# Unpaid work in the 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. We discuss possible reasons for this; we also explore 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, television, freelance, 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 subsidise 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). Until recently, however, at least in industrialised 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 unionised from the mid twentieth century onwards (Gray and Seeber, 1996; Denning, 1996). In UK television, as McKinlay and Smith show (2009), national collective bargaining underpinned labour relations in the industry from the Second World War, based on highly centralised craft unions. All this began to change in the 1980s with the onset of deregulation, marketisation and the opening up of national broadcasting systems to competition (Saundry, 2001; Heery et al., 2004; Saundry et al., 2006; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). 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 foran increasingly well-financed and commercially-oriented independent sector. With this shift came the growth of a casualised freelance labour market and plummeting levels of unionisation, 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 not through the roster systems prevalent in the USA, but through personal contacts, and with relatively weak union protection (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 long been seen as highly desirable and, while the reasons may vary from genre to genre, we can identify some key factors: the rewards of being involved in 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 found that 75% had done unpaid work experience - a saving for employers of some £28 million (Strauss, 2005). Hours were often long; an online survey in February 2005 showed only 42% of freelancers working less than a 48-hour week (Dacey, 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 materialise (Neilan, 2012). Indeed, while government policy responded (DCMS, 2008) by attempting to create formal creative apprenticeships, minutes from the 2011 meeting of 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, apparently because of the different attitudes that prevailed in that sector. The article then reports on a survey that was conducted in order to investigate the apparent differences in attitudes among workers in the two industries. As we show, the survey confirmed slight differences in attitudes between the two sectors, with workers in the film industry more tolerant of unpaid labour than television workers. These may help us to understand possibilities for resistance to poor labour practices in the two fields. 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 the spring of 2005, a small number of freelance workers in the UK TV industry launched an influential lobbying campaign called ‘TV Wrap’ (Workforce Rights Advocacy Petition) to protest against dubious employment practices in their sector. The campaign found widespread support and media coverage, especially in its aim to establish the illegality of unpaid work; it, increased awareness about illegal employment practice, led to renegotiated collective agreement and paved the way for legal action. When, however, this group of campaigners turned their attention to the same issues in the low-budget film industry, a large number of film workers objected to what they saw as an attack on their freedom to work for free; the film-making community became divided over an issue that continues to be hotly debated.

TV Wrap had its origins in earlier developments. 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 (anonymously) 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 ; it is also based on primary interviews with key organisers 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 seven am to midnight, bringing my wage down to less than three pounds an hour ... no one could really complain; it was obvious that we were all easily replaceable. (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 the 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 3,000 workers. Under the name TV Wrap (Television Workforce Rights Advocacy Petition) the petition appeared online in January 2005, asking ‘that government makes it clear that the law applies in this sector and that legal sanctions be imposed on companies who refuse to abide by the minimum legal requirements’ (Campaign press release). The campaign received a major boost on Monday, 11 April 2005, when James Silver wrote a two-page article in the MediaGuardian 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) amidst the threat of offending production companies being ‘named and shamed’.

Responses followed from across the TV production industry, with reactions from leading industry figures including Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell, former BBC Director-General Greg Dyke and BBC chairman Michael Grade; and changes in policy from producers including Granada and Endemol, one of the leading reality TV producers in the UK. *Broadcast’s* survey one year after the campaign suggested its impact was significant - if limited. Sixteen per cent of freelancers surveyed said 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 (Dignam, 2005). Most significantly of all, the DTI investigated the TV industry and issued new guidelines about work experience. These advised employers that ‘If an unpaid volunteer becomes subject to a sufficient degree of obligation to undertake tasks just like a worker, or employee, or fulfils an actual job, then National Minimum Wage should be paid.’ (Skillset, 2006)

When the TV Wrap initiative came to an end, its most active campaigners continued to lobby against unpaid work through the TV Watercooler online forum, where they established the SWEAT team (Stop Work Experience Abuse Today). Here, the focus switched instead to the low-budget film industry where campaigners 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) – one of the campaign’s key targets) that appeared to be advertising unpaid vacancies on film shoots.

As acrimony grew, the Shooting People community polled its members through their website. Respondents were asked to choose from two opinions: ‘Low paid staff like runners should be protected from exploitation by never working for anything less than the minimum wage’, or ‘Low paid staff like runners should be able to choose an unpaid job on an independent film if they want to.’ 76% chose the latter viewpoint.

Shooting People organized a heated debate with BECTU over the issue, watchable online (BECTU, 2010) at which the polarisation of the two sides of the debate became clear. Jess Search, the founder of Shooting People, commented in an interview for this article that the two camps are ‘never ever going to agree... we have a completely different economic philosophy; these are the irreconcilable priorities of the working tradesman versus the creative’. Search spoke of creativity as ‘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, 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 a thousand 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 factors including age, level of experience, job type, gender, income, type of employment, and nature of production funding.

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, 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 one to ten, with ten reflecting strongest agreement. These statements consisted of a selection of contrasting opinions for and against unpaid work, which were developed through pilot testing to minimise any suggestion of bias. These included, amongst others:

* 'In principle, I believe that asking someone to work for free is morally wrong'
* ‘It’s morally acceptable to work for free if the production is not going to make any profit’
* '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. For example, a ‘word shower’ question offered a list of words and phrases and asked respondents to tick any which they felt were appropriate to describe unpaid work. The survey also invited open-ended, qualitative comments.

The survey was run online, facilitated by the ‘survey monkey’ 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 also representing art department, costume roles, sound recordists, engineers, composers, electricians, runners, researchers, grips, managing directors, PAs, scriptwriters and others. Levels of experience and annual income are given in tables 1 and 2 below.

**Table 1: Respondents profiled by annual income[[1]](#endnote-1)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Annual income** | **Number** | **% of cohort** |
| £0-£10,000 | 121 | 15.1% |
| £10,001-£20,000 | 177 | 22.1% |
| £20,001-£30,000 | 188 | 23.5% |
| £30,001-£40,000 | 175 | 21.9% |
| £40,001-£50,000 | 70 | 8.8% |
| £50,001 and above | 69 | 8.6% |

**Table 2: Respondents profiled by levels of experience[[2]](#endnote-2)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Years of experience in this sector** | **Number** | **% of cohort** |
| 0-10 years | 465 | 42.3 |
| 11-20 years | 304 | 27.7 |
| 21-30 years | 172 | 15.6 |
| More than 30 years | 158 | 14.4 |

The sample thus surveyed, although large, is not necessarily representative of the workforce as a whole; in particular, due to the large 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 is significant considering that BECTU takes an active anti-unpaid work stance. However, this slightly increased union affiliation was found not to have had a significant impact on findings.[[3]](#endnote-3) 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 as a representative sample across the workforce as a whole.

The survey ran online for a period of around six weeks in June and July of 2011, and data gathered from the survey were then downloaded as an Excel spreadsheet. The data were analysed to determine an average response to each of the statements relating to ethical responses to unpaid work, on the scale of one to ten 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 in 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**

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

These figures confirm the impression of a film sector with higher levels of unpaid work, and of non-commercially funded productions, than the TV sector; as well as a workforce which is younger, more casualised, has a lower proportion of women, earns less and from more sources. Turning to ethical responses to statements about unpaid work, the data indicate differences in views between the two sectors:

**Table 4: key ethical responses broken down by sector**

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

When comparing the TV and film sectors, the data show adifference in response across all the questions asked. The difference is sometimes slight, sometimes marked - varying 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 television industry and the low-budget, independent film industry in the UK is in their funding arrangements. On the whole, 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. For many seeking entry to the industry, such unpaid jobs are an established route to potential more profitable employment.

The television industry, and low-budget sectors of the film industry, while they represent very similar forms of production and skill sets, 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 (Search’s ‘innate human desire’). 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 work in the industry.

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

The difference between sectors revealed in the survey, while consistent, is sometimes relatively slight. 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:

* ‘Commercial 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 (eg deferred payment)’
* ‘Unpaid crew with no financial motivation (eg 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. At the unfunded end of the market, respondents are in much stronger agreement that their lack of budget determines the morality of their practice; while those with higher budgets are less prepared to consider budget as being a determining factor in their ethical stance.[[4]](#endnote-4)

***Varying experience***

A more striking and perhaps unexpected factor with a clear correlation to 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 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. Further differences emerged when examining the words which respondents associated with unpaid work experience. 40% of those with two 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.[[5]](#endnote-5)

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. Perhaps because a higher proportion of younger workers have been involved in such unpaid work, the data 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% versus 37.8%), ‘Networking’ (58.3% versus 19.8%).

However, an alternative explanation for these disparities is that these higher scores represent an adaptation on the part of young workers to what they experience as an inevitability. This is supported by the data, which showed 7.3 agreement on the part of 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 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. Increasing experience also matched a shift across from the film to the TV industry; of those having worked for two years or less, 24.2% considered they worked in film, 29.5% worked in TV, and 39% considered 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.

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).

### 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, circumstances and grey areas 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 discrepancies noted above, 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, 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 qualititative 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 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 emphasised 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. 18 felt that it damaged 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.

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 their career of choice 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 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 statement received an average 7.5 agreement out of 10 across the whole sample, barely varying according to age, income, sector or level of experience. This equated with a similar view 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, in ways that would gain the consent of a very broad range of workers, both less experienced and more.

How did respondents feel about the possibilities of activism and resistance? The qualitative comments throw some light on this. 22 respondents said they felt that some sort of industry regulation was needed; a similar number expressed the view that unpaid work had filled a gap left by the disappearance of industry training, or that training had a key role to play. A further 17 said that universities and/or high numbers of media graduates were to blame for proliferation of unpaid work, and some pointed to the naivety of new entrants who did not have any sense of the issues involved, thereby becoming 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, especially in the film industries, where notions of ‘sacrificial labour’ might be more engrained. Younger workers across both television and film industries, however, seem to focus on the benefits for individuals 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 they may also reflect broader social and political changes.

A number of analysts have pointed to the way in which workers tend to see organisations, 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 individualisation, 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 individualisation (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 individuals that might be involved in the industry. 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 in negative views concerning the use of unpaid labour on projects where other crew members are being well rewarded, and where there is a reasonable expectation of financial success.

For trade unions and non-unionised 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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1. Income was not a required field but was provided by 800 of the respondents; figures in table 1 are based on this sample. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Level of experience was a required field, so these figures are percentages of the entire survey sample. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 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 one percent agreement rating. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Amateur ‘hobbyist’ film-makers should perhaps not be classed as ‘workers’ within this debate. For them this is effectively a leisure activity, but that is relevant to the discussion; it gives them a valid place in terms of exploring the link between budget and ethical attitude. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. We think it is reasonable to assume that experience more or less equates with age, and so we use ‘older’ and ‘younger’ interchangeably with ‘more experienced’ and ‘less experienced’. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)