the individualist narratives they promote (Birt, 2002; Cotton, 2016; Dyke, 2004; Wyatt, 2003).
3. 'Production' in this context refers to the team responsible for managing the logistics of a production, including schedules, budgets, logistics, as well as the administrative (and often the substantive) aspects of diverse legal obligations, human resources and well-being, health and safety, environmental sustainability etc. 'Editorial' refers to the team deemed to be concerned with the 'creative' aspects of a production, including directors, producers, assistant directors and producers, researchers etc.
4. The experience of one of the authors informs this project: having started at the BBC as a Production Coordinator in 2005, Aust then became a Researcher, viewed quite openly as 'going to the other side', and as an act of unabashed, somehow disloyal ambition.
5. To add to this complexity, Production Management is defined slightly differently in the contexts of scripted (drama) and unscripted TV, with further variations across areas such as News, or Animation.

6. The nicknames given respectively to studio era script clerks when women moved into this role, and to women working in development in post-studio Hollywood. (Hill 2016:5) Men in equivalent roles were never described as 'boys'.
7. The project design and the individual research tools were approved by the Bournemouth University Research Ethics Committee – Approval number 45814.
8. The industry consultation for the design and piloting of research instruments included conversations with industry contacts in production management roles, talent managers and representatives from support organisations including Bectu, Women in Film and Television, the Film and TV Charity and the Production Manager Association, as well as informal freelancer groups engaged in improving working conditions such as The TV Mindset (Facebook-based) and TV Hell (Instagram-based).
9. The survey was widely promoted through the stakeholders listed above, and through industry-facing platforms such as Broadcast online and TheTalentManager.com as well as through informal groups supporting under-represented demographics such as Black in TV and Deaf and Disabled People in TV.
10. For detailed demographic breakdown see 'Where have all the PMs gone: Appendix' at <https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/39530/>.
11. Women in Film and TV was founded in 1989, with the inaugural WFTV Awards taking place in 1991. The awards have always recognised PMs, aiming to celebrate 'outstanding achievement by a female line producer, production supervisor, production manager, location manager, finance controller, production accountant, or post-production supervisor in film, TV or digital media within the last three years.' Until 2023 the award was called the 'Project Management Award' then 'renamed the 'Production Management Award' to more accurately reflect the roles represented in the category'. (Claudia Merhej, 2024, Email to Rowan Aust, 17 June).
12. The Bectu campaigns can be found here: <https://bectu.org.uk/get-involved-in-the-union/eyes-half-shut/> and <https://bectu.org.uk/get-involved-in-the-union/lives-behind-the-lens/>, and the BFI-funded Work Wise Programme here: www.workwiseforscreen.org.uk.
13. The first output of this research, an industry-focused report, was published in 2024 (available at <https://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/39530/>) the further dissemination of the initial findings was undertaken through an industry event in April of that year.

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