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Article:

Portraying poverty: The economics and ethics of Factual Welfare Television

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Abstract

Since 2013 there has been an explosion of a new genre of factual programming on British television that centres on the everyday lives of people claiming benefits. The emergence of Factual Welfare Television (FWT) has coincided with intensifying public and political debates about poverty and the British welfare state, and has proved a deeply controversial and contested genre. While programme-makers have argued that FWT fulfils a public service mandate to inform audiences, critics have accused producers of making inaccurate, provocative and unethical television. Sociological enquiries into FWT have focused on the representations within these programmes and audience reception, arguing that these contribute to hardening anti-welfare sentiment. This article presents a complementary and urgent line of enquiry into FWT, locating it squarely within the conditions of its production by including questions of cultural labour, diversity in the workforce, and increasing competition and deregulation within broadcasting. We argue that market logics governing broadcasting discipline cultural workers and contribute to the production of reductive and stigmatising representations of social class and poverty. In doing so, we offer new insights into relationships between television production, representation and – consequently – consumption.

Keywords: austerity, cultural work, cultural production, diversity, factual television, poverty porn, reality television, social class, welfare

Introduction

In 2013, a new genre of popular factual programming exploded on British television, what we call here Factual Welfare Television (FWT). Centred on the everyday lives of people in poverty and receiving state benefits, it includes programmes such as *Benefits Street* (Channel 4 2014 2015)*, On Benefits and Proud* (Channel 5 2013), *We All Pay Your Benefits* (BBC1 2013) and *Britain's Benefit Tenants* (Channel 4 2015). The emergence of FWT has coincided with an intensifying public debate about poverty and welfare in Britain and a radical project of welfare reform following the 2008 global economic crisis and subsequent implementation of austerity measures. Introduced by the Coalition (2010-2015) and now Conservative (2015-present) government, this reform project has involved a vast swathe of public spending cuts and a drastic reduction of public expenditure on working-age benefits in an attempt to address so-called 'welfare dependency' and create a 'leaner' state. Described as 'the deepest and most precipitate cuts ever made in social provision' (Taylor-Gooby 2013), these reforms have had a disproportionate impact on already-vulnerable groups (Duffy 2013; Bennett and Daly 2014).

Against this backdrop, FWT has become a mainstay of most broadcasters and many programmes have attracted record viewing figures. For example, the first series of *Benefits Street* delivered Channel 4 over 5.1 million viewers, the highest the channel had attracted for at several years (Kanter 2014). Yet, this genre has also been deeply contested and controversial. Programme-makers and commissioners have argued that FWT fulfils an important public service mandate to 'inform' and educate, respond to public concern around welfare (Ofcom 2014), and 'raise provocative questions about what kind of safety net the poorest should have' (Alcinii 2016). In contrast, critics have described FWT as exploitative, inaccurate and entrenching damaging myths about those in poverty, with some labelling it as 'poverty porn' (Broady 2015; Church Action on Poverty 2015). By 'compound[ing] stereotypes by pitting deserving against undeserving poor' (Scott-Paul 2015) some programmes have been accused of contributing to a hardening anti-welfare sentiment among the general public. Indeed, whilst public support for social security usually *increases* in the aftermath of recession, this support in fact *declined* after 2008-2009 (Taylor-Gooby 2013). Some have proposed that such unprecedented reversals in public attitudes

towards welfare have been amplified by virulent welfare myths circulating across policy and the media (Hills 2015).

The genre of FWT – and surrounding debates – has occasioned a fascinating reflexive moment within the industry regarding the ethics and economics of popular factual television. This moment has reanimated longstanding academic debates about how television, as a representational form, intersects with, and (re)produces, wider classificatory systems and modes of producing social inequality (Biressi and Nunn 2008; Wood and Skeggs 2011). In this article, we situate FWT as a productive site to (re)examine the relationship between inequalities (in this case, social class) and cultural production, representation and consumption.

While a burgeoning body of sociological work has examined FWT representations (and to a lesser extent, audience reception), this article locates FWT squarely within the conditions of its production. In shifting the spotlight to questions of production and cultural labour, we follow calls for analyses of cultural representations that critically interrogates the 'epistemological effects' – or consequences – of their production: that is how production processes shape the ways in which 'difference' is represented and understood (Saha 2012; Gray 2016). Thus we consider how market logics governing cultural production discipline cultural work *and* cultural workers, shaping how poverty, social class and welfare come to be represented and consumed by the broader public.

We begin by situating FWT within the genre of reality television, and consider how FWT extends television's class-making project within the context of austerity. We introduce some of the existing analysis of FWT representations upon which this article builds and discuss our methodology.

Situating the contested terrain of FWT: Television's class politics

Having proven its popularity through record viewing figures, its ability to generate attention in other media sites, and its purchase on political and public debate, FWT has emerged as a growing and fast-mutating genre of popular factual programming. Several programmes have been commissioned for further series, accompanied by related 'event' television (e.g. *The Big Benefits Row: Live*), and franchised outside the UK. FWT is a contested, inventive and mobile genre which encompasses various formats, from docusoaps (e.g. *Britain's Benefit Tenants, On Benefits and Proud,*

Benefits Street) to more conventional documentary (e.g. *Battling with Benefits,* BBC One Wales, 2016; *Don't Cap My Benefits*, BBC, 2014*)*, as well as hybrid 'gamedoc' formats (e.g. *Benefits Britain 1949*, Channel 4, 2013; *The Great British Benefits Handout*, Channel 5, 2016-) and 'celebreality' (e.g. *Celebs on Benefits: Claims to Fame,* Channel 5, 2015). Some of these examples arguably aim to expose structural injustices of the political present through more classic observational documentary traditions, while others work by generating scopic pleasures of moral judgement, re-invented for the austerity period (Jensen 2014).

Despite its promises to open a documentary window onto everyday life 'as it happens' and foreground 'ordinary' people in unscripted situations, the genre of 'reality' television has, at best, an uneasy relationship with the principles of factual documentary (Murray 2009; Corner 2002). Biressi and Nunn (2008) argue that as reality television 'altered the terrain' of factual programming, 'importing a new kind of televisual grammar, [and] establishing new priorities for programme-makers and different expectations in viewers' (2008: 2). Critical scholarship has exposed how reality television, in its claim to 'realness', assembles powerful forms of 'class-making', judgment and devaluation, at a time when the vocabularies of social class are denied and euphemised (Wood and Skeggs 2011).

Similarly concerned with the 'class politics' of FWT, a body of sociological literature has interrogated FWT representations for their 'truth claims' and ideological effects. This work argues that far from simply 'documenting' life on benefits, FWT actively *shapes* public understandings of poverty and benefits claimants, and that it largely does so in problematic and limited ways. While we do not have space to fully detail the range and depth of this work, we briefly outline some of this scholarship including our own. Shildrick et al (2014) draw upon extensive empirical research with disadvantaged communities to contest the claims of 'intergenerational worklessness' that underpin FWT programmes. Jensen (2014) explores how FWT programmes such as *Benefits Britain 1949* employ a gamedoc format to create opportunities for voyeurism and moral judgment of benefit claimants. Exploring one of FWT's most controversial programmes, *Benefits Street,* Allen et al (2014) consider the gendered politics of the representations of, and public reactions to, its main protagonist Dee Kelly (or 'White Dee'). These included criticism of Dee's 'worklessness', but also more empathetic readings oriented around investments in gendered forms of labour and care that are under threat within neoliberal austerity. Crossley and Slater (2014)

and Jensen and Tyler (2015) theorise FWT as part of a wider cultural machine that generates stigma and incubates 'anti-welfare commonsense' through which public consent for increasingly punitive directions in policymaking around welfare is achieved.

Indeed, these programmes are not only explicitly cited by politicians as 'evidence' of so-called 'welfare dependency' and thus the need for welfare reform (see e.g., comments made by Iain Duncan Smith MP in Wintour 2014, and Phillip Davies MP in Cooper 2014). They also offer an 'index of crisis' (Hall et al. 1978) or set of ideological inflections and representational figures which animate and provoke contemporary anxieties around the welfare state (Hall and O'Shea 2013) and seek to explain poverty through individual pathologies (poor choices, irresponsibility and laziness). The result has been a limited (but dynamic) repertoire of frameworks and figures – such as the 'benefit scrounger' or 'dole cheat' - that may be used to justify future withdrawals of welfare. We note the abundant use of the term 'benefits' in the titles of FWT programmes, which in itself highlights that 'welfare' is not a neutral term (Baumberg et al. 2012; Stanley 2016) and how reality television marshals particular textual meanings in its workings as a classificatory apparatus.

Skeggs and Woods argue that it is crucial to understand television's interventions into class formations, 'particularly at a time when political rhetoric is diverting the blame for structural inequality onto personal, individualised failure' (2011: 2) and public attitudes towards welfare are hardening. Extant scholarship on FWT, cited above, has largely attended to its representation and to a lesser extent audience reception (McGlashan 2014). While this work is valuable, as yet the production processes behind FWT have been left unexamined. Responding to Imogen Tyler's claim that 'when undertaking class analysis it is inadequate to examine television media either in terms of programme content or audience preferences alone' (2015: 505), this article pursues a complementary and urgent line of enquiry into FWT that locates it within the transforming political economy of cultural work.

This article is especially concerned with the perspectives of cultural workers involved in making or commissioning of FWT. What values and discourses do they use to scaffold and defend their work? How do cultural workers frame and position the ethics of producing television about welfare and poverty? What economic agendas underpin production decisions and procedures? To address these questions, we analyse two public debates that were organised in response to the controversy

surrounding FWT: the Guardian Edinburgh International Festival (GEITF) panel '"Poverty Porn"? Who Benefits From Documentaries on Recession Britain?' (2013), and an event held by the BBC and anti-poverty organisation the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (BBC/JRF) entitled 'Poverty: who benefits?' (2015). These events were attended, promoted and organised by the industry, and speakers (ranging from senior level commissioners and producers) were invited to formally respond to the criticism levelled at the genre, and prepare and deliver their responses to those attending the events and watching them online afterwards.[i]

These public debates offer a context-specific and partial perspective into the conditions of FWT production. We recognise that alternative methodologies would generate different insights into cultural workers' views and production decisions, and we return to these issues in the conclusion. We are specifically interested in these public debates as reflexive events that offer valuable insights into the officialising discourses used by those within the television industry to frame the programmes they make and the decisions underlining them. We approach these neither as revelations of the 'truth' of cultural production nor simply the 'opinions' of specific individuals per se. Rather we are interested in what these discourses can tell us about the *governing logics* of cultural production and cultural producers including issues of workforce diversity, precarity and cultural labour, and competition and deregulation within broadcasting. For example, elsewhere Murray (2009: 69) demonstrates how television networks 'package' reality television programme in different ways – as socially engaged and informative, or as 'entertaining' – to 'endorse or authenticate a particular television text and to attract an audience'. Likewise, we are interested in identifying the 'rhetorical stances' that are used in these public-facing events to 'narrativize' and 'package' FWT, as industry figures were called to respond to controversies it generated around its ethics, function and impact. We suggest that these offer valuable insight into how the industrial conditions of broadcasting shape FWT production practices and decisions, so that *particular* scripts about poverty, class and welfare become prioritised.

'You don't need to be from a council estate to make a series about life on a council estate': Television workers, social class and 'diversity talk'

Oakley and O'Brien (2016: 3) argue that 'cultural products matter because they shape how we understand ourselves and our society and thus the question of who gets to make cultural products is a profoundly relevant one.' Thus, when considering why and what kind of FWT representations are made, it is imperative to consider *who* gets to be a cultural producer. It is now well-established that the television workforce, like many other creative and cultural industries sectors in Britain, is not representative of the diverse audiences it seeks to serve, and is marked by gender, ethnic and social class inequalities (Conor et al. 2015; Creative Skillset 2014; DCMS 2015). In regards to the latter, the preponderance of internships and unpaid work, precarious and unstable patterns of work, and informal recruitment practices make it difficult for individuals from less privileged class backgrounds to access or sustain careers in the sector (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2012; Randle et al. 2014). With 15% of TV industry workers having attended independent or fee-paying schools (compared to the national average of 7%) (Creative Skillset 2014), policymakers have identified the sector's 'social mobility problem' and the need to widen access to the profession (SMCP 2014). Relatedly, concerns have been raised that the disproportionally middle-class composition of the sector adversely impacts upon the type of media that gets made (House of Commons 2015; Muir 2015).

As this Special Issue attests, discussions about diversity in cultural work have reached a higher pitch recently and so it is unsurprising then that these have infused the critiques levelled at FWT as well as industry responses to these. However, this 'diversity talk', and the work that it does, requires unpacking. To begin this analysis we turn to a speech given by independent television executive Tim Hincks:

> I don't buy the poverty porn debate, I think that's overblown, hysterical, I think these are extremely well-made shows. But, there's an issue isn't there, we get a bit exposed when it comes to shows like these. There's a weak spot that we have that hampers programme-makers and broadcasters and it's an industry-wide problem [that] goes beyond *Benefits Street*. The thing that makes us feel uncomfortable about shows like that, it's got nothing to do with the creative intent or the quality which is remarkable, what makes us feel uncomfortable about them is that they feel like shows made by middle-class people about working-class people. And the reason that makes us feel uncomfortable is because it's true. (Hincks 2015)

This discussion of the industry's 'class problem' reflects the complexity of industry responses to discussions about its class composition. Hincks explicitly acknowledges a discrepancy between the middle-class programme-makers of FWT and the 'working-class people' represented within and consuming them. Yet through careful rhetorical manoeuvring, the seriousness of this particular debate is diminished; it is declared 'overblown', 'hysterical' and inconsequential to the 'remarkable' quality of the programmes themselves.

This dual acknowledgement *and* disavowal of televisions' 'class problem' may be understood as what Ahmed (2006) describes as the *non*-performativity of diversity talk within public institutions such as universities. She argues that in claiming to be committed to diversity, these speech acts in fact block action: diversity commitments 'get stuck', failing to bring about the effects to which they pledge action. Hincks' statement unwittingly deflects critical discussions about the politics of workforce composition; both signalling a set of ethical principles held by the industry that point towards action (such as a commitment to diversity and fair representations), and simultaneously diminishing the 'problem' of class composition in the television workforce. Like gender and race, social class is taken into account to be repudiated (McRobbie 2009). As we have examined elsewhere, such diversity talk becomes another way to conceal inequalities within the cultural industries (Allen et al 2012).

This process of repudiation or 'overing', whereby there is an assumption that someone is 'over' a critique and in turn works to assume they are 'over' the issue that has been critiqued (Ahmed 2012: 179), is reflected elsewhere within industry discussions about FWT as this excerpt from the GEITF panel demonstrates:

> Elaine Bedell (Director of Comedy and Entertainment, ITV): One of the things we should address is that, listening to us all, we clearly… *do* we all know people on benefits? I mean I guess our backgrounds are not necessarily the same as those people we're talking about. Um, Emma, I assume you're not [long pause] from a council estate?
>
> Emma Cooper (Documentaries Commissioner, Channel 4): No but my father is and the whole of one side of my family lives on an estate so it's not too

much of a stretch. But yes I do feel that part of these debates gets very po-faced and very middle-class. That's a bit stereotypical.

Stevie (Participant/ contributor, Nick and Margaret: We Pay Your Benefits): But you don't have to be on a council estate to be on benefits….

Elaine Bedell: No what I meant was, are the people making these programmes sufficiently in touch with the people they're portraying or is there a sort of.... I mean television is a very, very middle-class organisation… to what degree are we making these shows with real empathy or to what degree are we just turning the cameras on them? […] Is it just exploitation?

Katie Buchanan (Executive Producer, Skint, Keo Films): I think as filmmakers part of what you do is you go and discover worlds that you don't know… *Keo* make films in jungles and rubbish tips. Have we grown up on a rubbish tip? No. But can we make a film there? I think if you can…listen and be empathetic and learn to understand and convey what people tell you then I think you can […] That's what filmmakers do. You can't say you can't make a film about murderers if you haven't murdered someone. You make films about worlds you're interested in.

Again, we see how the wider debate about the television workforce's 'class problem' is *explicitly* acknowledged by the sector as it responds to criticisms of exploitation and misrepresentation. This appears to be an important step-change within the industry. While of longstanding interest within the sociology of cultural work and cultural production, class inequality within cultural work has historically been an issue that the industry has appeared reluctant to acknowledge, and at least unsure of how to address. However, while class is now 'on the agenda', this is not necessarily 'progressive' per se. In the extracts above, there is important rhetorical work being done in this diversity talk. We wish to draw attention to two key mechanisms through which questions of privilege and social distance are downplayed, and – consequently – crucial discussions about the media's class politics are shut down.

First, there is an alignment with values of documentary filmmaking that emphasise journalistic integrity, objectivity and empathy. Kate Buchanan dismisses

the claim that there must be a shared experience or identity between the cultural producer and their subjects to produce 'authentic', authoritative representations. The social distance between those making FWT and those depicted on screen is presented as (already) resolved by the skilled and reflexive filmmaker who can work productively and ethically with this distance.

Yet, comparing the filming of welfare claimants to filming subjects living in 'jungles' or on 'a rubbish tip' is telling. In seeking to 'document' the lived realities of surviving on welfare benefits, FWT reproduces the conceits of reality television formats that construct 'ordinary people' as, *in themselves* 'signs of the real' (Biressi and Nunn, 2008: 4). In so doing, this genre recycles a particular anthropological gaze upon (allegedly) hidden worlds – a key feature of reality television – whilst simultaneously disavowing any consideration of the politics of exposure that underpin such a gaze, or the socio-political climate that generate this representational focus on welfare and poverty. As Kaplan (1997) notes: 'the gaze of the colonialist refuses to acknowledge its own power and privilege: it unconsciously represses knowledge of power hierarchies and its need to dominate, to control' (1997: 79). In downplaying the unequal power relationships between the programme-maker and subject, cultural workers simultaneously deny how the production decisions they make can encourage viewers to take up a 'middle-class gaze' (Lyle 2008) through which working-class participants are produced as abject other to the 'good' and 'moral' neoliberal subject, and in need of transformation (Wood and Skeggs 2011).

Second, the claims of proximity with on-screen participants – here made through cultural workers' reference to their own family histories of poverty – work to disavowal class in another way. To illustrate this, we turn to another TV executive in which he explains the popularity of FWT as a product of austerity and its discontents:

> I actually think it's really worrying when it feels like somehow these people are so far removed from who we are. I don't think you need to be from a council estate to make a series about life on a council estate. But I do think it gets dangerous when we treat the issues of those people's lives as though they're almost a different species from us.... Fundamentally we all in the recession … we all worry about money… the economy is up and down and so what you're watching unfold is an extreme sense of what we're all feeling

which is that we're all in uncertain times. (Tom McDonald, Commissioning Executive for Documentaries & Science, BBC)

Claiming that 'we're all in uncertain times', or referring to familial experiences of poverty as in Emma Cooper's response earlier, denotes a sense of commonality between differently classed subjects. In some respects, this can be viewed as a welcome gesture, one that seeks to generate an inclusive 'common ground' or shared experienced between more privileged cultural producers (or audiences) and people experiencing poverty or claiming benefits. Yet such claims also erase the very significant differences in how precarity materialises in people's lives. As discussed earlier, austerity has had a disproportionate impact on already-vulnerable populations. While the working conditions of the middle-class have been affected by transformations in the economy, the working classes are disproportionately concentrated in the kinds of insecure, low-paid, casualised jobs that have dramatically increased since the crisis (Shildrick et al 2012; Warren 2014). By constructing austerity as a crisis that has generated *universal* precarity and uncertainty, these significant differences are erased. Again, our aim is not to single out individual cultural workers but to problematize the rhetorical mechanisms that work to (perhaps unwittingly) downplay the uneven experiences of precarity and consequences of austerity. Inequality is thus constantly slipping 'out of view' in the processes through which poverty is represented and understood. [ii]

This disavowal discourse also flattens out differences *between* cultural workers, reproducing the myth that *all* cultural workers are *equally* precarious. As we discuss in the next section, precarity as an aspect of cultural work is widely acknowledged. However, not all cultural workers experience precarity uniformly, and the extent to which this impinges upon their autonomy as cultural producers varies. There are considerable differences between, for example, the commissioners of a programme and the freelance junior researchers or casters working on it (Mayer 2014; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). Thus, not only do claims of a universalised precarity obfuscate these differences in power *among* cultural workers. They also become a disciplining tool that constrains what kinds of media representations are *imaginable*. Precarity within the television industry is a significant issue (as we discuss in the next section) But what do claims of universalised precarity and disadvantage 'do' within this context, specifically when they are spoken by senior industry figures with

significant symbolic power? What discussions do these open up and shut down? To claim your labour is precarious signals a constraint impinging on ethical practices outside of one's control. It is akin to the gesture of 'the shrug' through which responsibility for the kinds of representations commissioners and producers make is abdicated.

So far we have demonstrated some of the issues of representation engendered by a disproportionally privileged workforce. However, we seek to trouble overly-simplistic claims of a mechanistic relationship between *who gets hired* and *what media they make*. To do this, the next two sections shift the critical lens to the conditions of cultural production out of which these representations emerge.

Creating a 'Buzz': Cultural production in uncertain times

The debates around FWT and its impact (intended or otherwise) capture some longstanding tensions that have characterised popular factual television. As FWT programme-makers have defended themselves against criticisms of 'malign intent' (Deans and Plunkett 2014), they have mobilised both classic 'documentary' aspirations to educate and reveal 'truth', and what Corner (2002) calls 'post-documentary' imperatives to create entertaining and 'light' television.

For example, Richard McKerrow, the Creative Director of Love Productions who made *Benefits Street*, remarked: 'It's not demonising the poor: it's a very honest and true portrayal of life in Britain and people are frightened by it […] you have to find different, innovative ways of making sure serious issues stay in peak [scheduling time]'. McKerrow's ambition to present 'honest portrayals of life in Britain', and do this in ways that attract peak-time audiences, must be located within a shifting national and global terrain of television commissioning, broadcasting and distribution. In the UK, since the Broadcasting Act of 1990, television has been marked by greater competitiveness, audience fragmentation, and a move to post-Reithian 'edutainment' and 'hybridity' within 'factual' programming (Corner 2002; Hill 2007). Globally, intensifying commercial imperatives across the sector and a weakening of public-service provision and state financing has contributed to the growth of reality television across a range of networks and channels (Hearn 2014; Ouellette 2010). Born's (2005) ethnographic study of the BBC, for example, demonstrated how both the 'concept and practice' of public-service broadcasting had been radically

transformed by media deregulation and a post-welfare desire to reduce publicly-funded institutions. Born exposed how budget freezes, competition from commercial channels, and a spectre of 'market failure' led to a shift from more traditionally public-service inflected programming towards hybrid documentary genres in the BBC, which aimed to have wider audience appeal, including docu-soaps. Since Born's study, the market logics that pushed programming towards what Corner (2002) calls 'documentary as diversion' have further intensified. Under the current UK Conservative government, public service provision has come under threat by the BBC Review Charter and freeze on the license fee (Puttnam 2016). We note here the resonance between the questioning and undermining of 'public' institutions and ideas of a 'common good' across both the spheres of television *and* welfare.

Such reforms result in an uneasy tension in the positioning and value given to popular factual television – by networks or broadcasters, commissioners, critics, and audiences. Appeals to the more highly-venerated 'civic', educational and even critical principles of factual documentary thus rub up against mounting commercial imperatives to attract and entertain audiences through populist programming (Murray 2009; Ouellette 2010). FWT provides an especially illuminating site to consider how broader economic forces shape cultural representations. Transformations in broadcasting not only have implications for what kind of programming gets commissioned, but the conditions of cultural work itself, 'register[ing] in the experiences of television workers' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011: 170) and the products that they create.

Cultural work and workers are increasingly 'neoliberalised'; productive output is individualised, careers are marked by risk and vulnerability, public funding is uncertain and market logics are extended to the subjectivities of workers who are 'only as good as your last job' (Blair 2001; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Gill 2010; McRobbie 2015). Demonstrating how these conditions of industrialised cultural production filter down into the working practices of workers, empirical research illuminates the constrained and difficult spaces where those working within culture can negotiate and contest its representational politics. For example, Saha (2012; 2013) shows how British Asian cultural workers find themselves complicit in producing stigmatising portrayals of 'Asianness', despite desires to challenge reductive representations. He argues that market logics and commercial imperatives constrain the autonomy of cultural workers, with 'epistemological effects' on how ethnicity is

consumed by audiences. These include pressures to attract a 'mainstream' (white) audience by deploying exotic signifiers and clichés (e.g. curry, saris); or to 'make noise' and generate press coverage through provocative subject matter (e.g. Islamic fundamentalism). Similarly, Lee's (2012) research demonstrates that while independent television producers may be driven by ethical commitments to make content with a social and civic purpose, these are compromised by entrenched neoliberal values within the sector including flexibility, enterprise and commercial pressures. Such findings are similarly borne out in research with workers on reality television programmes, whereby commercial imperatives for the programmes to provide dramatic tension and compelling content (thereby attracting audiences and advertisers) become transposed into the often-fraught and largely undervalued emotional labour of junior television workers who cast for shows and manage the conflicting needs and investments of participants, executive producers and commissioners (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Grindstaff 2009; Mayer 2011, 2014).

This important work demonstrates how TV workers find their ethical or artistic commitments compromised by neoliberal values governing broadcasting, as their 'subjectivity connects to political economy in the structuring of the industry, and in the forms and modes of creativity that are allowed within it' (Lee 2012: 494). We find similar conflicts within the public accounts of industry figures involved in FWT. Specifically, discussions reveal combative ideologies coalescing around, on the one hand, FWT's claim to offer 'neutral' accounts that 'give voice', and on the other, the need for these shows to create a 'buzz'.

For example, in the public debates we have analysed, programme-makers primarily present the FWT genre as a form of democratisation that offers authentic accounts of how people experience poverty:

Whether or not you give a camera to a contributor or you are telling a story […] it is their voice. We are observers not participants. Nothing should be created, there should be no conceits, no formatting because what we are trying to do in the programmes that we make […] is simply observe and give them a chance to speak for themselves. (Ian Rumsey, Head of Topical for ITN)

I think what is important is that people who are poor living below the bread line on benefits - however you want to label them - is that they have a voice

> […] hearing from people at the sharp end who are living those lives is the most important thing. (Guy Davies, Commissioning Editor: Factual at Channel 5)

> We wanted to give voice to people who are rarely heard and we wanted to do that in an unmediated way. (Katie Buchanan, Executive Producer, Skint)

FWT is presented here as observational and 'unmediated'; producers are mere 'observers'; and the shows are free from 'conceits'. This is coupled with notions of FWT as enabling a democratising of culture through the appearance of 'ordinary' people (Biressi and Nunn, 2005; Turner 2010). FWT is positioned as 'giving voice' to marginalised groups, drawing on public service principles and signalling an ethical commitment to widening diversity on screen.

Yet, commitments to 'give voice' through authentic, 'unmediated' content conflict with intensifying commercial imperatives to attract audiences. Such conflicts are encapsulated in the comments made by industry figures. For example, in the GEITF panel, Emma Cooper stated: 'I'm not an entertainment commissioner, I'm a documentary commissioner but at the same time I want people to see them so sure they have interesting content and I don't think we should apologise for that'. Cooper distances herself from the label of 'entertainment', endeavouring to negotiate the hierarchy of value ascribed to television genres. As Murray writes, 'documentary is seen as a valid and productive social and artistic endeavour, while reality television is often vilified or dismissed' (2009: 68). Cooper positions herself within the more valued genre of documentary, tempering the negative connotations of the 'entertainment' label. But she also signals that television must have interesting content that audiences want to see, an ambition associated with more populist programming. These conflicting directives are even more palpable in the following statement by one commissioner at the BBC/JRF debate:
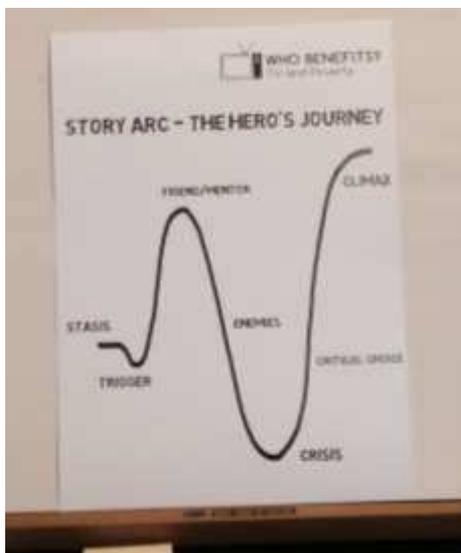
> In a world of multi-channel, we have to write headlines for our titles. Now I know that's not popular with some people, but we do need to get people to watch. We are a commercial channel, we're telling stories of Britain, [...] we're very proud and kind of comfortable with the way that we tell these stories. We tell them with integrity. [...] We will find titles which will grab

people and will make people watch them and we're not ashamed of that. It makes a difference for us in terms of people coming to the channel. (Guy Davies, Commissioning Editor: Factual at Channel 5)

FWT seeks to appeal to the principles of classic documentary; yet it is located within a context of commercial competition, where programmes must find ways to attract increasingly fragmented audiences by 'creating a buzz' and 'writing headlines for titles'. This begs the question, *which* representations of poverty and welfare are created to achieve such goals? We contend that to stand out in a fast-paced, multifarious media landscape, representations of poverty and welfare within FWT become flattened to align with commercially successful generic television and film conventions.

This was exemplified in an exercise undertaken at the BBC/JRF event, where delegates were presented with a 'story arc – the hero's journey' and tasked with creating 'good stories' about poverty and welfare for television (Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1

Figure 2

This exercise troubles the kinds of claims made by TV executives above that FWT offers 'unmediated' portrayals of poverty, and those made by politicians that cite FWT as 'evidence' of societal ills such as welfare dependency and worklessness. It highlights how narratives in FWT are heavily edited, scripted and actively cast for in order to generate commercially successful content. And it points to the labour of television workers in creating constructed and stylised representations of 'authenticity'. The Story Arc draws on long-held and formulaic conventions from Hollywood film (see Pramaggiore and Wallis 2005). The narrative of conflict and resolution is a tried and tested formula that is considered to offer tales that audiences are familiar with and comforted by. The use of these conventions in FWT highlights the limitations and problematic consequences of creating programmes about poverty and welfare within the industrialised confines of television production.

Specifically the use of standardised narratives is especially troubling when we consider the topic at hand. These 'positive' stories may be well-intentioned; they may be seen as an attempt to counter the more sensationalised and stigmatising representations of benefit claimants as feckless and irresponsible. Yet, in calling upon the heroic benefit recipient who 'makes good' by 'working hard' to get off benefits, such story arcs inadvertently individualise poverty rather than consider its structural causes. So, even when programme-makers explicitly seek to create representations that do not follow the familiar template of abjection and demonization (that historically characterise much of television's portrayals of the working-class), representations of working-class life are flattened. By scripting narratives of virtue and individual heroism, these narratives reinforce the binary of the 'deserving and undeserving' poor. Such production devices recycle stubborn welfare myths and smooth out the highly complex lived realities of poverty. Such storylines cannot for example articulate the churning cycle of 'low pay and no pay' in which many families find themselves, or the growing prevalence of in-work poverty (Shildrick et al. 2012).

In the final section, we interrogate further the systematic constraints that shape how cultural workers commission, script and cast for 'television that grabs'. Identifying the multiple, networked revenue streams associated with FWT, we

contend that the genre is an especially illuminating case study of the economic models of capital accumulation characterising contemporary global media.

'Kicking up a storm': The economic value of FWT

FWT operates not only as a new television genre, but also represents a 'new cultural industry' (Jensen 2014) organised through an emergent economic model. FWT has been praised by some within the television industry for its ability to 'kick up a media storm' (Considine 2014) and the attention it can generate in post-broadcast discussions across different media formats. This includes newspapers, social media and additional television programmes which operate as satellites to the original production. For example, in addition to its television audience, *Benefits Street* (Channel 4 2014) 'kicked up a storm' on social media during broadcast by instructing audiences to use their designated Twitter hashtag. This hashtag generated several hundred news stories on both article and digital versions of newspapers, and initiated a (hastily assembled) live discussion programme scheduled to follow the final episode (*Benefits Britain: The Live Debate*, Channel 4 2014). The economic model used in FWT is adept at generating parasitical media attention as a distinct form of capital accumulation within contemporary media industries. This economic model has long roots that stretch through to the emergence of reality formats:

> As one of the most effective global industries for generating new sources of revenue, television has been highly adept at finding new markets: enabling new forms of exploitation through opening out the previously 'private' forms of intimate life; challenging traditionally protected labour markets (flexible contracts for those working in the industry, and the blurring of the boundaries between employees and participants); and establishing new terms of market exchange with audiences (pay-per-view, for instance). Attention on governance can deflect attention away from the reason for governance, which is to lubricate the operations of capital. (Wood and Skeggs, 2011: 16)

Reality television, in its lubrication of the operations of capital, ushered in a transformed set of production processes that enabled television content to be

produced, edited and broadcast more cheaply, faster and with lower production costs, including the exploitation of a ready supply of unpaid or low-paid cultural workers (Hearn 2014, Ross 2014). The economic context of popular factual television production came to resemble a microcosm of global neoliberalism, with increasing internal pressures to commission revelatory, sensationalist and provocative programming - exemplifying what Dovey (2000: 21) termed the 'public sphere turned inside out'. By embracing more lightweight and mobile filming and sound technology and filming 'on the wing', reality formats such as docu-soaps revived an aesthetic sense of authentic rawness that was, conveniently, cheaper and faster to produce (Kilburn 2003). Analyses of the political economy of reality television highlight how these formats provide a convergence mechanism for delivering customers from one medium to another (Ouellette and Hay 2008), for example from television to web to magazine.

FWT employs the same cost-saving production methods pioneered by reality television, but also accelerates some of these dimensions even further under the imperative to 'kick up a media storm' and to generate intense bursts of media attention across multiple sites. Transformations in news media, including a dramatic consolidation of news media ownership in the UK (Media Reform Coalition 2014) and slashed budgets for investigative journalism (NUJ 2012), have contributed towards a much greater reliance by journalists on press releases, social media and recycled news content. 'News stories' about those appearing in FWT productions have become a staple of online news sites that use a 'clickbait' economic model, whereby controversial headlines are used to funnel more users to recycled content pages and thus drive up the value of advertising side-banners. The symbiotic relationships between broadcasters, production companies and news media workers are augmented and enhanced by these parallel economic agendas across different media fields. The lines between producer and consumer have further blurred and FWT audiences frequently serve as an unpaid labour force in themselves, as their social media and online discussion (live-tweeting during broadcast for example) are extracted by journalists and transformed into 'news' content. A generous interpretation would see these shifts as a 'democratising' of media, empowering citizens to 'speak back' through 'vox pops' and user generated comment. Viewed more pessimistically, such strategies herald the rise of 'churnalism' and the supplanting of sober and informed investigation with celebrated ignorance and

'tabloidisation' (see Turner 2010). However interpreted, these shifts are undoubtedly part of a complex economic model that has developed new ways to lubricate the machinery of capital by investing *less* in paid cultural work and identifying new ways to extract *more* value from unpaid cultural labour.

We locate FWT as a genre that is being used to test, develop and extend these economic models to generate and extract value. Many dimensions of this genre echoes practices of earlier reality formats such as the use of low-paid cultural workers. These practices which gained momentum and soon became standard across the industry (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Ross 2014). However, some dimensions of FWT production are emergent and distinct. We see the development of a parasitical media economy, whereby an increasing range of media agents are able to accumulate capital as the 'media storm' transfers from one field of production to another, used to excellent effect in FWT. Broadcasters can maximise advertising revenue streams through swelling record audience figures: With the first series of *Benefits Street* (2014) delivering Channel 4 with its highest viewing figures in 2014, it created television advertising space valued at around £1million (Suart 2014), whilst opening up other revenue streams such as sponsorship and online advertising. Channel 4 also harnessed and capitalised upon the public debate *Benefits Street* provoked through the broadcast of additional live 'event television' (*Benefits Britain: the Live Debate*). Production companies can consolidate their economic capital through inexpensive labour and through franchising formats as transnational commodities. Love Productions' annual profits increased by twenty-five per cent in the year they produced *Benefits Street* and Keo Films capitalised on the success of *Skint* (2013), franchising the format to Australia as *Struggle Street* (SBS 2015). Newspapers can draw upon the debate such programmes create to produce content, sell copies and drive readers to their online pages. With increasing links between newspapers and television production companies (for example, in July 2014 Sky/News International acquired a 70% stake in Love Productions in order to expand its international distribution (Tozer 2014)), the financial incentive to produce parasitical and sensationalist content intensifies.

Finally, the economic value of the media storm 'kicked up' by FWT may be accumulated by, or via, those who appear in front of the camera lens. FWT participants are a crucial, and usually invisible, part of the cultural labour force of television. The financial compensation of reality television participants has always

been uneven - some are paid, but the majority are not (Grindstaff 2014, Mayer 2011). But in FWT, financial compensation is forbidden since participants are welfare claimants and any payment for work would jeopardise receipt of benefits. As Wood and Skeggs further argue (2011: 17), 'it is the use of unpaid 'ordinary people' marshalled from audiences into production regimes that intensifies the possibilities for exploitation. Reality television therefore extracts value in different ways from the performances of unpaid participants'. We propose that, in its focus on benefit claimants, FWT producers have stumbled upon another avenue for reducing production costs. Simultaneously, we acknowledge that some of this value can be retained by FWT participants, and that there may be complex reasons which compel them to take part in unpaid, exploitative television work. While FWT programmes and producers seek to elicit particular stories of poverty and to 'script' claimants in predetermined ways, this does not mean that FWT participants are 'duped'. They may seek to creatively trouble such scripts and resist stereotypes imposed upon them, or they may pursue opportunities to capitalise on their media visibility, even if only for a short time or under constraining conditions (Tyler 2011).

A crucial element of the FWT attention economy is the configuration of newspapers, magazines and public relations industries that, together with (or via) FWT participants, are developing routes through which value can be banked and extracted from new 'micro-celebrities'. Questions of consent, fame and aftercare with respect to FWT participants merit closer scrutiny. It is unclear whether the aftercare for participants is adequate and if it can compensate the negative impacts of the programming. It is also unclear who is best able to capitalise on the production and circulation of micro-celebrities. Those who appear on FWT profit far less, even those scarce few who appear to find careers as micro-celebrities outside of the programme. Perhaps most notable here is Dee Kelly, known as 'White Dee' from Channel 4's *Benefits Street.* While the large majority of participants in FWT experience only fleeting fame and return to anonymity as soon as the programme ends, Dee has made media appearances on talk shows and radio. She also entered the *Celebrity Big Brother* house in 2014, and appeared in her own Channel 5 documentary. Yet this media career has subsequently dwindled. Furthermore, the economic and symbolic capital generated by Dee's media visibility has not come without cost. Dee has been subject of intense media vitriol and a public hate campaign, and revealed she experienced depression following the programme (see Allen et al 2014). Furthermore

she has publically criticised the producers of *Benefits Street* for a lack of consultation with on-screen contributors in the editing process, resulting in a sensationalised and unfair representation of her community. The micro-celebrities occasionally emerging from FWT can sometimes, as 'White Dee' shows, surf the wave of the media storm they help 'kick up', but are invariably injured. As Grindstaff reminds us, the opportunities presented by reality TV participation always 'come with obligation, compromise and risk' (2014: 336).

Conclusion

Since exploding onto British television screens in 2013, FWT programmes have proved highly popular and deeply controversial, entangled with wider public and policy debates about poverty against a backdrop of radical welfare reform. Such media representations are deeply significant. FWT does not simply reflect the social world. Rather it constitutes it, *intervening* into the current conjecture of austerity in powerful ways by shaping public understandings of poverty and welfare.

We have argued that FWT offers an illuminating site through which to explore the competing agendas governing contemporary media, and the implications of these on cultural producers and the texts that they create. In many ways our analysis of FWT has affirmed the importance of challenging *who* gets to be a cultural producer, questioning the impact of a predominantly middle-class television workforce on how social class, poverty and welfare are represented and consumed. One of the most fascinating dimensions of the 'reflexive moment' occasioned by FWT has been the ease with which senior industry figures have co-opted 'diversity talk' and other critical vocabularies around the politics of representation on ways that shut down discussions about its stubborn 'class problem' (McRobbie 2015). However, we contend that FWT representations cannot be explained by the class composition of the television workforce alone. While we do not dismiss the importance of widening access to the industry, we argue that a more socially 'diverse' workforce will not in and of itself, produce 'representational parity' (Gray 2016: 246). Rather, our analysis has shown that the conditions of industrialised media production itself constrain and direct cultural workers to produce digestible scripts around poverty and welfare, which can then be capitalised upon and extracted for value. Cultural sociology must therefore ask not simply 'who gets to make cultural products?' (Oakley and O'Brien

2016) but also 'in what context?'. Both a critical and systematic analyses of cultural labour conditions, and a radical reconceptualisation of *who* a cultural worker is, are crucial to understanding how the FWT industry works as a classificatory apparatus.

More research is needed to better understand how neoliberal economic forces come to direct cultural workers and shape the cultural products they make. In this article, we have analysed the official discourses presented by senior industry figureheads at public-facing events. Had we interviewed these figures in a different context, they may well have provided alternative accounts of FWT. Whilst there are challenges to studying media production (Paterson et al 2016), further empirical research into FWT would enrich and extend our understanding of the relationship between production, representation and consumption. This might usefully include interviews with cultural workers, in particular those at junior levels, and observations of the production of FWT programming. Furthermore, as a varied and mutating genre, future research into FWT must attend to this complexity.

Herman Gray (2016: 252) argues that 'it is time to ask that our research tell us a different story about the operations of power/knowledge and the role of media in the making of racial inequality (and its potential for the making of racial justice)'. Like Gray, we assert that critical interrogations of the logics of cultural production and how these come to bear upon cultural representations are crucial. We hope that this article contributes to telling a 'different story' about the role of television, both in the making of class inequality *and* – more optimistically - its potential for facilitating class justice.

Acknowledgements:

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[i] We have not anonymised industry figures that we quote since these two events were public and full recordings of each are freely available to view online on the following websites https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZ4e7WveQlw (Accessed 13 November 2016) and http://www.bbc.co.uk/responsibility/tvpoverty-conference (Accessed 10 February 2017)