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Precarious creativity: Changing attitudes towards craft and creativity in the British independent television production sector

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Abstract:

This article focuses on television workers' attitudes towards craft and creative practice within the field of factual television production in the British independent television production sector (ITPS). Based on longitudinal qualitative research, it argues that a radical shift has occurred in the professional values that television producers' associate with their creative work, by focusing on ethical and professional norms within factual television production. By considering the historical and contemporary discourse of 'craft' within this area of creative work, the article interrogates the nature of the changes that have taken place. The wider significance of these changes is also considered, through an engagement with theoretical concerns about the place of craft within late modernity (Sennett 2006), and with debates about the changes that have taken place within the political economy of independent television production. The article's findings have contextual significance within contemporary debates about creative work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010). Despite the celebratory policy rhetoric of the 'creative industries' (DCMS 1998), the transformed production environment within contemporary British television has had a detrimental effect on skills retention and development, as well as on the potential for creativity within the industry.

Keywords: creative labour; cultural industries; television production; deskilling

The emerging social order mitigates against the ideal of craftsmanship, that is, learning to do just one thing really well; such commitment can often prove economically destructive. In place of craftsmanship, modern culture advances an idea of meritocracy which celebrates potential ability rather than past achievement. (Sennett, 2006: 4)

This article explores the impact of the material conditions of labour in the British independent television production sector (ITPS) on workers' production values and sense of craft in their creative work. The findings are based on interviews with twenty individuals working in the ITPS across a range of creative occupations. Under the deregulated and commercialised conditions of production in the freelance independent sector, (self-) exploitation is rife for a large number of workers, associated with extremely long hours, stress, insecurity, and a lack of pension provision and holiday pay (BFI, 1999; Sparks, 1994). The freelance nature of television work means that workers must invest high levels of time and energy maintaining a steady flow of work, through networking and socialising (Paterson, 2001). When this is combined with an institutional lack of investment in skills training for freelancers, there is less opportunity for today's television workers to develop production and craft skills. The casualisation of the industry has also produced an ideological shift from *vocation* to *contract* for these workers. The spectre of unemployment haunts my interviewees, forcing them into developing a number of coping strategies. Many of them have turned the process of navigating

risk into a skilled practice in itself, which demands abilities of communication and enterprise which take time and effort to develop.

This article investigates a number of research questions that emerge in this context. What happens to craft and creativity in this creative industry under such precarious labour conditions? Does the imperative to network replace or detract from the need for production skills? How do individuals become skilled professionals, in the absence of job security and institutional training provision? Can we begin to approach the vexed question of *quality* in television, through an understanding of the production values and labour market conditions that are prevalent in the industry?ⁱ

To address these issues, this article analyses prevailing discourses around production values, creativity and entrepreneurialism within the ITPS. It does this by considering secondary literature on the sector and also by analysing interview material gathered through longitudinal research conducted over six months with 20 individuals working in different occupations in the ITPS. It explores how factual television, and its production values and genres, have changed in recent years. It also examines the altered professional status of television workers, which has occurred under the pressures of a changing occupational ethos and the impact of deskilling. Finally, the article explores the implications of this changing production environment on the nature of creativity within factual television production, exploring the decline of craft within the industry, and the impact of commercial and temporal pressures which my interviewees experience.

What emerges from the fieldwork is a set of discursive attitudes towards creative labour that are neoliberal in flavour, favouring enterprise, commercialism, competition, flexibility and individualism. Yet, evidence exists of another competing discourse, promoting values of craft, co-operation and public service. Crucially, the tension between these two discourses is ideological, between competing visions of factual television, its purpose and its future. Despite the celebratory policy rhetoric of the ‘creative industries’, my research indicates that the transformed production environment within the ITPS has a detrimental effect on skills and on the potential for creativity within the industry.

Changing production values: from Grierson to the 1990s

Previous generations of programme-makers learned their skills on the job over years of accumulated experience, in a field where the notion of the ‘apprenticeship’ was institutionalised (Tunstall, 1993). In today’s cost-cutting, commercially driven climate, television workers have experienced a transformation in their professional environment. Individuals are often obliged to pay for their own training, a difficult and expensive task in a fast-changing digital environment (Skillset, 2001). They are encouraged to multi-skill, often filming, directing and editing entire programmes single-handedly. This shift has occurred concomitantly to a wider change in factual television, with the growth of reality formats and factual entertainment, as well as regulatory changes meaning that independent producers are able to profit from secondary markets for their intellectual property (DTI, 2003). As such, the ‘traditional’ values and skills of television production are being replaced by those of the entrepreneur seeking market opportunities for successful global formats.

What kind of production values existed in the past, and what kind of production values can be detected today? Addressing this question requires revisiting the history of factual television as it evolved from documentary television to contemporary genres. Documentary television emerged in the UK in the 1920s as a result of the creative efforts of John Grierson and a collective of filmmakers and technicians who surrounded him. They made up what has become known as the British Documentary Movement (BDM), and included names such as Paul Rotha, Humphrey Jennings, Harry Watt, and Alberto Cavalcanti. Middle to upper-class male filmmakers and largely Oxbridge educated, they believed in the power of documentary to change society for the better and were driven by a 'sense of social responsibility' (Grierson, quoted in Hardy, 1979: 25). Many of these films were shot during the worsening social conditions of the 1930s and World War II, and had a propaganda objective, designed to raise national morale, and to inform viewers of the war efforts. They dealt with social issues, but failed to challenge the social structure that produced such social conditions (Winston, 1995).

Two key ideologies can be seen to guide early documentary: the aesthetic ideology of realism, and the prevailing ideology of culture as an educational tool providing 'uplift' for the 'masses' (Swann, 1989: 176). Realism emerged in the 19th century, and was concerned with the scientific, rational depiction of society, in contrast to the then prevalent forms of romanticism in art, literature and theatre.ⁱⁱ It was a form that had its roots in a radical socialist vision, with a desire for progressive change, giving documentary a social and educational agenda (Winston, 1995: 30). For Grierson, documentary was first and foremost a medium of social engagement – an exalted calling. His was an elitist stance, where 'the elect have their duty', declaring 'I look on cinema as a pulpit, and use it as a propagandist' (Rotha, 1966: 42).

Following World War II, things changed swiftly. First, the emergence of television moved documentary from the cinema onto television. Second, technological advances in filming allowed directors to experiment with smaller hand-held cameras and sound recording equipment, allowing them access to shoot material that would previously have been impossible. This shift was vital to the emergence of the *cinéma vérité* movement in the 1950s, which evolved from the French New Wave, and allowed filmmakers to shoot action as it happened. Third, the rise of public service broadcasting following World War II and the creation of ITV meant that the model of state funding utilised by the BDM altered dramatically. While the work of the BDM was self-consciously 'poetic' and artistic, the form changed as the values of television journalism entered documentary practice. If filmic documentary began as a form of *cinematic essay* - impressionism put to promotional ends; an exploration of the modern through evocative, metonymic use of images and sounds' (Corner, 1996: 2) - then the form shifted under the medium of television and much documentary became more journalistic, a form of extended reportage (ibid).

The shift away from commercial and state funding also had a dramatic effect on the production values of documentary makers working within television (Ellis and McLane, 2006). The Griersonians made films that aestheticised poverty, without asking more critical questions about the causes and effects of social inequality; however, film-makers working in television, although constricted by regulatory and ideological pressures, were able to take a more critical view of social issues by using journalistic principles of examination, critique and analysis. This change from film to television also meant new strictures for documentary makers, as powerful

but implicit norms regarding ‘public interest’ and ‘due impartiality’ come into play, moving documentary into the same climate as news production. As Winston suggests, documentary in this period began ‘encountering problems of non-cooperation from official sources, anxious monitoring from interested parties and potential self-censorship from nervous production executives’ (1995: 23).

The period from the 1960s to the 1970s is often perceived as a halcyon era for television production where budgets were large, schedules were flexible and generous, and there was plenty of scope for directors to make highly personal, single-subject programmes with scope for artistic freedom. This period was seen as television’s ‘golden age’ (Potter, cited in Wattis, 1994). Whilst this evocation of a ‘golden age’ is nostalgic and ignores recent innovations in television, it is instructive to examine the reasons for it, and to explore what has changed. This was a period of high status for factual television production staff. The broadcasting climate was favourable: it was a ‘time of plenty’ in television, where an ITV franchise was once famously called ‘a licence to print money’ by Scottish Television’s Roy Thomson (cited in Crisell, 1997: 108). Job security was high, pay was higher relatively than now and highly regulated, with specified minimum rates of pay and common terms of employment agreed between broadcasters and unions (Saundry, 2001). Moreover, there was a different kind of cultural attraction to working in factual television, as it was a career path that was highly attractive to idealistic progressive graduates with creative aspirations. Nicholas Garnham describes the attraction of working in the industry in the 1960s:

I joined the BBC in the immediate aftermath of the Pilkington Report and at the birth of BBC2. It was the precise moment at which a whole generation of the British creative intelligentsia moved into television because they saw it as a progressive medium of popular education and enlightenment against the background of an increasing radicalization of British politics. (2005: 472)

Furthermore, Paul Woolwich, a senior editor within BBC current affairs, notes:

Twenty five years ago, young Turks embarking on a TV career wanted to work in the BBC's current affairs department with the aim of changing the world. Today they would rather be working on *Changing Rooms*. (Woolwich, 2000)

In the mid-1990s the nature of factual television changed radically as emerging formats gradually became dominant on terrestrial schedules. These were so-called 'reality television' formats: including emergency formats, 'docu-drama', factual entertainment and 'gamedoc' shows which meshed factual formats with traditional game-show features. At the time, these new formats included docu-soap series such as 'Airport' (BBC 1, 1996-2005), 'Driving School' (BBC 1, 1997); makeover shows such as 'House Doctor' (Channel 5, 1998 – present); giving way to social experiment documentary strands in the late 1990s / early 2000s such as *Faking It* (Channel 4, 2000-05) and *Wife Swap* (Channel 4, 2003-09). The reasons for this shift are culturally complex and contested. Some have argued that the turn to 'reality' reflects a democratisation of television (Bazalgette, 2001: 20); others that it is indicative of a 'dumbing down' of factual television output (Dunkley, 2001). Either way, the rise of reality television

represents a significant shift for factual television, connected to new production techniques and production values, undermining traditional analytic documentary's status which suffered a long decline over the course of the 1990s (Barnett & Seymour, 1999). Analysing this change, Corner has suggested that we are in a 'post-documentary' culture with 'a decisive shift towards diversion' (2002: 149) coupled with the 'radical dispersal' of a 'documentary' look across programme forms and schedules. Significant financial reductions in the cost of making documentary-style television have driven its ubiquity across television output, meaning that a 'person with almost no technical skill' can perform this type of filmmaking (Ellis & McLane, 2006: 294). As such there is a vastly extended space for 'factual' programming across the schedules, further problematising documentary's status.

The reasons for this shift lie partly in media policy. Neoliberal governmental policies towards media regulation allowed the introduction of satellite and multi-channel television systems throughout the 1980s and 1990s. By the mid-1990s multi-channel became a reality, leading to the introduction of much greater choice and competition in the industry. As Sparks (2007) argues, during this period 'neoliberal ideology increasingly favoured competition and markets as against the combination of political and cultural paternalism that had dominated the main national broadcasting organisations'. In this context, audience share for the major terrestrial broadcasters has been steadily falling since the 1980s (ibid).

Broadcasters have responded to the economic threat to their business model by forcing through a series of measures aimed at their employees, with the effect of casualising the industry. This has involved moving from predominantly in-house production to subcontracting

production to independent companies, which for many workers involved a shift from permanent, full-time, organised employment to a succession of short-term contracts under precarious and harsh conditions (Sparks, 1994). As factual based programming has dramatically expanded to fill the schedules, budgets have been slashed, and production times significantly reduced (Ellis and McLane, 2006: 294-5). The commissioning focus is on commercial return, and popular formats, rather than on one-off documentaries, which are expensive to make. In this context, production values have undergone a significant shift. In the qualitative analysis that follows I explore the nature of that change, and the implications of it for creativity and innovation within television production.

Commercialising creativity

The commercial imperatives that dominate within the ITPS have created an obsession within independents to capitalise on intellectual property rights. Paul (Assistant Producer, 26) described the need for ‘returning series, series that you can make money on beyond the screen, you know, a book, merchandise and follow ups’. Sarah (Director, 31) argued ‘that the content has changed mainly because television, factual television has become so much more entertainment-driven’. Because entertainment programmes now have much bigger budgets, she contended ‘that documentaries have suffered from the falling away of high production values’.

The impact of this squeeze on budgets is significant. Describing the impact of a compressed production schedule on the making of a programme about Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Sarah told me:

I was expected to start shooting after about 2 weeks. I managed to get it up to 3 weeks. But 3 weeks to find contributors for a film, and bear in mind that people with OCD are so ashamed of their condition... That programme was a nightmare to work on from start to finish... because constantly we were being squeezed and squeezed and squeezed.

Eleanor (Assistant Producer, 37) described how commercialisation had impacted negatively on the quality of individuals working in the industry arguing that 'if you pay peanuts, you get runners' rather than experienced production staff. High production values are put under pressure with the shift towards factual entertainment particularly because programmes are being commissioned and produced by industry figures with a background in entertainment programming, where a different emphasis is placed on core skills such as fact-checking:

Louise (Series Producer, 32): When I was at the BBC one thing that was hammered into me was production values and if you were doing a factual programme you bloody well checked every last damn fact and checked it and checked it and not a thing would go into the script that wasn't absolute. And what I've find in the Indies is that I've had to fight for that, and there's an awful lot of hand waving and people going 'does it really matter, will anyone ever really bother' and I think 'yes, it does matter'.

In the place of established television production values oriented around craft, quality and public service, a new set of values have become dominant amongst television workers, which connect to the rise of an enterprise culture, individualisation and self-promotion (Keats & Abercrombie, 1991). The discourse around creative labour which promotes self-enterprise and

self-commodification sits uneasily alongside these older values. This discourse can be seen most clearly amongst the younger interviewees (under 35), while it is most contested by those over that age (although it appears in both groups, and sometimes is contested within a specific individual). The majority of the younger freelancers expressed the importance of marketing oneself as a commodity in the television labour market. For example, Rachel (researcher, 25) described how 'it's essential to be able to think ahead and market yourself, and plan your next move'. For her, being entrepreneurial 'means constantly talking to people about the way the industry is going, about what companies are doing what, constantly making sure I'm abreast of what's going on...making sure I know what's out there, knowing what the options are for me and kind of making myself more marketable so that I'm more employable'. Jack (Producer, 36) also expressed the importance of being 'proactive', stating that 'to get on in the business you do need a certain amount of innovation, enthusiasm, developing your own stuff, just being proactive basically'.

Crucially, the discourse of enterprise can be seen in the values and language of my respondents. The language used includes words and expressions such as 'opportunity', 'being proactive', 'entrepreneurial', 'making it', and 'drive'. The values of competitive individualism are internalised, and form part of an enterprising discourse that shapes working identities. The promise held out is that of self-actualisation through enterprise and flexibility. This can be seen in the hope that despite the rigours of the competitive, individualistic labour market, everything could be transformed by one big opportunity. For example, Jenny (assistant producer, 30) described the challenges she had faced in her career, moving from short-term contract to short-term contract, interspersed with episodes of temping work, and parental pressure to 'get a proper

job', with a pension and security. However, despite this, she has kept going, because of the prospect of career transformation, in which the phrase 'opportunity' is repeated like a mantra:

You've just got to rise to every occasion, you've got to seize those opportunities, you've got to take those opportunities, you've got to find opportunities.

But while the values of enterprise are powerfully expressed by my interviewees, this is by no means the consensus view. For example, Simon (Producer, 34), argues that talent is still the key factor in success:

I think entrepreneurialism to me is coming up with new ideas and creating new opportunities... I think that for the producer/director that's not what really gets you... I don't think that's what gets you on. I think it's being creative and knowing your job.

Equally, Colin (film editor, 43) stressed the values of co-operation and a mutually supportive network above individualism:

I've never found any of my fellow editors to be competitive... As a bunch, certainly the ones I know, and I know a few, we are always very keen and enthusiastic for our fellow editors to be picking up work. And there is certainly an informal network of you know 'do you know anyone else', 'yes, well I do', and passing names and numbers on.

Therefore, a clear tension emerges in the discourse of my interviewees between the naked individualism engendered by the casualised, precarious labour market on the one hand, and the need to be supportive and co-operative in order to find work on the other. To understand this, it is necessary to consider the changes that have occurred to television workers' professional identities in recent years.

Deskilling and professional identity

The change in production values can be traced back to political changes in the way broadcasting was perceived by free-market ideologues during the 1980s. Before the Peacock Report, the deleterious effects of competition were always traditionally recognised in broadcasting, with the BBC being seen by government as a patron for creative workers (see Briggs, 1961, Chapter 5). This was based on a belief that for the BBC, the task of educating, informing and entertaining the public would be at risk if workers were exposed to a working environment driven purely by market forces. Television production was understood as a *craft*, and creativity as fragile, needing a secure environment to flourish within. This was affirmed in 1977 by the Annan Committee which reported British broadcast products as being 'hand-made by craftsmen' (Annan, 1977: 28). However, this can be seen as the last time that 'Parliament reasserted PSB values with regard to the perceived crucial contribution of broadcast workers seen as "professionals"' (Ursell, 2003: 35).

This all changed in the 1980s under the free market ideology of the New Right. The protected environment for broadcast workers became a target of ideologues, as evidenced in the

words of Sir Alan Peacock, the man charged with leading a review into public service broadcasting in the 1980s:

[W]e received evidence... that the broadcasting industry was wasteful of resources through over-manning and self-indulgent working practices. In particular the cost for productions by the BBC and ITV have been compared with those for independent production which... are cheaper but just as good. (1986: 532)

Then, in 1987, Thatcher challenged the ITV companies as ‘the last bastion of restrictive practices’ (Crisell, 1997: 235) – thus associating the Reithian idea of the broadcaster as craftsman, asserted by the Annan Committee, with trade unionism, which the free marketers wanted to stamp out (Ursell, 2003: 36).

The effect on television production has been dramatic. As Ursell notes ‘there is a question mark about the ability of television workers to produce ‘quality’ output’ where training and time are under increasing pressure (2003: 40). Learning from colleagues on the job diminishes or disappears, as older media professionals are either forced out of the industry, or have no time to informally train younger colleagues. In this highly commercialised climate, the professional status of programme-makers has altered, along with the desired skills base required by broadcasters and production companies. Before the deregulation of the industry, programme-makers, editors and camera operators were able to spend their career steadily accumulating expertise in specific areas of programme-making. As Jack says:

It was different back then [in the 1970s –1980s]. You spent five years as a researcher, another five as an assistant producer, and then you were a director. You spent years learning your craft. There was a career path, there was security and the pay was much better.

This training ensured professionalism within television production of a particular type, one that existed within large bureaucratic organisations such as the BBC, and came with a particular public service ethos. In factual television, the shared ethos, inherited from a long-standing public service broadcasting tradition, was one that placed an emphasis on television's educative, social purpose. However, Richard (producer, 30) noted that this focus on skills and craft was vanishing. Instead he said that '[t]oday, it seems to happen far more by chance and luck, and without the same learning process. Directors today seem to wing it far more; they don't have the same knowledge of the medium and how to make bloody good television'.

A generational difference emerged in attitudes towards production, with my empirical data persistently showing that amongst both the younger freelancers *and* the older owner-managers there was a feeling that the past was associated with 'quality' television, whereas the future was highly uncertain, with high production values under threat. Older television workers have an earlier reference point to previous production values and conditions, whereas the younger ones are more immersed in contemporary commercial values. Although my sample is relatively small, it is interesting that only one of the under-30s expressed any awareness of different production values in the past, whereas all but one of those over 35 years old did.

James (producer, 34) felt there was ‘far more freedom to try ideas out’ in the ‘1970s or 1980s’. Colin talked about the length of time that was spent training individuals in the past, and said that ‘the Beeb expected people who were going to be cameramen or editors to train for five, six or seven years’. For him, that was part of the BBC’s ‘commitment to quality’ which ‘appears to be going out of the window now’. In its place, ‘[t]here is the belief that anyone can film, anybody can edit, and I just don't believe it to be true’. In this context, the past appears to have become talismanic for my participants, evocative of a lost ‘golden age’. Sarah described how new commercial values had become a priority for her, yet the spectre of the ‘glory days’ clearly hangs over her response:

I’m just a little bit too young to remember the glory days of documentary making in British television... I mean ratings have always been a preoccupation but I think now more than ever.

Similarly Paul at 26 also part of the younger generation of production staff - exhibited a clear awareness of older values in programme-making:

...the time frame has telescoped in so much as the kind of landmark programming that people were making in the 70s...and the 80s, you know, things like *Disappearing World* you know, that kind of programming is almost impossible to get commissioned these days... You've really got to be able to squeeze the pennies to offer something for the best possible value.

Therefore, in a discursive sense, the values and production climate of the past haunt the present, showing how the new values of commercialism are far from readily accepted and internalised, but instead are being contested by my interviewees.

Alongside this shift in professionalism, a process of deskilling has taken place in the industry, which has led to an altered professional status. For Braverman (1974), capitalism leads to the deskilling of 'craftsmen' in a number of areas, as a result of an increase in the interchangeability of labour and a decline in the levels of training. In television production craft skills embedded over time have been increasingly eroded, and are now carried out by interchangeable production staff. In factual television production this means that editing is often done by producers, filming is done by assistant producers, as skilled technical production staff become marginalised, and too expensive.

This connects to a broader shift away from the values of 'craftsmanship', with its spirit of 'getting something right, even though it may get you nothing' (Sennett, 2006: 195). The commitment of the craftsperson is missing, the belief in 'doing something well for its own sake' (ibid.: 195, 105). As Sennett notes, 'Understood this way, craftsmanship sits uneasily in the institutions of flexible capitalism... Institutions based on short-term transactions and constantly shifting tasks, however, do not breed that depth' (ibid.: 105). The erosion of craftsmanship in new capitalism takes place at the same time as the erosion of the traditional moral anchor of lifetime workplace identities (Sennett, 1998).

This is clearly the case in television production. Like other professionals, programme-makers are less likely to work in a defined role throughout their working life, and are increasingly likely to work in complex flexible and fluid organisations with the expectation of numerous changes in location and role specification over a career (Johnson, 1995). This trend has undermined traditional certainties about what a career in television involves, as Rachel noted:

To tell you the truth, I personally wouldn't want a job for life. I think we've all grown up in such a consumer society, and we do want the best all the time, and be able to take the best option all the time. No, I don't think jobs for life really do exist, and I don't think we want them to either. Most people I know are planning to do lots of different things in their life.

Indeed, this sense that television is a temporary contract, rather than a vocation, was particularly evident when the freelance group were asked if working in the industry could be a job for life, with the majority expressing that they did not believe working in television could be. For example Jack, who has since left the industry to work in higher education, rejected the likelihood that television work would be a 'job-for-life':

I'd like to find a way where I could combine it with having a life outside of work. So because this is where my skills are, this is the industry that I can actually make a decent living in... But I wouldn't hesitate to switch to something else if it gave me a stable income and allowed me to have more of a home life.

Competing visions of creativity

A powerful tension emerged between individualism and collaboration in this research, which was identifiable in the discourse of my respondents, and which played out in regard to understandings about the nature of creativity itself within television production. The creative process in television, as in many other cultural industries, is a collective endeavour, involving numerous personnel. Negus and Pickering note that ‘creativity arises not from a cultural context which exists in monolithic isolation, but from cultural borrowings and transactions’ (2004: 40). Yet the subjectivity engendered by the values of individualism, and self-enterprise, acts against co-operation, making all social exchanges acts of competition, creating a tension between the values of individualism and of collectivity in the creative act itself. As Born has noted, the casualisation of the broadcasting industry, by attuning workers always to be looking for the next job, has inhibited collaboration and led to the privatisation of ideas and intellectual property (2004: 191).

The instrumental discourse around creativity associated with New Labour has entrenched a view of creativity that is associated with economic growth. Yet many different concepts of creativity exist, forming competing discourses (Banaji *et al*, 2006). The tensions which are evident in my interviewees’ understanding of creativity reflect wider uncertainties, and a broader discursive struggle over what constitutes the purpose and meaning of creativity. Some of them expressed a belief in the primacy of individual talent, suggesting that the Romantic understanding of creativity, which promotes the idea of individual, creative genius remains

powerful and attractive for creative workers. This view of creativity is highly prevalent and often portrays creativity as constantly constrained by ‘institutional, bureaucratic and economic monoliths’ (Negus and Pickering, 2004: 58). Yet such a view fails to acknowledge the sociological nature of creativity, in short the ‘asymmetries of power and resources’ (ibid.) between different actors working in cultural production, which work to reproduce particular tastes and definitions of what is socially constituted as ‘creative’. Others hold on to a particularly public service *neo-Reithian* understanding of creative work and television’s purpose, one fuelled by an implicit ethics of cultural production.

Perhaps most powerfully, however, comes an understanding of creativity which is essentially neoliberal in flavour: individualistic, enterprising and geared towards the marketplace. In this view, particular modes of creative endeavour are legitimated, while others are dismissed as irrelevant. In the neoliberal vision of creativity, creativity is eviscerated, ensuring that the only legitimated forms of creativity are those that produce commodifiable, profitable outcomes and products. Alternative non-commodified creativities do not figure in this creative economy script ‘in part because they are perceived as socially disruptive, but also because they are less easily transformed into (capitalist) accumulation strategies’ (Gibson and Klocker, 2005: 100).

Overwhelmingly my interviewees felt that creativity was under threat within the new production climate. For Simon the commercialisation of television production content has had a detrimental effect on the creative ability to take risks, and to innovate, as it has led to a heightened form of standardisation:

I think what's really happened more as time has gone by, that commercialism has driven people not to take as many risks... and what they tend to do now is if something works everyone else will chase that similar format and repeat it to death, I suppose to keep their jobs for as long as possible, and until it's completely dead then they're looking for the next trend. So commercialism has led to a kind of standardisation.

Other interviewees actually questioned the creative nature of television *per se*, expressing a sense that television has become just another consumer commodity marketed to the widest possible audience:

Rachel: I don't know if television is that creative really.... There is a creative process, but I don't think it's creative like a modern artist is. There's just not that space for it, because you are constantly trying to market to wider and wider audiences, and I think that means that creativity probably has to go down because it's got to have mass appeal.

James, when asked what impact the insecure environment, both for freelancers and for independent companies, has on the content, argued that:

The content becomes much safer. You have companies like October who are doing one-offs, doing the difficult documentaries, making the challenging thought-provoking films who are now finding themselves having to go for the format market in order to be able to survive... there's nothing wrong with the format industry, but what's wrong is that people

are now refusing to risk something because they think something is not going to work, and because they need to fit in with what the broadcasters want.

This privileging of the safe against the innovative was felt to be endemic. This comment from Anita (series producer, 32), a highly successful company owner and series producer, typified this attitude, where she argued that in the current creative climate in television, ‘innovative’ content was seen as outmoded by the broadcasters:

Most of the channels aren't looking for innovative programming. Innovative programming is sort of seen as a bit ‘studenty’. It's not where money gets made and it's not what people are that interested in.

Conclusion

The television industry has become highly commercialised, as a result of multi-channel growth and deregulation. In the independent sector this has been marked by a process of consolidation, the marketisation of ‘super-indies’ in financial markets, and regulatory changes which allow independents to hold on to secondary rights. My research suggests that this is having a significant impact on production values across diverse levels and professional groups within the industry, from younger researchers to established managing directors of production companies.

My interviews explored the impact of this commercialisation on production values, and the implications of this changing landscape in terms of the type of content being produced. All of my interviewees agreed that factual television had indeed become more commercialised, and reflected on how this had affected their careers, and the industry more broadly. Traditional values, associated with 'quality' television, were seen as being under threat from commercial concerns, with my research showing a feeling amongst television workers that there has been a subsequent decline in standards.

A number of my participants have argued that factual television has become more homogenised, and formatted. In this highly commercial environment, broadcasters have become risk-averse, often reflexively adapting each other's successful formats. This echoes the environment that Gitlin (1994) described in his study of commercial television production in Hollywood, where producers nervously reversion successful formats, as a means of mitigating the risk inherent in cultural industries. Today, the ITPS is producing increasingly standardised products, accommodating the logic of the market's demand for successful formats and 'returnable' series.ⁱⁱⁱ In the commercialised world of 'mega-indies' and global competition, increasingly it seems that there is less space for the innovative independent production company. Dave (executive producer, 41) claims that 'innovation is a luxury in this industry'.

The trend towards consolidation and commercialisation would appear to challenge the very principles of public service broadcasting that have been established in this country, creating a situation where, as Dave put it, 'ultimately what's going to happen is that the strongest will

survive. The strongest aren't necessarily those who are the most creatively interesting'. Or, as Hutton (2006) argues:

Broadcasters... are much less confident about building schedules in which the populist and market-driven is mingled with giving audiences television they should be watching because it is good, challenging and important. Everything has to be popularised or given a personal hook; whether the news, a feature film about fatness or documentary about violence in schools, and which reaches its nadir in reality TV. They are responding to 'the market'.

The cultural tensions about production values and quality are also keenly felt at the individual level for production staff. The competing discourses of public service values and commercialisation can be seen at the political, macro level. This conflict is played out in debates about 'quality' and 'dumbing down' within the industry. However, the political dominance of the logic of commercialisation is evident in recent cultural policies oriented towards 'growth' such as the Communications Act 2003. Yet the tension between these two discourses does not just exist in a media policy vacuum, but is played out at the microcosmic level of individual subjectivity within the industry, as the competing values and demands of neoliberal commercialisation, and what Born has called a 'neo-Reithian' attitude in British broadcasting (Born, 2004), can be detected in the language and attitudes of production staff.

Ultimately, the prevailing consensus is with the neoliberalisation of culture, as the 'creative industries' are held up as exemplars of flexible specialisation. The impact on creativity,

risk-taking and innovation is beginning to become clearer after more than a decade of this structural shift in the broadcasting industry. Just as independent companies are dependent on broadcasters for the next commission, so too are workers dependent on the independents for their next job. As Born has noted, this has had a detrimental impact on creativity:

Given the chronic insecurity, the individual freelancer's relations with the current employer became a microcosm of the relations between the insecure independents and the broadcasters: the need to secure another contract militated against risk-taking or originality and towards the need to flow with prevailing trends. (2004: 186)

When Channel 4 was created the Indies produced highly innovative content, because demand was there from the broadcaster, and because of the regulatory context in which those companies were operating (Harvey, 2000, 2003). Now, as public service broadcasting values find themselves increasingly under threat, we find an independent sector that is increasingly consolidated, commercial, and in fact further from being 'independent', as ever more companies are being bought into by commercial investors, who are looking for a return for their investment. The earlier values that inspired the creation of the independent sector, from the Channel Four Group campaign onwards, are under massive structural pressures. In the context of a pervasive commercialism and burdened by short-term contracts, are those working in the ITPS able to speak out, and take the risks necessary for creativity?

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ⁱ The question of quality in television has a long and controversial history within media studies. Questions of class and power lie beneath debates around 'dumbing down' and lowering standards on television. As Brunson has argued, such debates around cultural value easily become embedded in suspicions of their ideological foundations – Quality for whom? Judgement by whom? On whose behalf? (Brunson, 1990: 73).

ⁱⁱ Classic realist texts include George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, the plays of Anton Chekhov, and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which focus on depicting everyday life and events 'as they are' rather than being overtly artistically constructed. For an in-depth study of realism in the nineteenth century, see Byerly (1997).

ⁱⁱⁱ Returnable series are those that are regularly recommissioned by the broadcasters, and run over a number of years.