White Rose Research Online

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York

Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/201499/

Version: Accepted Version

Article:
Bell, M. (2021) 'I owe it to those women to own it': Women, Media Production and Intergenerational Dialogue through Oral History. Journal of British Cinema and Television, 18 (4). pp. 518-537. ISSN: 1743-4521

https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2021.0593

This is an author produced version of an article published in the Journal of British Cinema and Television. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse
Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
University of Sheffield
UNIVERSITY of York

‘I owe it to those women to own it’: Women, Media Production and Intergenerational Dialogue Through Oral History

Melanie Bell

Abstract:

Whilst the academy is faced with increasing calls for its research to be socially relevant, a long-established principle of feminism has been the discovery and use of knowledge produced by, for and about women. Informed by feminist debates, the ‘Histories of Women in the British Film and Television Industries’ project undertook a number of engagement activities drawing on the oral histories of women who had worked in the British media industries. These included workshops with trade union members and media practitioners which explored continuity and change in women’s experiences of the media workplace. This paper reflects on this suite of engagement activities, their successes and failures, and the possibilities and limitations of feminist-informed impact in and through the academy.

KEY WORDS: BECTU; British film and television industries; creative industries; gender discrimination; intergenerational dialogue; memory work; oral history and women; public engagement.

In the twenty-first century, the subject of work has never been more pertinent. Zero-hour contracts and freelancing have become normalised across an increasing number of industries, businesses and professions, with sociologists, psychologists and others demonstrating the impact these practices have on our productivity, financial health and well-being. These

debates are particularly pressing in the cultural and creative industries (CCI) where the workforce is exposed to high levels of precariousness and flexible working patterns, and toxic work practices of interning and patronage are rife.

An emphasis on the contemporary situation of women in the creative industries might initially seem incongruous in a special issue on feminism and documentary filmmaking 1930-55, but I see two clear points of connection. The first is in the question of women's visibility and their presumed absence in filmmaking and film history, and the second is in the importance of documentary production as an area of employment for women. Many of the women featured in the research presented here have worked in the documentary or non-fiction field at different times in their careers, sometimes picking up work in the sector after a break to have children or finding that, as a mode of production, it offered more scope for creative practice than features (Bell, 2018). This account draws on my experience of leading a group of researchers and of being the public face of a research project to potential allies in the academy and the screen industries. This article has three goals: to put women's voices on the record; to reflect on the successes and failures of working with media practitioners and, crucially, with industry stakeholders on the topic of gender inequality and production cultures; and, finally, to demonstrate the relevance of historical women's accounts to the current situation and to highlight the impact historical research can have in pursuing contemporary changes, particularly in the light of #MeToo.

The detrimental impact of working conditions in the contemporary CCI in the UK is especially acute for women, who are under-represented in senior, decision-making roles in the creative industries, and over-represented in junior roles which are more vulnerable to precarity, low pay and short-termism. Data shows that across all CCI fields, from established industries (advertising, film, television, architecture) to new (web design, app development), gender inequalities are stark (Conor, Gill and Taylor 2015: 6). Women as creative

practitioners are less visible in the workforce and there are few role models with whom young women can connect. CCI scholarship has highlighted new pressures on women seeking roles in screen industries. As Conor at al have argued, greater requirements are now placed on individuals 'to construct and enact a particular creative occupational identity' but this is harder for women as '[c]onventionally, the artist/creative maker is male' (2015: 13). Creative workers have to negotiate 'received and accepted (gendered, raced, classed) images, practices and personae' which, if left unchecked, can become 'a barrier to the recognition of particular categories of people, including women, as creative practitioners . . . perpetuating their exclusion and under-representation' (Ibid: 14). Finding ways to enhance women's visibility as creative practitioners is one mechanism for combating practices which exclude them. Visibility is a feminist issue in film and television industries since generations of women have been led to believe that 'filmmaking has always been a man's realm, that they are an anomaly, and that they must reinvent the wheel' (Stamp 2018). One way of challenging the dominant narrative of male artistry is oral history interviewing with women filmmakers which provides a powerful means of collecting and disseminating women's stories and of disrupting established male-dominated histories.

The 'Histories of Women in the British Film and Television Industries' project (hereafter 'Histories of Women') took place in this context. The research was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for a period of four years, 2014-2017; its goal was to recover and make visible women's historical work in film and television production and to reflect on how past working conditions and practices shape the present. The project team was particularly interested in recovering women's work in 'below-the-line' roles where the majority of women were employed, an area which is marginalised and poorly-documented in media history.[1] We focused on the years between 1930-1989; a period which has received relatively little critical attention compared to the more substantial body of

scholarship on early cinema and the post-2000 media landscape. This is despite women's labour forming a cornerstone of the media industries; quantitative trade union data made available to the 'Histories of Women' project has shown that on average one-quarter of the film and television workforce in the UK were women during these decades (Bell 2021). Numerous women also worked behind the scenes in film processing laboratories, animation studios, television companies and film libraries. Drawing on this and on qualitative data from oral history interviews, the study team sought to identify historic and gendered patterns of working, make women's contribution visible and demonstrate the value of their work to the creative industries of the time.

A further goal of the project was to provide a body of evidence about historic forms of direct and indirect discrimination which would show how those legacies continue to shape present-day working practices. Here, the project's ambition was to engage stakeholders with a vested interest in equality and diversity agendas and provide evidence they could draw on in their campaigns. We envisaged the project's findings would be of interest to representatives from CCI, BECTU (the media industries trade union), Creative Skillset and Women in Film & Television (UK) amongst others, and to this end had written a public engagement or 'Impact' strategy into our project plan.[2] Whilst this was a requirement of AHRC funding, disseminating women's history beyond academia was a principle central to the project's feminist politics. We wanted to change the terms of the debate and – to paraphrase Joan Wallach Scott – use history as a critical weapon 'to disrupt the certainties of the present and . . . imagin[e] a different future' (2004: 18). From the start, industry stakeholders sat on the project's Advisory Board since we were keen to collaborate with and learn from them at all stages in the process.

Despite this model of collaborative practice, the study faced a number of challenges and bringing the past and present together through a dialogue with industry stakeholders

proved to be more complex than anticipated. The urgency of doing so was further intensified in the wake of #MeToo which shone a spotlight on employment conditions in the screen industries and opened up important debates about gender and power which are still being worked through. Scholars and activists have argued that to understand gender inequality in screen industries we must engage with what Skadi Loist and Deb Verhoeven describe as the 'highly gendered production culture in which a pervasive bias runs through the whole industry and creates hierarchical differences and hurdles for women seeking work in creative positions' (2019: 69). Our research with women practitioners, both present-day and historical, provided concrete examples of this 'pervasive bias' in action but despite these important insights some industry stakeholders struggled to understand the relevance of historical stories to a contemporary moment that was responding to #MeToo.

The first half of this article lays out the project's oral history methodology, describes the listening portfolio used in engagement events, and outlines extracts from the recordings. The second half explores how present-day media practitioners responded to histories of women's working lives, drawing out not only similarities, but forms of emotional connection, occupational identities and a sense of female community. I conclude with some reflections on impact events that failed to get off the ground and suggest how changing perceptions of screen industry history can empower stakeholders to be more effective in bringing about much-needed change to the current situation.

Feminism and Oral History

Oral history was central to the project's methodology as historical women in below-the-line roles are rarely represented in official records. The practice is a well-established method for engaging hard-to-reach and under-represented groups and has proven to be particularly

resonant for feminist scholarship. Not only does it have the capacity to revise history but it has the potential to identify the historical roots of discrimination and, in doing so, build a better understanding of their present-day manifestations. As this article will illustrate, present-day audiences continued to find in oral history a validation of their experiences *as* women working in media production and drew on them to build a sense of intergenerational solidarity.

The oral histories recorded for the 'Histories of Women' project were life story interviews, conducted over several sittings: a methodology which takes time to build rapport and foster trust between interviewee and interviewer. Narrators are invited to 'dig deep' in order to generate what the oral historian Lynn Abrams has described as a form of 'deep biography' (2010: 33). It is a method well suited to investigating the 'relationship between personal experience and culture' (Ibid) and in the research team's estimation, this method would help to open up the historic workplace cultures and practices we were keen to study. It has also been successfully used to explore women's experiences of 'above the line' roles in contemporary film production (Cobb and Williams 2020). The recordings were digitised and archived, alongside other contextual materials, to create a permanent and accessible record of women's work for others to use in educational and research settings. This was an important commitment for a feminist project as a great deal of research on women's film and television histories has been hampered by an absence of formal records and a consistent failure within media organisations to document women's participation in production roles (Gledhill and Knight 2015). By recording and archiving in an accessible format, the project would enhance the visibility of women's contribution to media production. This commitment created its own challenges as some within the oral history community questioned the ethics of our decision whilst social historians thought our goals laudable but burdensome in terms of time and resource.[3] Nevertheless, we remained steadfast in our conviction, guided here by Kate

Eichhorn's provocation on the political potential of archives to 'restore to us what is routinely taken away under neoliberalism . . . the ability to understand the conditions of our everyday lives . . . and . . . the conviction that we might, once again, be agents of change in time and history' (2013: 6). This was to prove particularly prescient given our later work with young women.

Between 2015-16, twenty-five interviews were recorded with women whose careers in the British film and television industries spanned the 1950s to the 1990s. Interviewees were recruited through BECTU trade union networks, industry magazines and word-of-mouth. Most were retired and now aged in their seventies or eighties; they were drawn from a diverse range of media industry roles including costume designer, production assistant, make-up artist, assistant editor, engineer, writer, script supervisor, producer, matte painter, model maker, paint and trace artist, sound technician and assistant floor manager. Some of the women had a well-established public profile – the film editor Anne V Coates (*Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)), the writer Adele Rose with *Coronation Street* from 1961-98 – but the names of the majority are unknown to media historians and scholars, although many of their employers (the BBC, Pearl and Dean) are household names. Demographically, all were white and most were living in the London/South East area of England at the time of interview, with a few women living in the regions (Yorkshire, Tyneside). Some were born into relatively comfortable middle-class families whilst others from more modest socio-economic backgrounds had, through education, achieved a degree of social mobility.[4] The interviews were conducted over several recording sessions (spanning several months), each typically lasting between two and three hours. The interviews were, on average, seven hours in length, although some were nearer ten hours in duration. This is typical with life story interviews which cover interviewees' family and educational background as well as their working lives in detail.

For most of our interviewees, this was the first time they had spoken at length about their working lives. We invited them to talk about their upbringing (family and education), training opportunities for women, promotion and pay, and the interface between home and work. They shared information about professional attitudes towards women, industry networks, hierarchies and forms of discrimination including ageism and 'banter'. The interviews focussed in depth on everyday work experience including tools of the trade, the circulation of information, reporting mechanisms, cross-grade working, the physical environment (including smell, touch and space) and what happened when things went wrong. The results were informative, surprising and touching. Women recalled agonising over whether to tell a new employer they had a baby, fearing it would jeopardise a longed-for job opportunity, whilst others reflected on their emotional connection with sound, their love of recording technologies, or the passion they had for drawing. Some recalled the pleasure they took in seeing their name recorded in screen credits, others the excitement of working on live action television, or the trials, tribulations and eventual triumphs of arguing for better pay and promotion. As a suite of interviews, the collection comprises almost one hundred and seventy hours of recorded interview material and both individually and collectively the women's testimonies bring a deep and richly-layered new perspective to film and television history. Preliminary research has shown how the field of documentary editing provided women with opportunities for creative risk-taking, whilst women have emerged as industry leaders in foley sound (an area little-studied in film history). These revelations have tested received wisdom about the role of women in media organisations and the categorisation of their work as unskilled (Bell 2017; 2018).

Voices for Change: Methods of Working with Oral History

The richness of oral history as a data set is one of its strengths but it does present challenges when sharing interview material at conferences and public engagement events. In these contexts, it is usual to select a short extract from a longer interview, designed to illustrate a particular theme, and present this as written text on a PowerPoint slide, with the researcher providing contextual detail. But there are many limitations to these conventions, most notably the loss of the voice, its tone and timbre, hesitations, pauses and vocal stresses and narrative pacing which combine to shape the richness and emotional content of the life story in particular ways. Written transcriptions, even if read aloud, tend to flatten out the ambiguities and emotional resonance of the original recording.

Mindful of these limitations, Sue Bradley, the research associate, and I put together a 'listening portfolio' for use at public engagement events with audio extracts of two to three minutes in length, chosen to exemplify a particular work topic. This provided a listening portfolio which covered a range of scenarios and experiences which remained drawn together around the unifying themes of continuity and change. Extracts were also slightly edited to rearrange the key events that interviewees talked about into a chronological order. As Annette Kuhn has shown in her work with oral history, memory stories are typically narrated 'as a montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, "snapshots", flashes' (2002: 11) and presenting the recordings in public meant a certain amount of editing was necessary, although we were careful not to change the fundamental meaning of the extract. Chronological ordering also helped to amplify the immediacy and accessibility of the stories for audiences at conferences or workshops. This listening portfolio was used in a number of settings and the usual practice was to follow a 'listen and respond' format in which members of an audience were invited to respond immediately to the recordings and offer further, deeper reflections later in the day. Before moving on to discuss in greater detail examples of working with the listening portfolio, I want to pause to describe two of the extracts in more detail to give a flavour of

what people were hearing and, in an issue devoted to deepening understandings of women's absence/presence in media histories, to put these women's stories on the historical record.

Talking about Work: Jean, Ada and The Studio Floor

In this first extract, the interviewee, Jean Steward (b. 1947), recounts how she and a group of co-workers made the case for their role as make-up artists to be regraded at the BBC. Steward (b. 1947) joined the corporation in 1968 and rose to the position of Manager of the Make-Up Department Design Group. The events described below took place in the 1970s, a time when equal pay and legislation was at the forefront of public debate in the UK. Steward, in this extract, is responding to a question from the interviewer asking her about the distinction between a make-up girl and a make-up supervisor:

> In those days the BBC had a very rigid pay structure, and it was all to do with grading, and the name of the job reflected the grade. So, there was a big battle to get the make-up girls out of, you know, we mustn't call ourselves make-up *girls*, because that's demeaning. We're not going to be make-up supervisors anymore; we're going to be make-up *designers*.
>
> And there was a real push as people were starting to think, when you look at a television screen, what you see is the close-up on the face. If we get it *wrong*, if the wig looks really bad, or the hair's badly combed, it would be distracting. So as a department, we were starting to push forward. "We might only be *women*, *but* we do a valuable job. We want more money." Our make-up designers were two grades down on the costume designers. We never did get parity but we did manage to pull ourselves up. What we said was, we had the extra stress of having to walk into the room on the day and transform somebody's face; if they'd come up in hives

overnight, it was our problem to deal with on the day. We had the closest relationship with the artist. If they were feeling neurotic, if they had had a fight with their boyfriend, if they'd fallen over and got a black eye, we were dealing with all of those things on the day.

And that was an incredible amount of stress which camera crews didn't really have – their equipment might let them down but we had to go in and do something very intricate and delicate. And so, we started to push forward, and say, "No, we need to be recognised now", "We're doing a hard job, we're doing a job just as difficult, and more difficult."

But everything at the BBC was graded technically. We always said, if you were doing a drama or a comedy and the actor would fluff his lines, or the wig would fall off, the costume would disintegrate, they [camera crews] wouldn't do it again. "Oh, we haven't got enough time … keep going, keep going, keep going." And then one of the engineers at the back would suddenly say, "We'll have to go again" [pompous tone] and everybody would say, "*Why*?" [puzzled tone] And there was a fleck, a bit of interference that *nobody* had actually seen, and nobody at home was ever going to notice. But everything was very technically driven. They had the power.

Consider how a sense of movement is used in the passage ('push forward', 'pull up', 'fall off', 'keep going') to communicate both the hectic rhythms of day-to-day working on a studio floor and the labour involved in trying to change the system. The working culture is gendered and hierarchical; it is the (male) camera crews who drive the shooting schedule and harry the make-up artists to keep in step with a time schedule which prioritises men's labour. Understanding the movement or direction of travel helps us appreciate how the women's attempts to 'push forward' were, like their jobs, 'hard' and 'difficult'. Steward's comment

that they were 'only *women*, *but*' suggests how the case was made on the value of their work being sufficiently high to overcome the secondary status attributed to their gender by men.

On one level, Steward's description of her role sounds like an amusing story of disaster management as make-up artists struggle to contend with wigs positioned askew and unsightly skin rashes. But a more careful reading shows something of the darker side of media production including stress, illness, psychological trauma (neurosis), and hints of domestic abuse. This points to the significant amount of emotional labour make-up artists undertook through their close proximity with artists, and to how much of their work involved care-taking/care-giving, tidying up the messiness of everyday life to create the appearance of normality. The invisibility of women's work in media production is well-established in feminist scholarship and Steward's story both makes that labour visible and shows how power circulated on the studio floor.

Despite the darker side underpinning her reflections, Steward's tone is relatively upbeat, and there is pleasure in the telling of a story about the collective endeavour of women exercising agency and bringing about change. In this second extract the interviewee Ada Hackney (b. 1932) recalls a difficult incident at work where she felt vulnerable and exposed. Hackney joined the BBC as a technical assistant in 1954 and went on to become the first woman to qualify as an Engineer at the corporation in 1972. In response to the interviewer's question about why she didn't want to change jobs to take up a post as a studio manager, Hackney recalled vividly an incident which took place early in her career:

> I didn't want to be involved with the setting up of programmes . . . I'd done enough studio testing in my time. …
>
> I'll never forget going into Studio 1 when I first started. They were doing a lot of studio testing, and one of the plugs to a microphone had come apart and I was given

the job, "go and fix that, Ada." So, you take your screwdriver and off you go, and you've got to rewire a socket, a plug, with the *whole* of the Northern Dance Orchestra sitting there. I walked in and they couldn't get on with the rehearsal because this microphone wasn't working and, I had to *go through* them to get to it [the microphone] to start with. *I was horrified*, but I had to do it. And all the comments that were coming, it was *awful*. [laughs]

[INT] What were they saying?

Well, you know, just joking and, "Fancy, there's a woman. Why are *you* doing it?" [incredulous tone] And then when I knelt down to get the thing, "Blimey, are you sure you know what you're doing, love?" [disbelieving tone] [laughs] And the comments, they were *awful* … I wished the floor would have opened and let me through, but it didn't, I had to get on and do the job because the boss upstairs had said I had to come and do it, so I got on and did it. [laughs]

They were just joshing, I suppose. I mean now I wouldn't bat an eyelid now, but I was a bit young then.

Events in this passage are organised through the concept of space with Hackney an unwelcome boundary-crosser in the workplace. The emphasis on the '*whole*' of the orchestra communicates a sense of scale and Hackney's own feelings of smallness (it is likely that there was upwards of thirty musicians in the studio, all men). As she recalls having to '*go through them*' and hear the men's comments ('*awful*'), the timbre of her voice changes and she uses laughter at several points in the story to try to conceal the underlying hurt which has surfaced through the recollection. As the story comes to a close, she uses the past/present register of 'then' and 'now' in an attempt to distance herself from the hurt and regain her composure. The story conjures up images of a battle of David and Goliath-style proportions,

with Hackney facing a multitude of foes, armed only with the singular item of the screwdriver. But this is not the classical myth of heroism – often repeated in the male-voiced trade stories described in John Caldwell's research on media practitioners (2008: 40) – but instead reveals the more sober reality of how spaces were gendered and policed, and the repercussions for women who transgressed. Hackney's wish to go through the floor rather than through the men conjures up images of going into free fall and suggests how vulnerable and exposed women could be when doing their jobs. The 'joshing' (joking) is entirely gendered; a man with a screwdriver would not have provoked the same reaction.

Oral historians use the term 'composure' to describe a feeling of comfort when we tell preferred stories about ourselves and, conversely, 'discomposure' to describe what Penny Summerfield calls 'a particular terrain of memory' that produces 'personal disequilibrium, manifest in confusion, anger, self-contradiction, discomfort, and difficulties of sustaining a narrative' (2004: 69-70). Ada Hackney's story and the obvious discomfort she experienced in the telling indicates the lasting impact of the experience and the affective residue it has in her memory. This was not a pleasant or favourite story for her to tell but in doing so it gave the research team a valuable insight into the gendering of production culture and the operation of power in the workplace. The listening portfolio consisted of several such extracts which we hoped would resonate with listeners at stakeholder events, helping to stimulate debate about present day media practice.

BECTU Women's Conference: Voices for Change

The first stakeholder event was organised at the invitation of and in conjunction with the BECTU Women's Equality Committee and delivered at the Committee's biennial conference in November 2015. BECTU was a partner of the 'Histories of Women' project (the general secretary sat on the project's steering board) and a co-hosted training event had been part of

the initial project planning. The invitation was an opportunity to explore our shared interests in women in media production and test the impact of the audio portfolio and the listen and respond method. The event, held at BECTU's Head Office in South London, was advertised widely to the union's membership. Using the title 'Voices for Change', it was promoted as an opportunity to participate in an interactive workshop where women could share work stories, ideas and experiences and be involved in shaping the Committee's next campaign strategy.

The conference was a one-day event consisting of two inter-related sessions. At the morning session, facilitated by Sue Bradley and myself, extracts from the listening portfolio were played, with delegates writing their initial responses on index cards before participating in an open discussion in small groups. In the afternoon, a more structured discussion took place, again in small groups, led by a facilitator from the union. The brief was to explore the similarities and differences between the historical accounts and their own experiences and, using that discussion, draw up a ranked set of recommendations for change within the industries. The recommendations were fed back to a final plenary session which identified key campaign issues for 2016/7. As a result of the conference and internal union discussions, the Committee put forward a proposal to develop a mentoring scheme which was formally adopted by the union in 2016.

One of the most rewarding aspects of the event was the diverse audience it attracted. About forty participants took part from all sectors of the industry including Regional Production, Arts and Entertainment, London Production and Independent Broadcasting. As most media practitioners work freelance, the event took place on a Saturday in the hope that this would increase uptake. We were pleased to see that the age range of the audience was wide, with women from the union's Young Members Forum attending alongside those in their 40s, 50s and 60s. This demographic mix facilitated cross-generational dialogue which was often fascinating. One young woman for example understood Steward's 'only women

but' comment as evidence of women's passive acceptance of their secondary status in the 1970s. This irked an older woman who, previously quiet, interjected forcefully with 'you've no idea of what it was like growing up then … we were *taught* to be deferential to men'. There were many such expressions of frustration, argument, humour and camaraderie during the day which illustrated the personal investment participants had in the subject matter, validated women's experiences and built a sense of solidarity.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, extracts on childcare triggered intense debate with delegates discussing their practical arrangements, the expectations of society and self around motherhood and caring, and their experiences of 'choosing' particular jobs because they were more compatible with the demands of parenting. One woman's written comment – 'Still totally the same 1974-2015. Love the job! Do you mention you have a child or not??!!' – brings into sharp focus how women experience the present-day media workplace as shaping work and parenting as two separate and irreconcilable identities. Hackney's story similarly struck a chord with some delegates pointing out how they too felt 'on show' in the workplace or were subjected to greater 'scrutiny' than men. For some, this related specifically to perceptions of technical skills but many drew parallels with what they experienced as a general sense of scepticism about women's professional capabilities which added undue pressure to an already difficult job. It was not surprising therefore that many delegates also readily connected with the Steward extract and understood very forcefully the significance of job titles in a hierarchical industry, using terms such as 'power', 'dignity' and 'value' in response to Steward's story.

The event received a positive response from delegates who, in their feedback forms on the day, rated it highly for its relevance and enjoyability:

> ‘I thoroughly enjoyed the event and left feeling totally inspired and connected to other women in the industry which felt amazing’.
>
> ‘This was my first BECTU event and think I am hooked already. Please let me know how I can be more involved’.

In the months following the Conference, the union pressed ahead with plans for a mentorship programme, whilst the research team continued to track respondents, inviting further feedback six months after the event. This intervention was initially motivated by compliance with REF goals which demand that university-based researchers look for evidence of change over time to demonstrate the significance of impact. But we were curious to hear how participants were faring in their workplace and also took the opportunity to ask for comments on the effectiveness of using oral history as a method for stimulating workshop discussion. Nine women responded to our online questionnaire, reporting changes in attitude, working practices and/or habits, describing themselves as ‘more alive to the issues’, ‘less of an onlooker’ and more likely to ‘step up’ and challenge inequality at work. That said, change brought about conflicting feelings for some, with one woman describing herself as both ‘empowered’ and ‘frustrated’. She reported that she had ‘just succeeded in getting another female into our department, but it took a lot of persuasion’, comments that remind us of the negative impact that can accrue to those who take up responsibility for equality and diversity agendas.

Respondents were wholeheartedly enthusiastic about the oral history extracts and the listen and respond format. They used terms such as ‘intimacy’ and ‘immersion’, likened the process to ‘listening to radio’, found the voices ‘expressive’ and felt it ‘resonated more than reading’ or ‘being told’. Comments about ‘real people’ and ‘real life women’ were a

recurring feature of the feedback and suggest the ongoing relevance of the stories. In response to a question about which extracts had stayed with them, Ada was remembered as 'the woman who walked into a roomful of men' suggesting how her discomfort had connected with a contemporary audience on a deep level. As Francesca Stella noted in her work on storytelling as knowledge exchange, stories have the power to 'affect and move, as well as represent, and . . . to resonate with members of the audience on a very personal level' (2014: 106), a description that seems entirely apt for the 'Voices for Change' event. Through the BECTU Women's Conference, the project achieved its first success in supporting stakeholders to deliver on their campaign goals around addressing gender inequalities in the workplace.

Trailblazing Women: Identity-Making in the Freelance Economy

The second outing for the listening portfolio was an invited keynote at a one-day symposium held at the University of Greenwich in 2017 which brought together academics, media practitioners and representatives of stakeholder organisations including the British Film Institute and Raising Films.[5] Entitled 'Trailblazing Women', the event's aim was to foster positive dialogue around women's roles in the creative industries, and roughly eighty delegates attended from academic and media practitioner backgrounds. At different career stages, their professions included documentary director, producer, production assistant and editor. As a keynote speaker I used the allocated time to share extracts from the listening portfolio alongside visual material, mainly featuring photographs of women at work. A linking commentary described the broader historical context of women's work in the media industries. The presentation was followed by a short Q&A but the majority of the feedback came through a questionnaire distributed after the talk which asked respondents to reflect on oral history stories and past and present experiences of the workplace, with an open invitation

for further reflections. The open-ended nature of the questions made the forms potentially time-consuming to complete and perhaps unsurprisingly only a handful were returned, but they did generate good quality data. This was especially noticeable in the questionnaires returned by young women in their early twenties who commented on the topics at length. It was typical for respondents to be indignant about their lack of knowledge of women's history ('I had no idea women were engineers at the BBC!') but most of the detailed commentary focused on the themes of occupational identity and community. This section examines these responses in more detail before reflecting on the wider implications of the women's remarks.

The listening portfolio struck a chord with respondents who, again, identified strongly with the experience of their historical peers. Respondents reported that terms such as 'girl' and '<u>my</u> assistant' were in common usage, that bathrooms for women were in short supply ('and never had tampons!'), and gave multiple examples of vertical and horizontal segregation by gender (male directors vs female producers were frequently cited). Moreover, these roles remained bound up in hierarchies of power and value with costume and make-up departments still not receiving adequate time for checks between takes which, as one respondent put it, 'compromised on the reputation of their work'. It seems that the workplace culture Steward described has been passed down through subsequent generations. The strength of the connection women saw between past and present was emphasised through their underlining of key words – 'I've experienced the <u>exact</u> scenario' – and the use of exclamation marks ('Yes!'), punctuation strategies used to amplify their message. One woman used asterisks on her questionnaire as a form of footnoting to present further examples and illustrations to back up her comments. All were enthusiastic about the listening portfolio method, using terms such as 'empathy' and 'closeness' in their comments and rating the process highly effective in 'stimulating debate'. Eichhorn's comments about the archive helping us 'understand the conditions of our everyday lives' seem especially relevant here

(2013: 6). These responses are remarkable not least for the spotlight they throw on on-going forms of gender discrimination and the wider questions they raise about how pervasive bias structures the present-day workplace. What are the implications of young women in 2017 experiencing the 'exact scenario' as women in the 1960s and 1970s? Why should an anecdote about a fight for professional recognition – some fifty years earlier – retain its potency? Certainly, the women's comments made me reflect on what function the historical testimonies and feedback process itself was serving for women on that day.

On one level it validated present-day experiences, confirming that the scenarios women encountered were not unique to them. This process is vital for women who often find their assessment of workplace gender discrimination challenged or who lack the power to speak out, with young women being especially vulnerable in this regard. The importance of validation identified here is consistent with Wreyford and Cobb's research on women in the contemporary UK film industry which found that statistical data played a crucial role in giving 'credibility to the inequality', making it 'speakable, and, for some, more real' (2017: 109). But there was more than just validation going on that day. Consider the following two statements, written by young women in their early twenties:

> I feel very moved by the sense of female community within the creative industries after today. . . . Hearing about women fighting for titles of 'technician' or 'artist' or 'designer' inspires me to use terms that clearly indicate that I am a professional and owe it to those women to own it. Thank you. (intern, age 22)

> Something very positive I took from listening to the oral histories was the importance and power of women using their voices and the way this creates support for other women in the industry, which encourages the importance of having a strong network

that people use to share their stories and experiences both to give and receive support from one another. (freelance producer, age 23).

These comments speak of the new pressures around identity-making. If, as Conor et al argue, creative workers, in the process of forging their own occupational identities, have to negotiate inherited images and personae, then the oral histories here were being used by women as alternatives to the dominant gendered modes. Moreover, references to 'female community' and 'support network' highlight what the women experience as lacking in an industry fractured by the relentless drive of the freelance economy and go some way to addressing the gap. In these two respects, making visible historic examples of women in creative practice helped the next generation of women recognise and construct themselves as creative practitioners – to 'own it', in their words – combating the dominant images/personae of the male artist which excludes them. This is not to suggest that intergenerational dialogue is without issue. Feminist theorists such as Winch, Littler and. Keller (2016) have persuasively argued for the importance of examining connections and conflicts across generations and there is more work to be done.

Failing to Make an 'Impact'

Despite the richness of women's stories and the feelings of solidarity they generated for many, the 'Histories of Women' project did encounter some difficulties in delivering its impact plan. The final event was to be a workshop, planned for Spring 2018, which would bring together senior representatives from leading organisations including Women in Film and Television (UK), BAFTA, BFI and others. These organisations have a powerful voice in the gender equality industry and our ambition was for them to draw on our research in their

campaigns around policy. Work was put into building collaborative links and establishing rapport; initial responses were enthusiastic. Planning was underway when the workshop was unexpectedly cancelled at short notice. This was explained as a consequence of shifting priorities brought about by what was, at the time, the emerging #MeToo Movement and the recent publication of the BBC's gender pay gap report, which meant stakeholder organisations found their time diverted to field media enquiries about those developments. Whilst the cancellation was understandable if regrettable, I was concerned that underpinning the decision was a conviction that history was irrelevant to current debates. One stakeholder representative explained the cancellation on the grounds that 'the research, as it is historical, is not of great interest to the industry at present. Right now, the focus is on the huge sea change which is happening across our industry.' This assessment seemed ill-informed, and did not reflect our previous experience of working with women in the media industries who had found history provided a way to claim a professional identity and voice. Indeed, who precisely was 'the industry' being referred to in this statement? Perhaps those in senior roles, who were retrospectively trying to clean up the organisations they campaigned about? At the very least, the cancellation seemed to highlight a gap between rank-and-file media practitioners on the studio floor who had valued the grounded evidence of pervasive bias and the circulation of power in the workforce and the representatives of stakeholder organisations who were not willing to give such an approach a chance.

It is worth noting that the nature of this research – women's historical, below-the-line media labour – makes it difficult to access established avenues for the public engagement work now prioritised in UK Higher Education. For example, programming a strand at a film festival or at special screenings and retrospectives – normally a relatively easy win for film studies – were not options. Typically geared around notions of individual authorship in elite, creative fields such as directing (which disproportionally favours men), women's below-the-

line work did not fit their brief. Nor did the work histories of our interviewees fit the commissioning agenda of Visual Arts organisations which work with visual artists/practitioners. One Director, initially enthusiastic about the project's feminist politics, was crestfallen to find most of our interviewees had worked in mainstream organisations such as the BBC and Elstree Studios and the potential collaboration never got off the ground. Similarly, attempts to work with museums around a shared interest in 'women's history' were stymied as these organisations look for ways to engage the public with collections their museums hold, rather than sources external to them, however interesting these may be. What these efforts highlighted was the challenge of making the work performed by women visible in a culture where individual authorship in elite fields is prized.

Conclusion

Oral history has proven to be a powerful tool in work with media practitioners. Stories from and about the past, far from being obsolete, have opened a window onto the contemporary world of women's work. This has added to the general body of knowledge about gender discrimination in the media industries and the myriad ways women experience being 'a woman' at work, from how they are addressed to the time, facilities, resources and rewards that are allocated to them in the performance of their labour. The sense of connection between past and present is complex and multi-faceted. Some women used the histories for validation and solidarity, others as a call to arms, whilst for those new to the industry they offered a way to construct a creative occupational identity and 'own it' in order to stake a claim in the profession. Whilst it is satisfying to have played a role in facilitating this, it is also troubling, asking us to reflect on the wider implications of these observations for an assessment of the present-day workplace and its gender politics. Where are the professional spaces in the media industries where women's experiences can be heard and validated? How can stakeholder

organisations come onboard as effective partners so that it is not left to individuals to be the sole agents of change? Perhaps most fundamentally why, despite fifty years of equality legislation and numerous initiatives to tackle discrimination, do gendered patterns of disadvantage remained so entrenched? Whilst these problems will continue to tax stakeholders, practitioners and other interested parties, oral histories offer a way to raise women's visibility in the public sphere whilst ameliorating some of the symptoms caused by the freelance economy. Screen industry and academia would be remiss in not taking that seriously.

References

Abrams, L. (2010), *Oral History Theory*, London: Routledge.

Bell, M. (2017), 'Learning to Listen: Histories of Women's Soundwork in the British Film Industry', *Screen*, 58: 4, pp. 437-57.

Bell, M. (2018), 'Rebuilding Post-War Britain, Female Technicians and Non-Fiction Film: Gender, Genre and Labour', *Feminist Media Histories,* 4: 4, pp. 33-56.

Bell, M. (2021), *Movie Workers: The Women Who Made British Cinema*, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.

Caldwell, J. (2008) *Production Culture*, Durham, US: Duke University Press.Cobb, S. and Williams, L. R. (2020), 'Histories of now: listening to women in British film', *Women's History Review*, 29: 5, pp. 890-902.

Conor, B, Gill, R. and S. Taylor (2015), 'Gender and Creative Labour', *The Sociological Review*. 63: S1, pp. 1-22.

Eichhorn, K. (2013) *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Gledhill, C. and Knight, J. (2015), 'Introduction' in Gledhill and Knight (eds.) *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, pp. 1-12.

Loist, S. and Verhoeven, D. (2019), 'Complex not complicated: Gendered media industries in the wake of #Me Too', *Media Industries*, 6: 1, pp. 67-71.

Kuhn, A. (2002), *An Everyday Magic, Cinema and Cultural Memory*, London: I B Tauris.

Scott, J. W. (2004), 'Feminism's History', *Journal of Women's History* 16: 2, pp. 10-29.

Sinclair, A, Pollard, E. and H. Wolfe (2006), *Scoping Study into Women Screenwriters in the UK,* UK Film Council.

Stamp, S. (2018), 'Why the History of Women's Filmmaking is Important Now', *Women and Hollywood*, 5 December. https://womenandhollywood.com/guest-post-why-the-history-of-womens-filmmaking-is-important-now/. <accessed 9 September, 2020>.

Stella, F. (2014), 'Engaging with "impact" agendas? Reflections on storytelling as knowledge exchange', in Y. Taylor (ed) *The Entrepreneurial University: Engaging Publics, Intersecting Impacts*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 105-124.

Summerfield, P. (2004), 'Culture and composure: Creating narratives of the gendered self in oral history interviews', *Culture and Social History*, 1:1, pp. 65-93.

Winch, A., Littler, J. and J. Keller (2016), 'Why "intergenerational feminist media studies"?', *Feminist Media Studies*, 16: 4, pp. 557-72.

Wreyford, N. (2013), 'The real cost of childcare: motherhood and flexible creative labour in the UK film industry', Review Essay. *Studies in the Maternal*, 5: 2, pp.1–22.

Wreyford, N. and Cobb, S. (2017), 'Data and Responsibility: Toward a feminist methodology for producing historical data on women in the contemporary UK film industry', *Feminist Media Histories*, 3: 3, pp. 107-132.

[1] The team consisted of Melanie Bell (PI), Vicky Ball (CI), a research associate Sue Bradley (employed for two years) and doctoral student Frances Galt.

[2] 'Impact' in the context of UK Higher Education is defined as research findings which have 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' (UKRI Research England, https://re.ukri.org/research/ref-impact/ (accessed 30 March 2020)). Research in the UK which receives public funds through bodies such as the AHRC is required, at point of application, to have a programme of activities intended to stimulate impact around their research findings.

[3] Our approach to life story interviews was informed by the British Library's National Life Stories model, an initiative which had pioneered oral history interviewing in the UK. Their policy is to offer interviewees the opportunity to place restrictions on their recordings, often 'closing' them to the listening public for a number of years, sometimes decades, on the grounds that this encourages an interviewee to be frank in their recording. This approach has become something of an orthodoxy for some oral historians, and there were those who thought our project's commitment to open access recordings was unethical. I was steadfast in my commitment to the recordings being accessible for future research, not least because of the virtual invisibility of women's accounts in film and television history, but this did lead to some emotionally-exhausting tensions within the project's lifespan.

[4] A full list of interviewees, biographical detail, the recruitment and selection process and the recordings themselves are available at https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/womenswork/. Employers included the BBC, Elstree Studios, Thames Television, Channel 4, the National Coal Board, the Children's Film Foundation and Rank amongst others.

[5] Raising Films is an organisation which provides support and advocacy for parents and carers working in the screen industries. One of its functions is to create a platform to share experiences and stories which practitioners can draw on to reduce feelings of isolation (common in a freelance economy) and to shape workplace conversations about equality and parental rights. The symposium was organised by Lee-Jane Bennion-Nixon and Lucy Brown, who were at the time employed by the Department of Creative Professions and Digital Arts at the University of Greenwich.