

# Unpaid work in the UK television and film industries: Resistance and changing attitudes

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## Abstract

This article concerns resistance to unpaid work in the television and film industries. It outlines one notable and successful campaign against unpaid labour which was conducted in the UK television industry and discusses how a similar campaign in the film industry met much greater opposition. It then reports on a survey that was conducted in order to investigate the seeming differences in attitudes in the two industries observed during these campaigns. While confirming that workers in the film industry are more prepared to accept unpaid labour than television workers, the survey also revealed a more striking characteristic: those who have worked longer in either sector view unpaid labour considerably less favourably than relative newcomers. The article discusses possible reasons for this, such as self-interest and altruistic attitudes towards younger workers; it also explores some implications for future working conditions, and for the role of activism and solidarity in resisting the worst aspects of existing labour relations in the cultural industries.

## Keywords

Film, freelance, television, unpaid labour

## Introduction: Unpaid work in the cultural sector

A number of recent interventions have sought to draw attention to the problem of unpaid labour in contemporary workplaces. Journalist Ross Perlin's book *Intern Nation* (2011) highlights the increasing and often exploitative use of interns across a wide range of industries, including politics and overseas aid. Perlin also points to the dubious consequences for class inequality and social mobility of a system where only the wealthy middle class can afford to subsidize their access to the most desirable types of work. Elsewhere, the reliance of software development on unpaid work has led to a lively debate about the politics of 'free labour' (Terranova, 2000).

One sector well known for its use of unpaid labour is the cultural and creative industries. Andrew Ross has discussed how various artistic (and academic) traditions have inculcated a tendency towards 'sacrificial concepts of mental or cultural labor' (Ross, 2000) especially on the part of workers in the early stages of their careers. Ross suggested that this tendency towards self-sacrifice made artistic labour markets harbingers of new models of labour exploitation in the workplace of tomorrow. Some have even used the term 'self-exploitation' to refer to this dimension of modern working life (Ekinsmyth, 2002). Menger showed that individuals in artistic labour markets 'learn to manage the risks of their trade through multiple jobholding, occupational role versatility, portfolio diversification of employment ties, and income transfers from public support and social security programmes' (2006: 765). Until recently, however, at least in industrialized and democratic nations, major commercial cultural industries such as film, television and journalism offered substantial protection to large numbers of their employees.

Many of the key occupations were highly unionized from the mid-twentieth century onwards (Denning, 1996; Gray and Seeber, 1996). In UK television, as McKinlay and Smith (2009) show, national collective bargaining underpinned labour relations in the industry from the Second World War, based on highly centralized craft unions. All this began to change in the 1980s with the onset of deregulation, marketization and the opening up of national broadcasting systems to competition (Heery et al., 2004; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Saundry, 2001; Saundry et al., 2006). There was a marked shift from a broadcaster/producer model, based on the public service broadcasting institutions of the BBC and ITV, towards independent production which eventually led to growing power for an increasingly well-financed and commercially oriented independent sector. With this shift came the growth of a casualized freelance labour market and plummeting levels of unionization, following the end of national collective bargaining in 1988. In this respect, television became more like film. The labour market for film had long been project-based, since the break-up of the main UK studios, notably Rank and ABPC, with heavy use of freelance labour, hired through personal contacts (Blair, 2001).

There are also important cultural factors at work in these industries' labour relations. As Andrew Ross's seminal article on 'The mental labor problem' (2000) shows, longstanding ideas about the value of art and culture have had a paradoxical effect, in that they potentially lay the basis for people's willingness to work cheaply, and even for free. Careers in film and television have been coveted for the rewards of putting together expressive and informative products, and the esteem involved in working in an industry with public renown, even acclaim and glamour.

The consequent oversupply of labour has provided fertile ground for a growth in the use of unpaid labour in the UK film and television industries, notably in the form of unpaid 'work experience'. A survey of 1071 freelance workers by *Broadcast* magazine in 2005 found that 75% had done unpaid work experience – a saving for employers of some £28 million (Strauss, 2005). In *Broadcast's* 2012 survey, 43% of freelancers said they had either worked for free or below standard rates in the past five years, on the promise of later paid work – which in 61% of cases did not materialize (Neilan, 2012). Indeed, while government policy responded (DCMS, 2008) by attempting to create formal creative apprenticeships, the government's Creative Industries Council noted that 'the culture of unpaid internships within the creative industries has ... made paid apprenticeships a hard sell to small businesses' (BIS, 2011).

However, worsening labour conditions in the industries have not gone unresisted. The first part of this article outlines one particularly notable and successful campaign against unpaid labour in the UK television industry. We then show how efforts to mount a similar campaign in the film industry received much greater opposition. The article continues by reporting a survey which confirmed slight differences in attitudes between the two sectors, with workers in the film industry more tolerant of unpaid labour than television workers. We then proceed to discuss a more striking finding: in both industries, those who have worked longer have a much more negative response to unpaid labour than relative newcomers, who more readily identify its non-financial benefits. We discuss some potential reasons for this acceptance, and its consequences for future working conditions.

### **The fight against unpaid labour in television and film**

In March 2002, a small group of freelancers decided to set up an independent web community, the online site 'TV Freelancers' (TVFL). This included a free forum, where members began to exchange views about their employment conditions and ways to improve them. (This account of the campaign is based on the participation of one of the authors of this article, who was involved in establishing the TV Freelancers forum, and on primary interviews with key organizers of the campaign.)

Disturbing first-person accounts of punishing working conditions began to emerge, especially amongst more junior workers, which were later collated for an article for *Broadcast* magazine (Percival, 2005) – for example:

I was paid £230 per week. A week was sometimes the full seven days, and often I ended up working from 7 a.m. to midnight, bringing my wage down to less than three pounds an hour ... (A 23-year-old runner)

I worked 18-hour days as a matter of course and averaged five hours' sleep. The demands on me and the team I worked in were at best ludicrous and yet any failure was punished daily by public humiliation. (A 24-year-old runner)

Another online forum known as TV Watercooler ([www.tvwatercooler.org](http://www.tvwatercooler.org)) then decided to carry an online petition asking the UK government to enforce employment rights for freelancers in television, a petition that was eventually signed by over 3000 workers. Under the name TV Wrap (Television Workforce Rights Advocacy Petition) the petition appeared online in January 2005, and received a major boost on Monday, 11 April 2005, when James Silver wrote a two-page article in *The Guardian* entitled 'Exploitation is more widespread than ever' (Silver, 2005). A further dossier of evidence, gathered from online freelance communities, was subsequently presented to PACT (Producers' Alliance for Cinema and Television – the body which represents UK independent production companies).

Responses followed from across the TV production industry, with reactions from leading industry figures including Media Secretary Tessa Jowell, who promised to take TV Wrap's concerns into the BBC Charter review ([broadcastnow.co.uk](http://broadcastnow.co.uk), 2005b); former BBC Director-General Greg Dyke claimed it was 'time for all the main broadcasters in Britain to lay down some minimum terms and conditions' ([broadcastnow.co.uk](http://broadcastnow.co.uk), 2005b), while BBC chairman Michael Grade responded that 'We need to be sure we work with independents prepared to sign up to an independent ethical employment policy' ([broadcastnow.co.uk](http://broadcastnow.co.uk), 2005a). Changes in policy followed among producers including Granada and Endemol, one of the leading reality TV producers in the UK. *Broadcast's* survey one year after the campaign suggested that 16% of freelancers felt the campaign had changed their working lives for the better (Strauss, 2005).

In the longer term, PACT agreed to renegotiate their Production Agreement for employing freelancers with BECTU (Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union – the key media and entertainment trade union which represents film and TV employees and freelancers) (Dignam, 2005). Most significantly of all, the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) investigated the TV industry and issued new guidelines about work experience and the National Minimum Wage (Skillset, 2006).

When the TV Wrap initiative came to an end, its most active campaigners switched their focus to the low-budget film industry where they felt that the minimum wage law was also being broken. Media union BECTU began objecting to forum postings in online film-making communities such as Shooting People – [www.shootingpeople.org](http://www.shootingpeople.org) – that appeared to be advertising unpaid vacancies on film shoots.

As acrimony grew, the Shooting People community polled its members through their website. The results showed that 76% of respondents agreed that 'Low paid staff like runners should be able to choose an unpaid job on an independent film if they want to.' Shooting People organized a heated debate with BECTU over the issue (BECTU, 2010) at which the polarization of the two sides became clear. Jess Search, the founder of Shooting People, commented in an interview for this article that

creativity is ‘an innate human desire that fulfils a deep need which is not shelling peas in a factory ... you cannot reduce creativity to the business model of an industry’ (Search, personal communication, 2011). The debate can be summed up as follows: some assert the right of all workers to be paid, and welcome the enforcement of the National Minimum Wage as protection of that right; other workers feel they should not be prevented from making their own choice to work for free to advance their career or express their creativity in this way.

### **The survey of workers**

In 2011, one of us (Percival) conducted a survey that began as an attempt to examine why two different sectors of the media industry responded so differently to a campaign against unpaid work. This online survey of over 1000 workers in the two sectors set out to measure ethical attitudes to issues of unpaid work, and to explore correlations not just to differences between the two sectors, but also to other contributing factors.

The survey’s first set of questions was designed to profile the respondent according to a number of variables: these included the sector they worked in, gender, nature of employment, job type, length of time in the industry and nature of productions commonly experienced (in terms of budget and funding model).

The second set of questions was designed to quantify ethical attitudes of the respondent regarding the issue of unpaid work. The survey posited a number of statements of opinion and asked the respondent to rank their agreement with each statement on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 reflecting strongest agreement. These statements consisted of a selection of contrasting opinions for and against unpaid work, which were developed through pilot testing to minimize any suggestion of bias. These included, amongst others:

‘In principle, I believe that asking someone to work for free is morally wrong’

‘The morality of unpaid work depends entirely on the budget available to the production’

‘Productions should offer unpaid internships to make valuable experience available to new talent’

‘I believe in the individual’s right to choose to work for free’

‘If anyone on a production is getting paid, nobody should work for free’

‘For me, working for free was (or is) the only route available to enter the industry’

A third set of questions was designed to elicit personal responses to unpaid work in other ways, such as a ‘word shower’ and an opportunity to provide open-ended, qualitative comments.

The survey was run online, facilitated by the SurveyMonkey website. It was promoted by email newsletters and online postings through a large number of industry online communities and networks in both film and TV sectors, including production guilds, screen agencies, media job sites and unions. A total of 1099 respondents completed the survey, which included 557 from the TV industry, 148 from the film industry and 314 who identified themselves as working in both. Job roles encompassed managerial, production, craft, technical, on-screen talent and post-production, both freelance and full-time employed, including 45 actors, 175 in a production role, 115 in a directing role, 94 in an editing role, 120 in a camera/photography role, and numerous other positions. Levels of experience and annual income are given in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1.** Respondents profiled by annual income.<sup>a</sup>

<i>Annual income</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of cohort</i>
<i>£0–£10,000</i>	121	15.1%
<i>£10,001–£20,000</i>	177	22.1%
<i>£20,001–£30,000</i>	188	23.5%
<i>£30,001–£40,000</i>	175	21.9%
<i>£40,001–£50,000</i>	70	8.8%
<i>£50,001 and above</i>	69	8.6%

<sup>a</sup>Income was not a required field but was provided by 800 of the respondents.

**Table 2.** Respondents profiled by levels of experience.<sup>a</sup>

<i>Years of experience in this sector</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>% of cohort</i>
<i>0–10 years</i>	465	42.3%
<i>11–20 years</i>	304	27.7%
<i>21–30 years</i>	172	15.6%
<i>More than 30 years</i>	158	14.4%

<sup>a</sup>Level of experience was a required field, so these figures are percentages of the entire survey sample.

The large sample thus surveyed is not necessarily representative of the workforce as a whole; in particular, due to the number of respondents (55%) who heard about the survey through the film and TV union BECTU, it is reasonable to assume that the sample contains a slightly higher proportion of union members than would be representative across the sector. Skillset’s 2008 survey of the creative industries workforce puts BECTU membership at 47%; this excludes the film production industry which was separately surveyed at 30% membership in 2007 (Skillset, 2008). This had potential significance considering that BECTU takes an active anti-unpaid work stance, but this slightly increased union affiliation was found not to have had a significant impact on findings.<sup>1</sup> The survey data have primarily been used to carry out comparisons within the film and TV sector workforce, using a number of variables, rather than claim any absolutes across the workforce as a whole; however a number of basic inferential tests were carried out which confirmed the reliability of these correlations in relation to a wider population.<sup>2</sup>

The survey ran online for a period of around six weeks in June and July of 2011. The data were analysed in Excel to determine an average response to each of the statements relating to ethical responses to unpaid work, on the scale of 1 to 10 offered to participants, and then filtered to enable correlations to profiling variables to be identified.

Qualitative data were examined by analysing all written comments and separating out negative and positive comments about unpaid work, as well as identifying other repeated themes. Within Excel, the appearance of each theme in a response was tagged, and filtered, to identify possible correlations with ethical responses or other profiling variables amongst respondents.

The initial filtering of the data was performed by separating out those who identified themselves as working primarily either in TV or in film. Some of the differences in practice between the two sectors are suggested by the key profiling questions in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Key profile questions broken down by sector.

<i>Profiles of respondents</i>	<i>TV</i>	<i>Film</i>
<i>Working mostly on commercially funded productions</i>	85%	49%
<i>Do you ever engage people on an unpaid basis?</i>	17%	41%
<i>Have you ever worked unpaid?</i>	65%	94%
<i>Age – average</i>	43	36
<i>Annual income – average</i>	41.7K	24K
<i>Freelance/self-employed/casually employed</i>	53.2%	75.5%
<i>Income from sector forms more than 80% of personal income</i>	79.6%	45.0%
<i>Proportion of males</i>	62.5%	44.8%

These figures confirm the impression of a film sector with higher levels of unpaid work than the TV sector; as well as a workforce which is younger, more casualized, has a lower proportion of women, and earns less. Turning to ethical responses to statements about unpaid work, the data indicate differences in views between the two sectors (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Key ethical responses broken down by sector.

<i>Statement – rank agreement from 1 to 10 (averages given)</i>	<i>TV</i>	<i>Film</i>	<i>Whole sample</i>
<i>‘I believe that asking someone to work for free is morally wrong’</i>	7.1	6.5	6.9
<i>‘I believe in the individual’s right to choose to work for free’</i>	6.3	7.1	6.4
<i>‘The morality of unpaid work depends on the budget available’</i>	3.5	4.7	3.9
<i>‘I would not take part in any illegal employment practice’</i>	7.6	6.4	7.4
<i>‘For me, working for free was (or is) the only route available’</i>	4.2	6.2	4.69
<i>‘Unpaid work is a good selection mechanism for industry entry’</i>	3.2	4.7	3.53
<i>‘If anyone on a production is paid, nobody should work for free’</i>	7.4	7.6	7.58
<i>‘My sector can sustain production without unpaid workers’</i>	8.4	7.5	7.99

At the level of the whole sample, the majority of respondents broadly claim ethical views that embrace both a disapproval of asking someone to work for free, and support for an individual’s right to choose to work for free. The strongest overall agreement was that the industry the respondent worked in could sustain production without being dependent on unpaid workers, while the next highest – and the closest agreement between sectors – was with the statement ‘If anyone on a production is paid, nobody should work for free’.

When comparing the TV and film sectors, the data show a difference in response across all the questions asked. The difference is variable, from approximately a fifth of a point up to two points difference in average agreement ranking. But it is consistent. In every question the film respondents were more tolerant of unpaid work than those from the TV sector.

What might explain these differences? A key difference between the TV industry and the low-budget, independent film industry in the UK is in their funding arrangements. On the whole, broadcast TV productions are not made speculatively; they are produced on a commercial footing, by professional production companies, commissioned and funded by broadcasters or advertisers. The film industry, however, spans a spectrum of funding models, from fully funded feature-length films using paid industry professionals, through partially funded productions where only certain crew members are paid, to completely unfunded films produced by amateurs for personal pleasure. A common model in film production, for example, is for a small core production team – who are paid – to expand up to a full film crew on a production, by recruiting less experienced crew members, who are not paid, but offered a credit in the film, a DVD of the finished production and personal expenses – an established route to potential more profitable employment.

The television industry and low-budget sectors of the film industry involve somewhat different motivations and expectations. In television, work carries a clear expectation of delivering financial viability in the form of a living – and unpaid work is widely seen as exploitative. In film, however, there tends to be a greater stress on ‘passion projects’, and on aspiration towards difficult or even impossible creative goals. There is an emphasis on the internal goods of an activity where financial viability is desirable but not essential, and even unlikely. In other words, our claim is that a greater degree of film work involves the kind of sacrificial labour (Ross, 2000) associated with artistic production than does television. Perhaps because of a residual commitment to respecting the values of craft production, derived from UK television’s historical protection of craft values, it may be that there is greater resistance in the television industry to unpaid labour, partly on the grounds that it degrades those who undertake it, and partly on the grounds that it undermines the careers of those who have trained hard to gain the skills to work in the industry.

### **Differences in attitude to unpaid work based on production funding and level of experience**

Further analysis of the data showed that ethical responses correlated more closely to other factors, in fact, than they did simply to industry sector. The most significant of these were the production funding model and level of experience.

#### *Production funding*

The production funding model provided the clearest correlation with ethical response. Respondents were given the choice of four options relating to the types of production they most commonly worked on:

‘Commercially funded productions with paid crew’

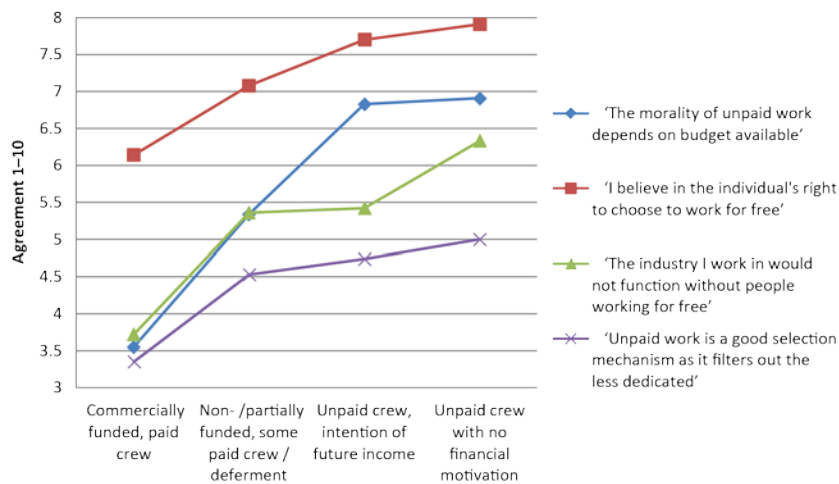
‘Non- or partially funded productions with some paid crew or element of partial deferred payment’

‘Unpaid crew with intention of future income (e.g. deferred payment)’

‘Unpaid crew with no financial motivation (e.g. for pleasure, hobby, creative reasons)’

Figure 1 plots ethical responses from some of the pro-unpaid work statements against the funding model involved, and shows a clear trend: the lower the budget, the greater the tolerance of unpaid work.

Of particular interest here is the response to the statement that ‘the morality of unpaid work depends entirely on the budget available to the production’, which shows the greatest change of response, from 3.5 agreement on fully funded productions, through to 6.9 on unpaid productions with no commercial motivation – the greatest range of responses indicated by any factor within the study. At the unfunded end of the market, respondents are in much stronger agreement that their lack of budget determines the morality of their practice.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1.** Funding model vs tolerance of unpaid work.

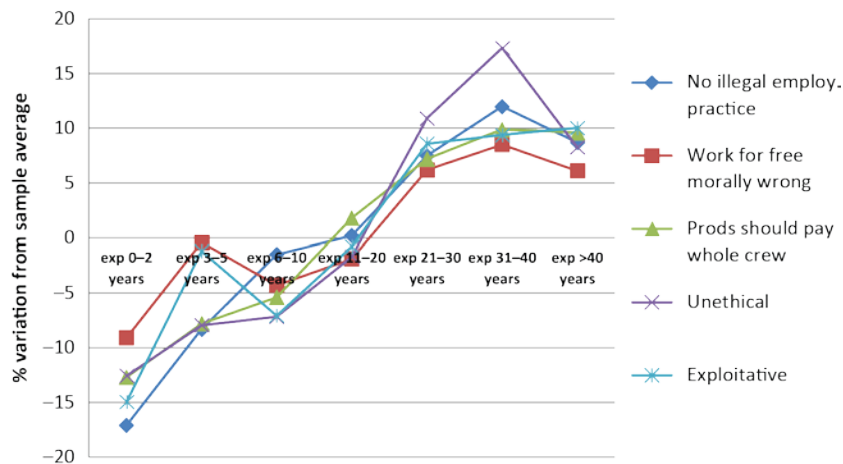
#### *Varying experience*

A more striking and perhaps unexpected factor with a clear correlation to an ethical standpoint is amount of experience in the industry (and, correspondingly, age). For example, when offered the statement ‘In principle, I believe that asking someone to work for free is morally wrong’, respondents with 0–2 years’ working experience provided an average agreement of 6.0; those with more than 20 years’ experience offered a stronger average agreement of 7.6. To the statement ‘The law takes precedence over all other considerations – I would not take part in any form of illegal employment practice’, those with 0–2 years’ experience offered an average agreement of 5.7, while their counterparts with more than 20 years’ experience offered 8.3. The statement ‘Productions should not be made without a big enough budget to pay all the crew they need’ elicited 6.2 agreement from the former group, while the more experienced latter group offered 8.3. In the word shower, 40% of those with 2 years’ experience or less ticked the word ‘unethical’, compared with 65.8% of those with more than 20 years; ‘exploitative’ similarly drew 58.3% as opposed to 82.4%. The data therefore consistently show more experienced workers to be much less tolerant of unpaid work than their less experienced counterparts, as Figure 2 shows.<sup>4</sup>

The data indicate that older workers are less likely to have done unpaid work at any time in their careers – 59.1% as opposed to 84.8% amongst the least experienced. The data also show that the least experienced were much more likely to perceive benefits associated with unpaid work than were their more experienced counterparts; ‘Beneficial’ (38.9% as opposed to 11.9% from the more experienced), ‘Learning experience’ (75% vs 37.8%), ‘Networking’ (58.3% vs 19.8%).

However, an alternative explanation for these disparities is that these higher scores represent an acceptance on the part of young workers of what they feel to be an inevitability. This is supported by the data, which showed 7.3 agreement on the part of





**Figure 2.** Experience vs anti-unpaid work statements.

less experienced workers with the statement ‘For me, working for free was (or is) the only route available to enter the industry’ – while the more experienced group offered only 2.5 average agreement, a difference of almost five points. The least experienced were also the group that considered it the most ‘inevitable’ and ‘necessary’ in the word shower, suggesting that unpaid work has become an increasingly unavoidable entry route (especially in film) over recent years. The young and inexperienced are clearly also aware of the financial realities of unpaid work; 50% of those aged under 24 years considered it ‘expensive’ as opposed to only 7% of the over-50s.

Other significant changes in response from different age groups also suggest clear trends over time; 51.4% of the least experienced considered it ‘Inevitable’ as opposed to 18% of the most experienced; 45% of the former considered it ‘The only way in’ as opposed to only 9.3% of the latter group. Increasing experience also matched a shift across from the film to the TV industry; of those having worked for 2 years or less, 24.2% reported they worked in film, 29.5% worked in TV and 39% reported they worked in both; out of those with more than 20 years’ experience, 4.6% worked in film, 64.2% in TV and 25.1% in both.

### *Less significant factors*

One might hypothesize that different work roles would generate significant variations in ethical attitude. This was tested by dividing the sample into three basic categories based on the job titles given – managerial (producers, managers, company owners, coordinators, etc.), creative (including directors, writers and actors) and technical/craft categories (such as cameramen/women, editors and sound engineers). One unsurprising finding was that only 43% of those in managerial roles were freelance, as opposed to 69% of the craft category and 77% of the creative category. However, differences in ethical responses between the three groups proved to be relatively slight, with only two statements eliciting a variation of more than 10% in ethical attitude between categories: the view that productions should offer unpaid internships, and the view that if anybody on a production is getting paid, no one should work for free. In each case the ‘managerial’ category viewed unpaid labour around 10% more favourably than the craft category, with the creative category somewhere in the middle each time. Dividing the sample by employment status showed slightly stronger correlations, with company owners and freelancers varying by 12% as to whether unpaid labour was morally wrong, and by 15% as to whether productions should be made without a big enough budget to pay their entire crew; but these correlations were still not as significant as those relating to funding model or age, described above.

An analysis of gender shows a consistent trend of lower proportions of women amongst the older and more experienced respondents. Amongst respondents aged less than 24, men were slightly in the minority at 45.8%; those between 24 and 37 were 54% male; those between 37 and 50 were 61.5% male (very close to the average figure for the whole survey sample of 62%); while those over 50 were 81.5% male. In terms of survey responses, women showed little or no variation from their male counterparts in their reactions to ethical statements about unpaid work. However, a higher number of those who saw unpaid work as their only way in were women (17% above the survey average); and out of 54 qualitative comments describing unpaid work as unfair to those less well off, almost two-thirds were written by women (61% as opposed to the overall cohort average of 38% female).

### **Divided opinions**

The survey offered several opportunities for written comment, which revealed a deeply divided set of opinions concerning unpaid work. While some argued strongly in favour of unpaid work as a means of enabling dearly-held aspirations to be realized, creative desires to be satisfied and careers to be furthered, others saw it as a source of abuse that damaged their industry, devalued professionals and prevented social mobility and diversity. Others saw it as a complex issue covering a wide range of situations and circumstances, a grey area that a simple 'right or wrong' could not encompass.

Out of a total of 325 contributions offered in the 'further comments' column, 119 were classified as being overtly opposed to unpaid work in some way, while 66 expressed views broadly in favour. 79 comments identified a non-financial benefit of unpaid work, many of them career-related – ranging from skill development, creative satisfaction, getting a 'foot in the door', building a showreel, securing a future project, feeling a sense of adventure, maintaining or increasing reputation, making contacts, testing a new idea, learning new equipment, or gaining experience at a higher grade.

The comments also suggest how we might explain some of the differences between the attitudes of less experienced and more experienced workers. While this is inevitably speculative, this is an issue that might be explored further in future research. One possible influencing factor is self-interest: more established workers are no longer dependent on unpaid work for career progression (and list far fewer circumstances under which they would consider it), but may also feel a threat to their own incomes from a growing culture of entry-level unpaid work. This view was clearly present, and some qualitative comments, such as the following, made this connection quite explicit:

Use of free labour targets young people and discriminates against older people with financial responsibilities who cannot afford to work for nothing (Production designer, age 55).

However, from many other qualitative comments came a sense of altruism and solidarity, perhaps from workers who entered the industry when principles of collectivism were still at large in both the television and film industries:

I do believe strongly that unpaid work should be carefully regulated so that it is a genuine opportunity to learn and also there should be a mechanism in place across the industry to ensure that unpaid work is accessible by everyone – not just those who have the means to be able to afford to work for no pay. (Production consultant, age 47)

Judging purely from the numbers of comments reflecting different views, sentiments of altruism appear to outweigh those of self-interest. For example, while 26 respondents expressed a view that unpaid labour devalued the work of professionals or made it harder for them to make a living, a further 56 referred to the barriers to entry for those without independent income, while another 39

specifically made reference to unpaid work in a context of injustice, both sets of views suggesting again a collective desire for a level playing field rather than a desire for self-protection. Many respondents described conditions in which they felt work experience could be managed more fairly – suggesting that their desire was not to prevent new entrants coming into the industry, but to ensure that their entry was fairly and appropriately managed.

The qualitative comments also emphasized other shared anxieties. As mentioned above, 26 saw unpaid work as devaluing professional work, while a further 19 said that unpaid work undermined those who depended on the industry for a living. It was felt by 18 respondents that unpaid labour damaged productions and the industry as a whole, claiming that such workers are often not best suited to the work, can impact negatively on production quality and end up badly treated as a result; or that small companies in a tough marketplace risk becoming uncompetitive if they do in fact pay their entry-level workers, perpetuating the use of unpaid work.

As noted above, a total of 56 comments referred to unpaid work as a barrier to employment for those without independent financial means, and this included a small number of respondents who had personally been unable to pursue progression in their career of choice and had been forced to make alternative career choices for financial reasons. However, the opposite argument was also made by some: that if unfunded productions were not permitted, only wealthy companies or rich individuals would be able to embark on productions, since they would be the only ones able to fund productions and pay all their own crew.

These comments suggest that it is difficult simply to dismiss unpaid work as exploitation – or even self-exploitation – when so many workers, especially young ones, are able to articulate clear non-financial benefits from it. It also suggests that the considerable divisions among workers about the issue of unpaid labour may inhibit resistance to it. However, there was one sentiment that was repeated frequently across all production types. 43 comments referred to *fairness within productions*; so that if a production had a budget, or if one member of a production team was being paid, all should be paid. This view mirrored the statistical findings, where this specific ethical statement received an average 7.5 agreement out of 10 across the whole sample, a figure which barely varied according to age, income, sector or level of experience. This equated with a similar view expressed in 31 comments that it is necessary to differentiate between varying types of production, so that the same rules should not be applied to a not-for-profit ‘passion project’ as to a fully funded commercial endeavour. It is worth noting that both the sector trade union, BECTU, and the low-budget film community Shooting People, are encouraging attempts to establish a legally acceptable agreed framework within which films can be made on a not-for-profit basis.

The strongest condemnation of unpaid work was reserved for scenarios where inexperienced workers were expected to work for free while others were profiting from the same production, and a sense of injustice or inequality was expressed in 39 comments. This suggests one area where there is scope for activism against dubious practices, in ways that would gain the consent of a very broad range of workers.

How did respondents feel about the possibilities of activism and resistance? It was stated by 22 respondents that some sort of industry regulation was needed; a similar number expressed the view that unpaid work had expanded to fill a gap left by the disappearance of industry training, or that training had a role to play in reducing levels of unpaid work. A further 17 said that universities and/or high numbers of media graduates were to blame for its proliferation, and some pointed to the naivety of new entrants who became complicit in their own exploitation. But from the statistical responses, the opinion that ‘collective action can bring about change in working practices within the

industry' received a strong 7.5% average support from the sample – with little variation across age groups.

### **Conclusions and implications**

The findings of the survey suggest a certain resignation on the part of younger workers to unpaid labour in the audio-visual industries, perhaps especially in the film industries, where notions of 'sacrificial labour' might be more engrained. Younger workers across both television and film industries, however, also seem to focus on the benefits of undertaking unpaid labour. There are signs among the comments of older workers of a greater awareness of principles of collectivism, perhaps to some degree motivated by their own anxieties about being undercut by unpaid or low-paid entrants, but also reflecting legacies of older histories of craft solidarity and altruistic desires for fairness within the sector. As we have discussed above, these differences between older and younger workers may partly be explained by changes in television and film labour markets, and may also reflect broader social and political changes.

A number of analysts have suggested that workers increasingly tend to see organizations, and jobs, as opportunities for self-development, rather than as sources of commitment (Edwards and Wajcman, 2005). Similarly, in an era of flexible working and individualization, there is perhaps less likely to be solidarity based on shared career paths, occupation and craft skills. Some sociologists have stressed the ambivalent nature of such individualization (Beck, 2000), but one potentially negative implication is that it encourages attitudes where people's (understandable) attention to their own individual self-development leads to a lack of concern for general working conditions, in a way that ultimately harms all workers. In such circumstances, principles of collectivism and solidarity are important buffers against poor working practices. Such collective action may not always have to be based on ethical consensus shared across an industry, but it could be argued that campaigns might best be targeted at areas where such a consensus exists, perhaps uniting older and younger workers. The survey findings suggest such consensus can be found concerning the use of unpaid labour on projects where other crew are being well rewarded, and where there is a reasonable expectation of financial success.

For trade unions and non-unionized lobby groups alike, therefore, the data indicate a clear shared sense of injustice relating to partially paid productions, and a belief in the efficacy of collective action, which may offer both encouragement and focus. More broadly, the discussion above suggests that research and education might valuably encourage a greater understanding of the mutually entwined fates of workers in the same industry. A knowledge of shared histories and legacies might foster principles of solidarity that may ultimately serve to improve quality of working life in the cultural industries, and discourage the worst excesses of unpaid labour.

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### **Notes**

To examine any impact of increased BECTU affiliation in the sample, a separate dataset was created by removing a stratified selection of the BECTU responses to reduce their proportions to those

reflective of BECTU membership across the workforce as a whole. The rebalanced sample showed minimal variations of always less than 1% agreement rating, suggesting that the slightly increased union affiliation of the full sample has not had any impact on findings.

The use of Spearman's correlation rho demonstrated that the relationships between the three key attitude variables (i.e. agreement that morality is influenced by budget, the morality of asking someone to work for free, and rejection of illegal employment practice) and a respondent's age were significant, as were their relationships with length of service. In each case, the significance figure was 0.000, indicating that there is a less than 0.1% risk of error in assuming that the relationships between these variables would be reproduced in the population of all people who had worked in film and/or television. The significance of the relationship between the different levels of funding for production and the extent of agreement with the three key attitude statements was examined using Kruskal–Wallis tests. Once again, the significance figure was 0.000, indicating a less than 0.1% risk of error in concluding that the variables would also be related in the population. The differences between people who had worked in film and people who had worked in TV in relation to the key attitude statements also proved to be statistically significant. In the case of the statement that working for free was morally wrong, the significance figure was 0.016, suggesting a 1.6% risk of error in concluding that the relationship would be reproduced in the population. In the case of the other two statements, the figure was 0.000, i.e. less than 0.1% risk of error.

Amateur 'hobbyist' film-makers should perhaps not be classed as 'workers' within this debate. For them this is effectively a leisure activity, but that gives them a valid place in the range of responses from fully paid worker, through the sacrificial investor in future work, to the hobbyist, in terms of exploring the link between budget and ethical attitude.

We think it is reasonable to assume that experience more or less equates with age, and so we use the two interchangeably here.

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