

Context

A survey by Broadcast magazine in 2011 of 550 UK TV freelancers indicated the uncertainty of a freelance TV career, with only 35% polled expecting their careers to last another ten years, while a similar percentage described career planning as 'impossible' and many indicated a belief that the industry favoured young graduates willing to work for free or at a lower wage level (Parker, 2011).

Writers such as David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker (2011) found that creative labour offered real scope for self-realisation, in ways 'that give [workers] a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives'. But high levels of casualization lead to feelings of 'victimisation and anger... on the receiving end of harsh and aggressive treatment. The authors identified that such careers are vulnerable, and hard to sustain over an entire working career, especially for women; and secondly, the very lure of self-realisation brings about 'an over-identification of the self with work'.

Much research is based on experiences of those still in those industries – for example the excellent article by Wing-Fai, Gill & Randle entitled "Getting in, getting on, getting out..." indicating that many female interviewees anticipated dropping out of the industry or trying to take up more permanent roles when they start a family."

The goal of this project was to reach those who had already left the industry, to find out why they left, what prevented their careers being sustainable, what they did next, and how they felt about their careers through the lens of hindsight. It was not intended specifically as a gender study, perhaps naively, but it very quickly became one; so this took me into a new subject area for me, and I hope you'll forgive me presenting the data in the knowledge that many of you will be able to frame the implications of this data much better than I can

Methodology

This was a particularly difficult group to recruit, since by definition they are no longer accessible via media industry networks. To save time I won't go into the details here of how they were located, but I was able to carry out 61 telephone interviews and run an online questionnaire with 80 online respondents.

Interviews took place first and the emerging themes then formed the basis of the questionnaire questions and options.

Topics included, amongst others:

- a description of career history
- reasons for leaving
- career routes since leaving
- how they found the transition out of the industry in emotional terms
- suggestions of changes that would make media careers more sustainable
- impact of those leaving on the wider industry, and TV audiences

In terms of limitations, clearly this sample is not representative of the population of all workers in TV, and therefore a more negative response is to be expected. Those who expect to enjoy, or have

enjoyed, a lifelong career in the industry are not represented here. Some respondents left longer ago and the issues they raise may be historical. It's also disproportionately female, freelance, factual and non-technical, but as we will see, this is perhaps indicative of the population leaving the industry, if not those within it.

What they did next

After leaving the TV industry, subsequent careers were highly varied and there were many very positive outcomes as well as a few who were still struggling with the transition. A significant number (16) remained in a sector with skills or knowledge transferable from their previous career, such as archive sales, communication, fashion production, social media management, PR, producing branded video content, radio production, and web producing. Some explored roles which provided an alternative outlet for their creativity (10), such as writing (including a novelist), gardening, photography, upholstery, furniture restoring, film-making for charities, and art curation.

Some (8) went on to achieve roles involving therapy or wellbeing – including a child psychotherapist, clinical psychologist, hypnotherapist, mental health support worker, midwife, osteopath, and pilates instructor. 7 went on to start new careers in education, such as lecturing; 5 went on into some form of charity-related work, 3 retired, 4 became full-time mothers, and others individually found roles as diverse as accountant, barrister, customer service, engineering, financial adviser, information management, office management, PhD student, IT project manager, medical secretary, selling children's clothes, relationship manager, working with offenders, marine quality assurance and yacht racing. A number set up new businesses or launched themselves as self-employed in new areas of work – but there were two clear themes here of people wanting to have a creative outlet, if not for their film-making skills, or wanting to see the meaningful difference their work made, through forms of therapy, teaching or charity work.

Why did they leave?

Could respondents select one single reason why they left?

In the questionnaire, respondents were asked if they were able to select one single prime reason why they had left the industry, and were then given the chance to select multiple secondary reasons in the next question. (The choices offered in both questions were the ones that had most frequently arisen from interviews, with an 'other' field available in both.)

15 said they were unable to choose one single reason, but out of the rest who did, the leading answer by some margin was 'incompatible with parenting' (27, of whom only one was male). 6 chose 'Better work/life balance' (not unrelated to the previous answer); 6 chose 'Changes in the nature of the industry' and another 6 chose 'Desire to do something more meaningful'. Perhaps surprisingly, in such a heavily casualised industry, 'precarity/insecurity of freelancing' and 'lack of available work' were each only selected by four respondents as a single prime reason. As 'other' responses, individual reasons offered included harassment and racism, redundancy, lack of career progression, and retirement.

Graphs – as is

What multiple secondary reasons were given?

Respondents were also given the opportunity to select multiple secondary factors influencing their decisions to leave. 'Better work-life balance' was chosen 34 times, while 'Changes in the nature of the industry' influenced 33. Lack of available work, and precarity/insecurity, were significant secondary factors (30 and 21 respectively), while 'Desire to do something more meaningful' influenced another 22. Incompatibility with parenting was chosen by a further 18 as a secondary reason. Although it did not feature as a primary reason for leaving, 'London-centricity/lack of regional work' emerged as a significant secondary factor for 18 respondents, with 'desire to change location' affecting another 10.

Those who volunteered 'Other' secondary factors referred to an inability to develop their career in the desired direction (2), the trivialisation of TV (2), the lack of future in the industry, nepotism, culture of micro-management, feeling under-valued, marginalisation of socio-political content, gender inequality, employers moving, unethical management, sexual harassment, redundancy, being undercut by graduates, incompatibility with relationships, factual inaccuracy, and challenges of being a woman returner.

Women leave earlier

As has been documented elsewhere, there is a lot of existing evidence that women leave the industry earlier than men, but in this sample, the women averaged 12 years younger than men, and had spent 8 years less in the industry before leaving. Those women who gave incompatibility with parenting as the prime reason for leaving left the industry on average 10 years earlier than the average of all the men surveyed. This ties in with a survey I carried out in 2011 which had 1100 respondents from the film and TV industries; for those within a couple of years of joining the industry, slightly more than half were female; those who had between 11 and 20 years experience were 42% female, while out of those with more than 20 years experience, only 21% were female.

What people loved/missed

Despite decisions to leave, when asked to rank how much they enjoyed their time in the industry – from 1 being 'absolutely hated it' to 10 being 'absolutely loved it' - the average for the whole cohort was 7.9 with little variation between sexes. Only two out of 80 scored below a mid-point 5. Here you can see some of the things they missed... although as we will see in a moment there were clearly other factors which were missed as well.

What would have kept people in the industry

When asked if they could identify one single thing that would have enabled them to stay in the industry, the strong majority related to time or reasonable hours, or flexibility of working, and there was a noticeable repetition of a desire to jobshare. Security, pay and valuing/understanding towards mothers also ranked highly in these single reasons. Notably, in interviews, women also identified barriers to returning from parenthood as including this lack of flexibility – but also lack of confidence with current technology, the need to retrain and the lapsing of industry networks.

What people loved/missed

As is

Insights from interviews

The interviews provided a rich and very varied set of experiences, but especially developed themes around family, and around the culture of the industry of lack of care for its workers. 3 aspects of this culture were repeated – not just a barely concealed discrimination against women and their perceived inability to commit to the work, but also a repeated sense (for both sexes) of disposable

freelancers being less important than budgets, and individuals not being nurtured in their career development.

Other common themes (all fairly inter-related) included a downward pressure on budgets, leading to smaller crews, and shorter production schedules; working hours, especially punishingly long days but also in terms of feast/famine contracts for freelancers. Disillusion with changes in the industry included things like shrinking crews (removing some of the camaraderie people valued) , the need to self-shoot, and the introduction of 'edit producers' meaning directors were no longer involved in editing; but also related to the nature of TV programming being commissioned and frustration with having to make trivial programming – with the types of films they got into TV to make, no longer being commissioned.

Family

With the time this morning it's not possible to do more than scratch the surface of some of the themes from interviews so this won't be comprehensive in any way. But this excerpt captures many of the themes relating to family.

Culture

Here you can see the kinds of comments people made in relation to the negative attitudes towards motherhood. The final comment is from a man, but is included because there was also a wider theme of the industry using outdated management practices, which would not be accepted in other industries, and treating workers like commodities and costs rather than people – basically because oversupply and disposability meant that they could. (although as ever there were positive exceptions to this theme)

Lack of role models

There was a noticeable lack of role models for women which came up often – the inability to be what you cannot see was deeply disconcerting for many women, who also clearly commented on the guilt evidenced by those who did attempt to juggle motherhood and parenting.

Working hours

The theme of working hours was omnipresent, as Pere has already discussed with some positive thoughts about solutions. The third comment was a scenario where the participant was making a series about people waiting for organ donation - was on the eve of going away on holiday, and was hosting a party at their house when a phone call came in saying that an organ had been found for one of their contributors.

Other themes

For men and women there were several comments about ageism and fear of replacement by younger workers, at an age that would be considered quite young in other businesses. For some in their fifties and above, this was expressed as not having left the industry, but the industry having left them – and some of the most depressing conversations were where they really felt they had nothing else they could turn to.

Many women expressed serious concern that their voice was being lost to the industry, and therefore was not reflected either in the nature of editorial decisions, but also in the type of programming being pitched and commissioned, resulting in a wider societal impact. Geographic location was a factor especially where childcare in London was not affordable, or moves were required for other reasons, and individuals found themselves unable to get sustainable amounts of work outside London. As expected, precarity/insecurity was also a factor, but not to anything like the

extent I personally had expected; although some participants did find themselves unable to string together sufficient work to make a living, there were more comments from this sample about the drop in income they experienced when leaving, so insecurity related to more unpredictable flow of stop/start work rather than overall lack of income.

More research – identity loss and grief

Read slide first. Identity was very often articulated in terms of how people introduced themselves at parties, before and after leaving, and their profound enjoyment of the interested response to their TV identity suggested how highly they valued this social status – at the same time as they usually admitted the self-perceived shallowness of that enjoyment. Some took several years to stop defining themselves as someone who works in TV, while others were hurt by the lack of interest. Many described a long process of coming to terms with the process of grieving, although the majority ultimately felt positive after they had made it through – but some were clearly still struggling to negotiate that process, a process which has been theorised elsewhere in psychology literature (and there is another paper on the way about that process).

Love and loss

Finishing off with perhaps a slight provocation – but often the language used by interviewees (male or female) was the language of romance, and George Morgan picks up on this tendency towards a romance narrative in his book *The Creative Hoax*. Hesmondhalgh and Baker speak of over-identification with work – but this is also a passionate relationship with your work. If TV is a glamorous, seductive career, it is like the unattainable long-desired partner who promises personal fulfilment and gratification. For the lucky few who gain access, it's as though the desired partner is suddenly, unbelievably within reach. It's the person whose approval makes you feel like a better version of yourself, who makes you feel like you can change the world. It's the person on your arm who turns heads when you arrive at parties, a reaction you love, although you don't fully admit it to yourself; the person who opens doors to people and places you've never been before, the gatekeeper to an elite club of like-minded people. As the honeymoon phase begins, you are eager to commit, body and soul. But before long, you start to realise that this is a high maintenance partner that demands complete commitment; not only that, but one so desirable has many, many other suitors, and if you do not commit 100%, 24/7, you are easily and instantly replaced. Before too long, you realise that your beloved is still on the online dating sites, and the commitment you offered without question is not being returned. You feel less and less secure about your ability to hold the loved one's attention, or to meet your partner's demands. The passion is still there, but tinged with that word's true Latinate sense of suffering and sacrifice. And as you look around, you realise there are more and more people courting your partner, they are getting younger and harder to compete with, that the relationship is more and more one-sided and your needs are no longer relevant. Perhaps you realise your loved one has changed; or you meet someone else, someone you see a longer-term future with, so when it's time to move on, you can part ways amicably and promise to stay friends, with many fond memories of your time together. Perhaps, though, you're still in love, and even though you have to break up, it hurts like hell. It knocks your confidence; you feel diminished, you grieve - even while you blame yourself for putting up with the relationship for so long. You were together a long time. Perhaps you don't know who you are without the other person there, and it takes a long time before you can even admit to others that you are no longer an item. Perhaps you stretch the relationship out as long as you can, until one day you realise – in online dating parlance – that you have been 'benched' or even 'ghosted'; left to wonder why the phone no longer rings and your messages are not returned. Gillian Ursell spoke of TV as a vampire; this analogy takes us more towards the succubus or incubus – perhaps more vamp than vampire. I

stretch the analogy to its limits but only to note that creative labour, at least in the TV industry, is not just emotional labour, but couched in the language of love - and consequently the language and process of bereavement, if love is lost.

Conclusions

- Confirms the hypothesis that incompatibility with family is a major factor driving women unequally out of the industry
- Media Parents and Raising Films – examples of initiatives doing great work supporting men and women back into the industry – but more is needed
- Casualisation and over-supply create disposability, which sustains working practices that would be unacceptable in most other industries – yet they are accepted
- Many very positive stories confirm there is 'life after telly', but the loss of identity is very painful – for both genders