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Intergenerational divides as a mechanism of class inequality in UK television drama: From age-segmented commissioning to networked gatekeeping

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Abstract

In this article, we theorise generation as a structuring mechanism of class inequality in UK television drama. Drawing on 64 interviews across two anonymised case studies (a long-running BBC drama and a Channel 4 multi-episode drama) and supplementary industry interviews, we show how broadcast-era stability and platform-era precarity produce distinct, classed dispositions towards skill, authority and cultural value. We argue that audience-age segmentation operates as an institutional device that allocates commissioning resources and evaluative attention, converting cohort socialisations into structural advantage for the middle classes. Extending Mannheim and Bourdieu to the production field, and anchored in classic production studies, we identify three interlocking mechanisms across macro/meso/micro levels: (1) the erosion of shared cultural repertoires, (2) the transformation of hierarchy from finite rite of passage to enduring class filter and (3) the shift from institutional mentorship to networked gatekeeping. We reframe 'generational tensions' as historically contingent misrecognitions of structural change, with consequences for workforce diversity and for the civic remit of public service broadcasting drama. We conclude by outlining policy-relevant implications related to secure paid entry roles, formalised mentorship, transparent hiring and plural metrics for cultural literacy,

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and argue that the framework is analytically portable to other creative sectors and public service broadcasting/streaming contexts internationally.

Keywords

Class inequalities, commissioning practices, intergenerational divides, public service broadcasting, streaming platforms, television drama

Introduction: generation as a structuring condition of UK television drama

The UK television industry sits at a critical juncture where long-standing promises of meritocracy collide with entrenched patterns of exclusion. Inequalities of class, gender, race and region in television work have been extensively documented (Creative Diversity Network, 2023; Malik and Shankley, 2020; O'Brien et al., 2018), but generation remains an under-analysed axis of stratification. This article develops intergenerational divides as an analytic for cultural and media industries research, showing how differences between cohorts, formed under distinct industrial regimes, operate as mechanisms of inequality in television production.

We define intergenerational divides not as simple age differences, nor as shorthand for 'older' versus 'younger' workers, but as the structural and cultural disconnects between cohorts whose formative years in the industry were shaped by radically different sociohistorical conditions or conjunctures. As feminist media scholars have argued, generation is frequently mobilised in media and cultural discourse in ways that obscure or displace structural inequalities, making it necessary to interrogate how generational categories are produced and put to work rather than treating them as self-evident descriptors (Keller et al., 2019). These divides are not only analytical tools for researchers; they are also embedded in the industry's own vocabulary and decision-making.

For clarity, we use 'broadcast-era' to refer to careers formed in the 1980s–2000s within the public service broadcaster-led system, which was characterised by in-house training, stable employment and mass-audience scheduling. We use 'platform-era' to refer to careers emerging from the 2010s onwards, which have been shaped by digital streaming, fragmented audiences and a freelance, project-based economy. Both eras, of course, were marked by a range of inequalities. Rather than treating generation as a demographic variable, we examine how it functions as a mechanism for distributing value and reproducing inequality.

Broadcasters, commissioners and audience researchers routinely segment the viewing public by age, framing strategies around the pursuit of 'younger audiences' or the retention of 'core older viewers'. Such demographic targeting does more than shape scheduling and commissioning priorities: it seeps into workplace cultures, informing judgements about which genres, formats and production styles are considered viable for particular audiences.

Workers who entered during the broadcast era often encountered more stable forms of employment, in-house training and predictable career ladders than are typical today, with stability sometimes extending into freelance work. Yet this relative security coexisted with entrenched exclusions along lines of gender, race and region, as scholarship has documented (Bell, 2021; Galt, 2021; Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2013). Those entering during the platform-era, in contrast, typically face precarity in freelance work, network-dependent recruitment, compressed schedules and casualised contracts. The contrasts should not be read as a simple narrative of decline or improvement, but as a shift in the kinds of inequalities through which class advantage is maintained and legitimised.

Foregrounding generation reframes familiar labour concerns in UK television. Long hours, for instance, were once embedded in a career structure that promised stability and upward mobility; today, the same hours function as exclusionary filters, disproportionately deterring those without financial backing or flexible living arrangements (Morris et al., 2024). Similarly, the requirement to ‘pay dues’ in low-status roles had very different implications when progression was likely and secure than it does in today’s precarious market.

Rather than positioning generation solely as a demographic descriptor or as a feature of audience experience, this article builds on a body of cultural studies work that has examined generation in relation to labour, class formation and cultural production. Foundational studies have shown how generational positioning shapes orientations to work, authority and aspiration within specific historical contexts (McRobbie, 2002, 2016; Willis, 1977); while more recent interventions have demonstrated how generational discourse is mobilised within neoliberal culture to reframe questions of inequality, precarity and austerity (Keller et al., 2019; Milburn, 2019). We extend this work by examining how generational formations are institutionalised within the field of UK television drama, not only through cultural discourse but also through concrete production arrangements, commissioning practices and workplace hierarchies.

Our approach draws on Mannheim’s (1952) theorisation of generations as cohorts shaped by shared sociohistorical conditions, Bourdieu’s (1993) account of how ‘systems of aspirations’ formed in different periods underpin struggles over legitimacy, and research on media generations (Sorice and De Blasio, 2012) that shows how changing media ecologies reshape not only consumption but also the skills and literacies workers bring into production. By integrating these perspectives with cultural and sociological research on inequality in creative labour (Brook et al., 2020; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012; Percival and Hesmondhalgh, 2014), we position generation as a structuring mechanism through which class advantage is reproduced, contested and misrecognised within contemporary television production.

Our account of broadcast-era institutional cultures also draws on classic production studies that document craft moralities, in-house routines and managerial reform in UK/US television. Caldwell’s (2008) ethnography of ‘production culture’ details how professional authority and below-the-line knowledges are organised and policed across departments, while Born’s study of the BBC under John Birt and Greg Dyke traces how organisational restructuring re-coded values and labour norms inside a public service broadcaster (Born, 2004). These anchors help situate our generational socialisations within concrete institutional textures rather than abstract eras.

The analysis draws on anonymised case studies of two UK drama serials: one a long-running BBC production and the other a Channel 4 multi-episode drama. It includes interviews with 54 workers involved in making these serials across various career stages, from early-career entrants to heads of department. In addition, we conducted 10 interviews with TV drama producers working outside of public service broadcasting (PSB).

This article addresses the following research question: *How do cohort socialisations under different industrial regimes shape dispositions towards skill, authority and value in UK television drama?*

Theoretical framework: generations, distinction and the structuring of labour

Our analysis of intergenerational divides builds on, but departs from, existing sociological and media studies' accounts of generation. Mannheim's (1952) theorisation of the 'problem of generations' offers a foundation: generations are not simply age groups, but cohorts whose formative years are shaped by shared sociohistorical experiences, producing common orientations, dispositions and repertoires of meaning. Mannheim insists that such cohorts are internally differentiated by class, noting that

the fact of belonging to the same class, and that of belonging to the same generation or age group, have this in common, that both endow the individuals sharing in them with a common location in the social and historical process. (1952: 291)

Though it has been critiqued for overstating cohort cohesion (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2013), we address this by grounding 'generation' in the specific industrial socialisation processes and classed resources that shape career trajectories, rather than in broad attitudinal archetypes.

Bourdieu's (1993) work adds a crucial dimension: generational conflict as a clash between 'systems of aspirations formed in different periods' (1993: 95), embedded in particular fields of cultural production. In UK television drama, this includes clashes between broadcast-era cultural capital, rooted in public service repertoires and schedule-oriented craft norms (Born, 2004; Caldwell, 2008), and platform-era cultural capital, characterised by platform literacies and metric-driven commissioning value (Lobato, 2019; Lotz, 2017).

Importantly, the television industry itself actively reinforces generational distinctions. Age segmentation is codified in audience measurement tools such as Barb panels¹ and Ofcom demographic reporting,² which back-propagate into commissioning priorities and hiring practices.³ UK broadcasters and commissioning teams are preoccupied with audience demographics, routinely segmenting by age and designing strategies to attract 'younger viewers' or retain 'core older audiences'. This demographic coding operates across macro (measurement), meso (commissioning) and micro (production decision-making) levels (BFI, 2022; Ofcom, 2024; ScreenSkills, 2024), making generational categories both analytical constructs and active industry levers.

Research on media generations (Bolin, 2016; Siibak et al., 2014; Sorice and De Blasio, 2012) extends these insights, situating generational identity as a key lens for

understanding how audiences and, by extension, practitioners, experience media change. Shifts from broadcast to digital, from synchronous mass audiences to personalised on-demand viewing, reconfigure not only audience practices but also the literacies and professional repertoires that workers bring into production. For UK television drama, broadcast-era entrants were socialised into a production culture oriented towards serving heterogeneous publics at scale. In contrast, platform-era entrants have honed skills and values in fragmented, niche and participatory environments.

Despite its presence in audience studies, media history and feminist cultural analyses of generational discourse, ‘generation’ has been less consistently examined within media labour research as a structuring category in its own right, particularly in relation to television production. Feminist cultural studies has offered important analyses of generational discourse and intergenerational relations under neoliberalism (Keller et al., 2019), but has paid less attention to how generation is institutionalised within the organisation of television labour.

When addressed in creative industries research, generational difference is often framed narrowly, as a matter of skills transfer, technological adaptation or craft tradition, rather than as a mechanism of gatekeeping embedded in industrial structures. Press’ (1991) study of women’s television viewing offers an earlier model for integrating generation with other axes of inequality – in this case, class and gender – showing how cohort position shapes interpretive frameworks. Although Percival and Hesmondhalgh (2014) and Brook et al. (2020) have compared age groups and career stages to understand differing experiences of unpaid work as part of research on UK television that has illuminated structural inequalities of class, race, gender and region (Brook et al., 2020; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012), the field has rarely analysed generation as a means through which those inequalities are reproduced.

We use intergenerational divides to name points of disconnection between cohorts socialised into the same industry under different structural conditions, conditions that encompass not only technologies of production and distribution, but also the institutional arrangements of labour, the terms of entry and the everyday moral economies of work (Born, 2004; Caldwell, 2008). In our case, the contrast is stark: one cohort was trained in an era of relatively secure, in-house employment, sustained mentorship and predictable advancement, while the other navigates freelance precarity, short-term contracts, network-gated hiring and compressed schedules.

These divides are deeply classed. The resources required to succeed in each industrial regime, such as the ability to ‘wait out’ low-paid early years, or to leverage personal networks, are unevenly distributed. In situating our analysis at the intersection of Mannheim’s generational theory, Bourdieu’s distinction, and media generations scholarship, we foreground generation not as a backdrop to class inequality, but as a mechanism through which class advantage is actively maintained, contested and legitimised in UK television production.

Methodology

This article draws on qualitative UK research conducted as part of the AHRC-funded *What’s On? Rethinking class in the television industry* study, which examines how class

shapes television drama production, representation and audience engagement. For this analysis, we focus on two anonymised case studies: a long-running BBC serial drama and a multi-episode Channel 4 serial drama. The cases were selected to provide both institutional contrast (PSB vs commercially-funded PSB remit) and temporal scope: the BBC serial's longevity provided access to broadcast-era and platform-era veterans within the same production, while the Channel 4 drama exemplified contemporary commissioning logics and production rhythms.

Our sampling strategy aimed to capture the breadth of intergenerational targeting across the industry. We conducted 64 semi-structured interviews – 54 across both productions and 10 supplementary interviews with drama professionals beyond PSBs – recruiting participants across departments and career stages, from runners and trainees to heads of department and senior creatives, with entry points spanning more than four decades. Crucially, we included participants who had worked on projects explicitly framed for different demographic targets, since broadcasters' audience segmentation along generational lines ('youth', 'core older viewers', 'family audiences') influences how productions assemble teams and value creative repertoires. Commissioning for youth audiences often attracts 'fresh talent' schemes, creating more entry points but thinner access to senior mentorship, while commissioning for 'core' demographics may concentrate experienced teams, offering richer mentoring but fewer entry-level opportunities. Thus, demographic targeting at the commissioning stage quietly structures where and how mentorship accumulates.

Interviews explored experiences of entry, progression, working conditions, mentorship and perceptions of cultural value. Participants reflected on their entry conditions into the industry, available pathways and comparisons with colleagues from other cohorts. This design allowed us to trace how formative conditions – whether in broadcast-era systems of (relatively) secure, in-house training, or contemporary freelance ecologies – continue to shape day-to-day work and long-term career trajectories.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using an abductive approach that moved between our conceptual framework and the empirical material. Initial open coding yielded thematic categories, which were subsequently grouped into three overarching themes: repertoires, hierarchies and mentorship. The research received ethical approval from the University of Leeds, and all participants are anonymised by role, with identifying details about productions or personnel removed.

The two case studies diverged in ways that illuminate how intergenerational divides operate. The long-running public service drama often retained crews across multiple series, creating stability that allowed some platform-era entrants to progress through roles over time and build relationships with broadcast-era mentors. In contrast, the shorter-run commercial-public service drama operated more transiently, with crews assembled for short commissions. This reduced opportunities for sustained mentorship and made career progression more dependent on pre-existing networks, intensifying structural disadvantages faced by entrants without class-based safety nets.

Analysis: mechanisms of intergenerational inequality

In what follows, we examine three mechanisms through which intergenerational divides structure inequality in UK television drama. These are (1) cultural repertoires and genre

value, (2) hierarchies and working cultures, and (3) mentorship and the networked gate. Together, they show how formative socialisations in different industrial eras are institutionalised, reproduced and contested across the field.

Cultural repertoires and genre value

Our first mechanism concerns cultural repertoires and genre value: how broadcast- and platform-era socialisations generate divergent repertoires that are differently valued, with consequences for classed career trajectories. Participants in both case-study dramas described a marked change in the cultural reference points and shared experiences that underpin television work. This shift was not narrated simply as a matter of ‘taste’ or ‘audience change’, but as a generationally produced divide in how television is understood as a cultural form and a workplace.

For those whose formative years in the industry occurred in the broadcast era, television retains the qualities of a common cultural grammar. It was experienced as a synchronous, mass medium that organised everyday rhythms, shaped public conversation and provided a readily shared repertoire of references among colleagues. A senior producer with four decades of experience recalled:

Children don’t grow up with . . . TV like we did. It’s a changing world . . . I had such joy of working in this industry for 40 years that I just think that is a shame – but the only way that we are going to keep television going is to get our younger audiences involved.

This is not nostalgia as mere sentiment; it is a claim about television’s social function. In Mannheim’s terms, it marks a generationally formed ‘mode of experiencing’ television as a mass, synchronous medium. That experience confers a particular understanding of value: the programme as a public object, the schedule as civic rhythm, the production as contribution to a shared commons. Older workers repeatedly locate their craft within that public horizon, even when they embrace the changes brought by digital platforms.

In contrast, younger workers describe navigating a mediascape composed of personalised feeds, irregular release windows and multi-platform engagements. A craft worker offered a telling illustration, referring to the show they work on:

It’s not widely watched among young people . . . Some people sit and watch it with their mum.

The phrase ‘with their mum’ signals that, for many younger viewers, television persists less as a universal peer reference than as a bridge across generations in the home. For labour, the implications are double: younger entrants do not necessarily arrive with the same broadcast-era repertoire in common with colleagues, yet they bring literacies from adjacent cultures, such as short-form video, platform logics and participatory fandom, that are often undervalued in legacy production hierarchies.

Participants stressed that this divide is a divergence in socialisation into television, as both cultural form and workplace, rather than simply a matter of taste. As one participant put it, shifts in media ecology have reshaped everyday practices of television engagement across cohorts: ‘We have BBC iPlayer now . . . that is how lots of young people

watch TV now . . . They don't watch regular TV like, you know, I do'. Workers trained in the idiom of broadcast flow tend to narrate craft excellence in terms of serving heterogeneous publics at scale. Those formed in platform ecologies more often narrate excellence through responsiveness, iteration and community-specific address. Both sets of dispositions involve high skill, yet friction arises when one is treated as the unmarked professional norm and the other as a deficit. Some broadcast-era entrants, particularly those with early exposure to digital and participatory cultures, readily embraced platform-era literacies. In contrast, some platform-era entrants arrived steeped in broadcast repertoires through family or regional traditions.

These cultural shifts intersect with classed hierarchies of genre. A younger participant described the drama they worked on in explicitly social terms:

I'd say the drama comes across in a kind of middle-classy way. It can be quite mentally stimulating rather than just people getting shot or chased, but you'd have to have a good vocabulary, because sometimes I had to stop and think, what are they even saying? Other times I found myself drifting off on my phone because it was just people talking.

Such reflections from workers socialised in the platform-era underline how genre distinctions are often read through class as well as generational lenses. Senior figures echoed this coding of genre in different terms. One long-serving producer spoke bluntly:

I think there is a class in society watching television. Some people go, 'Oh, I don't watch *EastEnders*', or, 'I wouldn't watch *Corrie*', and, 'I wouldn't watch soap'. I think there is a soap snobbery that still exists, and then there are people that love soap.

A script worker, with experience across continuing serial drama and the so-called high-end projects, described the consequences:

There is not anyone I have spoken to in high-end drama that doesn't look down their nose a bit about soap. I think, even working with writers who have come from soap, they are kind of stigmatised to a certain extent.

If such classed perceptions of genre shape how programmes are valued, they also have direct consequences for workers' progression. A younger worker, reflecting on their own stalled progression, made the point even more sharply:

I've just missed out on a gig because someone saw *EastEnders* on my CV and decided they didn't want that. Sometimes you just need someone to say, 'They can do this', because the difference between the top of that rung and the bottom of this one is actually fairly small.

In this context, 'too soapy' is more than a stylistic judgement. It is a form of symbolic devaluation that links genre association to perceived creative capacity. Because continuing drama was historically the training ground for broadcast-era entrants, while platform-era workers more often build credits in short-form or prestige-branded projects, such judgements carry both a generational and a classed coding, influencing who is considered for certain types of work. This makes it one instance of how generation operates as a structuring mechanism of class inequality in the television industry.

These symbolic struggles over genre and value not only shape how workers and commissioners perceive each other, but they also manifest in the dramas themselves. In the long-running public service drama, the central ensemble consists of established characters in their early forties, surrounded by family members and colleagues spanning younger and older generations. Its continuing structure sustains cross-generational exchange, whereby formative repertoires of different cohorts are staged in everyday interaction. The shorter-run drama takes a different approach, unfolding over a tightly contained period and moving episodically between the perspectives of characters at different life stages. Each instalment offers a concentrated, mood-driven immersion in the lives of its focal characters, with flashbacks and atmospheric details layered into a compressed timeline. Its narrative intensity and self-contained arc mirror commissioning and production rhythms that prioritise concentrated audience engagement and flexible release patterns, reflecting the tempo of contemporary short-form, multi-partner drama production.

In both cases, these formal and structural choices are shaped by the generationally-inflected industrial contexts in which the dramas were made. The long-running serial's institutional continuity and cross-generational collaboration echo broadcast-era production values, while the shorter-run drama's condensed format and atmospheric immersion reflect production tempos and commissioning priorities associated with the current platform-oriented era. More broadly, the ensemble structures of long-running drama reproduce broadcast-era norms. In contrast, the short-run drama case study reflects platform-era commissioning logics, embedding these generational repertoires into the very form of the texts. Reading the dramas alongside their production contexts makes visible how workplace divides also shape the symbolic repertoires available to audiences, influencing which generational experiences are centred and how they are represented.

In Bourdieu's terms, these are acts of distinction: judgements framed as neutral quality assessments that, in practice, police legitimacy and distribute opportunity. As one interviewee noted, 'people will look at your CV and be like, "Oh, you did soaps", and they look down on it'. In our interviews, 'soapy' rarely referred to a specific flaw. Rather, it was shorthand for skills developed under pressure: sustaining character continuity, producing at pace and building audience intimacy. These are paradoxically vital to the drama field, yet when coded as 'low', they become liabilities, particularly for regional and working-class entrants whose CVs often begin in such genres.

The erosion of a shared cultural framework heightens the impact of these judgements. Commissioners and senior creatives, themselves shaped by different formative eras, rely on new signalling devices – 'high-end', 'premium', 'cinematic' and 'authored' – which cluster around specific platforms and commissioning labels. Intergenerational divides widen: broadcast-socialised workers defend the civic and craft value of continuing drama, while platform-socialised workers sometimes learn to disavow those forms to progress. In both cases, the move is as much a classed career strategy as a personal preference.

Hierarchies and working cultures

Our second mechanism centres on hierarchies and working cultures: how structures of authority, progression and decision-making are re-coded from finite rites of passage into enduring class filters under conditions of precarity. Fragmentation also reorganises

authority in everyday production talk. Older heads of department invoke the imagined 'national audience' as an arbiter of taste and measure of success. Younger entrants more often cite metrics from platform culture, such as completion rates, clip shares, online buzz or define value in serving niche communities.

These differences are reinforced by the way broadcasters' segment audiences in commissioning strategies. Targeting 'younger' or 'core older' demographics not only shapes the shows that get greenlit, but also the creative and editorial repertoires deemed valuable in production. Workers whose formative experience aligns with a broadcaster's current demographic focus may find their expertise amplified; others may see theirs discounted, even if it has proven value in other audience contexts. In this sense, audience-age segmentation is not a neutral marketing exercise. Instead, it is an active mediator of which generational dispositions hold institutional legitimacy at any given moment.

As one younger AD put it,

If something goes viral in the right spaces, that's huge . . . but I've been in meetings where people just don't get why that matters if it's not on BBC One at nine.

Another younger worker reflected on how these differences play out in everyday authority:

I've found younger managers much more willing to hear what I've got to say, which really shocked me at first. With people my age it's collaborative, but when older colleagues are in it gets more frantic. They'll say Gen Z are always on their phones, while some of them in very senior jobs can't even manage a PDF.

This framing in terms of 'younger' and 'older' reflects how workers experience the divide, but what sits beneath it are different industrial socialisations: one shaped by broadcast-era norms of authority and another by platform-era cultures of collaboration and digital competence. These outlooks are neither inherently more public-minded nor more commercial; rather, they collide over what constitutes valid evidence and expertise. Friction arises not over the goal of serving audiences, but over which evidentiary standards are recognised in the room. In some cases, platform-era metrics such as completion rates or cross-platform engagement provide more empirically grounded audience evidence than imagined 'national audience' appeals. Yet when such expertise is illegible to decision-makers shaped by broadcast norms, its strategic value can be overlooked.

A further nuance emerges in how workers describe the affective experience of television. Senior contributors spoke of it as a 'life-course companion' and 'enabler of the imagination', a framing that underwrites a moral economy in which long hours are justified by cultural value. Many younger workers respect this ethos but reframe it through concerns for mental health, sustainable pay and time outside work. When such claims are read as lack of dedication, the clash is misread as attitudinal rather than structural; a meeting of norms viable in one industrial regime with survival strategies for another.

Importantly, younger workers are not indifferent to legacy television; many spoke with admiration for the craft of continuing drama. The divide is not between consumers and non-consumers, but between which literacies are recognised as valuable.

When authority defaults to broadcast repertoires, platform literacies are treated as supplemental; when it defaults to prestige repertoires, continuing drama skills are cast as parochial. In both cases, the pathways to acquiring those literacies are classed: who had proximity to certain institutions, who could afford unpaid training and who learned which dialect of value.

The result is not the flattening of hierarchy but its multiplication. As one interviewee lamented, ‘it is hierarchy . . . a lack of understanding – and, in some regards, respect of what other people are doing’. Intergenerational divides convert different socialisations into unequal opportunities, positioning the broadcast-trained worker and the platform-literate entrant in distinct and unequally-valued fields of cultural capital. What appears to be a conflict of generations is, in fact, a contest over which histories of television count as expertise and whose histories are allowed to set the terms of the present. For some participants, particularly those entering the industry under platform-era conditions, this contest was experienced in explicitly generational terms. As one platform-era entrant put it, expressing acute frustration with decision-making cultures shaped by earlier industrial norms:

a lot of the decision makers are of a generation where being gay is still weird, being trans is disgusting, being a woman is to be in the kitchen . . . all of these barriers are up because of who the decision makers are.

Across both case-study productions, participants described UK television drama as intensely hierarchical. The ladder of roles, the bottlenecks and the unwritten rules have changed little in form over the decades. What has changed, sharply, is how different generational cohorts experience these structures.

Broadcast-era entrants typically encountered hierarchy within a relatively stable employment regime. Long hours, deference to senior staff and ‘paying dues’ in menial tasks were framed as temporary rites of passage on the way to secure, long-term positions (see Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). A senior colleague recalled,

I was an art department assistant . . . You have to go and make people cups of tea, coffee . . . I had to get their wives their birthday presents, including lingerie. It was a bit of doing everything.

While exploitative by contemporary standards, such tasks were embedded in career trajectories that could deliver upward mobility and institutional loyalty. In the broadcast era, this kind of entry-level work functioned as a structuring mechanism for sorting and socialising entrants into the industry: a finite rite of passage whose hardships were offset by stable prospects.

For platform-era entrants, the same hierarchical rituals occur in a freelance, project-based economy with no guarantee of progression. The people who most often endure them at the bottom of the ladder are not a cross-section of society. As our forthcoming findings on labour conditions will show, entry routes are now heavily skewed towards those from middle-class backgrounds who can afford prolonged periods of insecure, low-paid work, often supported by family wealth or connections. Nepotistic hiring and network-gated opportunities mean that working-class entrants are less common, and those who do enter are far more likely to leave before advancing.

This generational shift gives rise to two distinct realities for entry-level professionals. In the platform-era, middle-class entrants can often 'ride out' insecure early years, treating exploitative norms as part of building credits; working-class entrants face the same expectations but with far higher risk of attrition. In the broadcast era, these conditions, while exploitative, were typically survivable across classes because they were temporary steps towards stable roles. These dynamics are often misinterpreted as attitudinal. Older workers sometimes interpret younger colleagues' reluctance to endure exploitative norms as a lack of dedication. Younger workers see older colleagues' defence of those norms as out of touch. In reality, both are responding rationally to the industrial conditions of their formative years: one group to a stable career ladder that made such endurance worthwhile, the other to a precarious market in which the same endurance may lead nowhere, unless you have the safety net of class privilege.

Decision-making cultures also reveal a generational dimension. Senior managers, often broadcast-era entrants, sometimes carry forward assumptions about who 'fits' leadership roles, rooted in older workplace norms. This is compounded by commissioning teams' evaluation of projects and personnel through demographic appeal (National Audit Office, 2017). Workers associated with genres targeting 'desirable' demographics may be fast-tracked, while those linked to genres serving ageing audiences can find themselves stalled, regardless of skill (Johnson and Peirse, 2021). As one senior worker noted, 'If it's seen as for old people, it's already got a ceiling on it'. Some younger, middle-class entrants described the freelance ecology as more permeable than institutional hierarchies, enabling faster lateral moves between projects – a reminder that generational effects are mediated by class resources rather than reducible to age. Such judgements demonstrate how the industry's concern with audience age categories directly influence career hierarchies, though we treat these accounts as perceptions of uneven cultural change rather than universal attributes of broadcast-era entrants. This does not mean that older workers are inherently more exclusionary, but that the cultural scripts they absorbed during formative years can persist unless actively challenged. For platform-era entrants, many of whom came through more publicly diverse media spaces but far more precarious labour markets, these scripts often feel doubly alienating: exclusionary in content and unrealistic in economic expectation.

Informal recruitment compounds the divide. Broadcast-era entrants often built networks through long-term institutional presence; platform-era entrants, on the other hand, must generate and maintain those networks in a fragmented, short-term hiring ecology. As a middle-class origin, early-career worker noted of their first role as a runner, 'At the time, I was just happy to be there . . . I didn't realise every second counted . . . It took time to get more work'. The result is that hierarchy functions not only as a vertical ordering of roles, but also as a cultural logic that is differently navigable depending on both the generational regime and the class position in which one learned the rules.

In short, the structure looks the same across cohorts, but the terms of engagement have shifted. What once operated as a finite rite of passage under stable employment, as many broadcast-era entrants narrated, now functions as a standing class filter under precarity, rewarding those with financial buffers and ejecting those without, despite the persistence of exclusionary barriers, particularly for women and workers of colour. For broadcast-era entrants, hierarchy was a test within a system that would, eventually,

reward compliance. For platform-era entrants, it often serves as a filter that reproduces class privilege, keeping middle-class entrants in play while quietly pushing working-class entrants out.

Mentorship and the networked gate

Our third mechanism highlights mentorship and the networked gate: the shift from institutionalised, in-house training to network-dependent gatekeeping, which advantages entrants with inherited social capital and leaves others exposed to attrition. In both case-study productions, participants stressed that building a television career involves far more than technical competence: it requires learning how to navigate the industry's values, rhythms and unwritten rules. The way that learning happens and who has access to it has changed profoundly across generations.

Broadcast-era entrants often encountered mentorship as a structured part of their job. In-house production departments, long-term contracts and stable teams created an environment that fostered sustained, reciprocal learning. A senior colleague recalled,

I became an assistant location manager at Thames. Thankfully, then they had a very nice lady who was very pro-women and was trying to build the role of women in television . . . She sort of took me under her wing and grew me and my career.

Here, mentorship meant active sponsorship from someone with institutional authority, offered within a system whereby junior staff were expected to progress, and there was time to invest in that progression.

For platform-era entrants, the ecology is very different. The contraction of in-house training, the shift to freelance and project-based work and compressed schedules mean that mentorship is now mostly ad hoc. A mid-level production manager described the double-edged nature of the current system:

A lot of the time, this industry is very much word of mouth and who people recommend. That can be great . . . you work in a team that you know is fantastic . . . but there is this element of kind of closing off to others.

There were exceptions. In a small number of cases, senior broadcast-era staff actively sought out and sponsored platform-era entrants from underrepresented backgrounds, altering hiring and promotion decisions. Such cross-generational mentorship demonstrates that these divides can be bridged when recognition flows both ways. The same mechanism – personal recommendation – can create solidarity and trust, but it also functions as a gatekeeping device. Those from middle-class backgrounds, often with family or educational connections to the industry, arrive already well connected within these networks. Working-class entrants, particularly those without proximity to production hubs, face an exhausting and costly struggle to break in.

One content editor described the attritional process:

I was a sports coach to earn money on the side . . . It was one last ditch to *EastEnders* because I was emailing them for months, well years on and off, trying to just . . . do anything.

Such persistence is rarely sustainable without financial backing. In the absence of formalised mentoring or structured routes of progression, those without inherited connections are required to invest prolonged periods of unpaid or underpaid labour simply to remain visible within hiring networks. This disproportionately benefits those who can afford to wait for a break and limits the presence of working-class voices in the platform-era workforce.

Mentorship still happens, but it is more often an act of individual generosity than an institutional requirement. Unsurprisingly, such generosity tends to flow along lines of familiarity, towards those already ‘known quantities’ in the networked hiring ecology. For those without inherited connections, even when mentorship does occur, it is more likely to be short-term and fragile, easily lost when a contract ends. In this context, access to learning how the industry works is no longer embedded in organisations, but mediated through informal relationships that unevenly distribute opportunity.

Here, too, demographic targeting plays a quiet role. Productions aimed at attracting younger audiences are often positioned as sites for ‘fresh talent’ initiatives, while those serving established demographics are more likely to retain experienced teams. For early-career workers, this can mean very different exposure to mentorship: the former may offer access to other newcomers but fewer senior guides, while the latter may offer seasoned colleagues but little space for entry-level recruitment. The result is that commissioning decisions made in response to audience-age metrics ripple down into the informal economies of training and sponsorship, shaping who receives sustained guidance and who remains dependent on short-term networked access. There were, however, cases in which platform-era entrants secured sustained mentorship from senior broadcast-era colleagues, and conversely, instances where broadcast-era entrants received pivotal support from younger peers with specialist platform expertise.

Read alongside our participants’ accounts, this shift from institutionalised to network-dependent mentorship also finds expression in one of our case-study dramas. An established local figure, embedded within inherited networks and narratives, is paired with a younger arrival whose partial exclusion from those networks initially limits their capacity to act, even as their perspectives unsettle existing assumptions. This pairing functions as a narrative analogue of the contemporary mentorship divide: a world in which learning ‘how things are done’ depends less on formal inclusion than on proximity to those already inside the gate.

Discussion: intergenerational divides as a structuring condition of inequality

Our analysis identifies three interconnected mechanisms through which intergenerational divides reproduce class inequality in UK television drama. First, the divergence in cultural repertoires between broadcast and platform-era entrants shapes how genres are valued and opportunities distributed. Audience-age segmentation is a key mediator here: commissioners’ targeting of ‘younger’ or ‘core older’ demographics determines not only

which shows get made, but also which repertoires of skill are seen as current, bankable and legitimate. Broadcast-era entrants often defend continuing drama and soap as vital public service work and training grounds; platform-era entrants, socialised into prestige-platform economies, may feel pressure to disavow those forms to progress. In both cases, judgements about genre become coded career strategies, reflecting classed access to different kinds of cultural capital.

These mechanisms also played out differently across our two case studies: in the long-running public service drama, recurring series created more scope for cross-generational contact and gradual progression, whereas in the shorter-run commercial-public service drama, the stop/start hiring cycle left newer entrants more reliant on existing networks to secure the next role.

Second, hierarchy norms learned under different industrial regimes alter the cost-benefit calculus of 'paying dues'. In the broadcast era, long hours, hierarchical deference and low-status work were temporary trials within a stable progression system, survivable across classes. In the platform era, those same demands often have no guaranteed payoff, functioning instead as enduring filters that disproportionately favour those with financial safety nets. What was once a finite test of endurance now operates as a structural barrier, producing classed patterns of attrition.

Third, the shift from institutionalised to network-dependent mentorship advantages those with pre-existing connections. In-house training schemes and long-term teams once provided sustained, reciprocal learning across cohorts. In today's freelance ecology, mentoring is often ad hoc, short-term and predominantly directed towards those who already resemble the existing workforce in terms of class, region and social background. These patterns are reinforced by demographic targeting at the commissioning stage, which unevenly distributes mentoring resources across productions. Projects aimed at younger audiences often recruit more newcomers but offer fewer senior guides, while productions for 'core' audiences may concentrate experienced teams but open few entry-level opportunities.

These mechanisms are often misrecognised as differences in attitude or dedication, obscuring their structural roots. Broadcast-era norms remain benchmarks even though the supports that once made them viable have disappeared. At the same time, platform-era literacies can be undervalued when they do not align with entrenched repertoires of legitimacy. The result is that the very benchmarks for 'professionalism' and 'quality' are historically contingent but are rarely treated as such in everyday evaluation.

It is important to note that the broadcast era's 'shared culture' coexisted with significant exclusions along lines of race, gender and region; therefore, nostalgia for its civic ethos must be tempered by recognition of who was left out. Likewise, some platform-era practices, such as digital-first commissioning, short-form drama or cross-platform storytelling, have opened creative routes for certain regional or underrepresented communities, even as they have intensified precarity. These counter-currents show that intergenerational divides are not monolithic, and that bridging them is possible when recognition flows in both directions.

Recognising intergenerational divides as a structuring condition of inequality shifts the focus away from narrow calls for 'mutual respect' between age cohorts and towards infrastructural reform. Bridging these divides will require more than encouraging older and younger workers to value each other's expertise; it will require changing the material

and organisational conditions that shape what expertise can be developed, recognised and rewarded. That means secure, fairly paid entry-level roles; formalised and accessible mentorship (cf. BFI, 2022; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; ScreenSkills, 2024); and evaluative frameworks that give equal weight to multiple forms of cultural literacy.

The stakes extend beyond workplace equity. Intergenerational divides, as we have shown, are one of the mechanisms through which class inequality is reproduced in UK television drama. Left unaddressed, they risk narrowing the range of voices, experiences and perspectives that reach positions of creative authority, and in turn, the diversity of stories told to audiences. In a sector that claims to serve a broad and heterogeneous public, the persistence of such divides is not only a labour issue, but also a cultural one.

For the wider field of cultural and media industries research, our analysis suggests that treating generation as a structuring mechanism rather than a descriptive variable opens up new avenues of inquiry. Work on inequality in creative labour has tended to foreground class, race, gender and region, while invoking generation primarily in relation to audiences or technological adoption. By demonstrating how generational dispositions are institutionalised through commissioning logics, workplace hierarchies and genre valuations, we extend the analytic toolkit for understanding how inequalities are reproduced. This mechanism-oriented account invites comparative research across sectors and national contexts, encouraging scholars to trace how shifting industrial regimes generate not just different working conditions but durable, classed dispositions towards skill, value and legitimacy.

Conclusion

Addressing intergenerational divides in UK television drama requires recognising them as systematic barriers that reproduce class advantage rather than natural demographic differences. Our analysis shows how audience-age segmentation, hierarchical filtering and network-dependent mentorship combine to create structural inequalities that extend far beyond individual attitudes or generational preferences.

This recognition has broader implications. The framework developed here is likely to resonate across other creative sectors such as theatre, music, journalism and film, in which industrial regimes have shifted rapidly, producing similar disjunctures between cohorts trained in more stable employment systems and those entering highly precarious, network-driven contexts. Internationally, comparable dynamics can be observed in other PSB and streaming environments, such as the ABC/SBS in Australia, CBC in Canada or European PSBs adapting to platform-era commissioning. The underlying mechanism – generational dispositions institutionalised through commissioning logics – remains applicable across these contexts.

Recognising intergenerational divides as an active mechanism of inequality reframes the terms of intervention across multiple domains. For academia, this means treating generation as a structuring category in cultural and media industries research, one that intersects dynamically with class, race, gender and region. For the television industry, it means altering the material conditions that sustain the divide: secure, fairly paid entry-level roles must replace unpaid or underpaid work; mentorship should be formalised and resourced as an organisational duty; and the skills of continuing drama and soap should

be accorded the professional value they demonstrably hold. For policy-makers and regulators, generation should join class, race, gender, disability and region as a monitored dimension of workforce diversity, with public funding tied to demonstrable commitments to paid training and accessible mentoring.

The significance of this work lies in contributing to a growing body of labour research that foregrounds generation as a structuring mechanism of class inequality. Treating intergenerational diversity as a creative resource rather than a site of fracture will require sustained structural change, but without it, the sector will continue to narrow the diversity of voices and perspectives it can sustain, undermining television drama's capacity to serve heterogeneous audiences and fulfil its democratic remit.

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Ethical considerations

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Data availability statement

Data supporting this research are not available for public sharing due to the sensitive and confidential nature of the human subjects involved. Sharing this data would compromise the privacy and anonymity of the participants, in accordance with the ethical approval and consent agreements governing this study.

Notes

1. The Barb panel: <https://www.barb.co.uk/the-barb-panel-2/>
2. Ofcom generation research: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/media-habits-adults/gen-z-swerves-traditional-broadcast-tv-as-less-than-half-tune-in-weekly>
3. National Audit Office 2017: <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/the-bbcs-understanding-of-its-audiences-and-users/> and Ofcom BBC Annual Report (2024): <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/tv-radio-and-on-demand/bbc/bbc-annual-report/2024/ofcoms-annual-report-on-the-bbc-202324.pdf?v=392184>

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