The 'shelf-life' of a media career: a study of the long-term career narratives of media graduates

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ABSTRACT

Despite scholarly interest in the disruptive changes to have affected media industries, and a growing understanding of how Creative Industries now operate as labour markets, to date there has been little consideration of the way in which media careers are navigated over the longer-term. This article focuses on the subjective experience of media work *over time*. We report on a study of a single cohort of Media Production graduates of a UK university, who are now in mid-career. They reflect on: their transition from University into work; freelancing; job satisfaction; industry changes; and work-life balance. In our analysis we note the way in which the demands of media work are experienced through the prism of age, and life stage. Contrary to our presumption that the most significant challenges are experienced in early career, our findings suggest that media careers may become increasingly difficult to sustain over time, and are characterised by a limited 'shelf life': the rate of attrition from media work by mid-career is particularly striking. We suggest that this under-reported feature of media work is likely to be systemic and to have wider implications.

Introduction

The Creative Industries as a sector category can be traced to UK government policy under New Labour in the late 1990s, in its attempt to quantify the creation and exploitation of intellectual property. This policy was adopted following a 'mapping' exercise to establish exactly what were 'the employment, earnings, value and growth figures' (Smith 1998, 10) of those sectors thought to be dependent upon 'talent and the creation of value through imaginative skills' (147). The initiative was to have far-reaching and long-lasting ramifications. What followed was a 'raft of mapping documents by other countries also seeking to estimate the size and growth of this sector' (Potts and Cunningham, 2008, 233) as the Creative Industries designation became widely adopted internationally.

In parallel with these developments, a body of scholarship began to emerge that reflected a burgeoning interest in this sector within academia. The establishment of this journal is just one such example, 'dedicated to an emerging and increasingly important multidisciplinary field of research and scholarship' (Roodhouse, 2008, 5). Such work has included charting the many changes to have occurred across the various Creative Industries' sub-sectors, within this timeframe. This has included studies with a focus on creative agencies (Pratt, 2006); fashion (McRobbie, 1998; McRobbie, 2002; Arvidsson, Malossi, and Naro 2010); music production and performance (Richards and Milestone, 2000); and entertainment clubs (Butler and Stoyanova Russell, 2018). Media work, the particular focus of this study, has also been the subject of several investigations: notably film production (Blair, 2003; Blair, Culkin, and Randle 2003; Caldwell 2008); television production (Paterson 2010; Lee 2011; Eikhof and York 2016); new media (Batt, Christopherson, Rightor, et al. 2000; Kotamraju 2002; Jarvis and Pratt 2006; Gottschall and Kroos 2007; Gill 2011); and computer games (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2006; Harvey and Shepherd 2017). Media work has also featured in a number of cross-sector comparative studies (Nixon and Crewe 2004; Banks 2007; Deuze 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; and Hennekam and Bennett 2017). Collectively, the picture to have emerged by the latter part of the second decade of the twenty-first century has been of a labour experience often considered by its workforce to be attractive, pleasurable, rewarding, and a means of self-actualization and personal fulfilment, whilst at the same time characterized by both exploitation (Hesmondhalgh 2015) and self-exploitation, as workers engage in individualised and unstructured careers, involving long hours, and sometimes inadequate rates of pay. Contracts are often short-term and project-based, dependent upon workers' own self-entrepreneurship and networks, and lacking basic entitlements to what formerly would have been considered the rudimentary obligation and responsibility of the employer. Such findings have been in contrast to a more celebratory (often more policy-oriented) discourse that has tended to foreground the 'joys of creativity', and the opportunities for individual agency in working within the Creative Industries (Lovink and Rossiter 2007). Creative work has also been identified as a site of serious and long-term inequalities (often styled as 'under-representation'). These relate particularly to gender, ethnicity, disability, and their intersection, and have become more widely recognized as problems needing policy intervention (illustrated, for example, by the EU's *Gender Equality in the Media*, Directorate General for Internal Policies 2018). Within the UK, there have also been systemic social class barriers: recent analysis of the British Labour Force Survey has demonstrated that those working in cultural industries remain significantly over-representative of those from professional and managerial backgrounds (O'Brien et al. 2016).

It is clear that technological advances, (de)regulatory reform, and altering social practices since the turn of the century, and the social and political shifts that these have represented, have resulted in decisive transformations within these industries, with direct and indirect effect on the experience of employment. It has also become clear that many of these changes are not restricted to creative work, as employment relationships more broadly become 'defined in many cases by less loyalty, greater mobility, and less certainty' (Briscoe and Hall 2006, 5). What has largely been missing from the insights of this various and evolving corpus of literature, however, is what

the implication of these trends has been for the individual experience of the media worker *over time*.

The relationship between age and intrinsic and extrinsic work-related motives has been well-established (Kooij et al. 2011), and we take as our starting point that the impersonal and external forces of social change that have been identified as transforming the conditions of work in media industries, are experienced by the media worker at a personal level, particularly through the prism of age and life stage. Response to alterations in working conditions and practices in the case of an early career graduate, for example, cannot be assumed to be the same as their response in mid-career. Attitude, life circumstances, and the accrual of fixed commitments, are likely to reflect very different priorities and considerations over time. For a proper understanding of the lived experience of work in this sector, therefore, it is necessary to attend to the interplay of the extra-personal forces of change, with the subjective dimension of an individual's long-term navigation of their own career. The aim of the research reported in this article, therefore, has been to better understand the changing conditions of work in media since the late 1990s as such changes have been experienced subjectively, over time, by those attempting to develop careers within these industries. It is the trajectory of such careers, and the way in which they are navigated differently at different life stages, that is the distinctive focus of this study.

Context

There have been few studies in this field that have focused in detail on the experience of media work over time, including at mid-career. The most comprehensive of these was undertaken by the British Film Institute (BFI) between 1994 and 1997. The Television Industry Tracking Study (BFI 1999; Dex, Willis, and Paterson 2000) was an examination of the impact of legislative changes that had occurred over the preceding decade: principally the growth in competition, and the shift to freelance working. The study included media professionals at different ages and life stages, and set out to 'analyse the impact on individual television careers' of changes within the television industry that had come about as a result of new regulation, technological advances, structural reorganisation, and increased competition. The first wave of research for the BFI study was undertaken in 1994, and was followed by two further waves per year, up until May 1998. The research highlighted particularly the rise in the phenomena of short-term contracts, and the growing challenges of income unpredictability and uncertainty. It noted the strategies that were being employed by workers to deal with this shift, as they were forced to look for supplementary and alternative income sources, prioritise personal contacts and build industry networks. The study also exposed significant inequalities, with women less likely to earn as much as men, less likely to be in senior roles, and less likely to have children.

Whilst there has been no subsequent attempt at a longitudinal study of the kind undertaken by the BFI, various point-in-time studies have suggested that, as the media landscape continued to evolve and expand, the trends identified in the 1990s have intensified and become normalised. Writing about the television industry within the same decade, for example, Ursell (2000) identified: an increase in barriers to entry;

reductions in the numbers of permanent staff; lower earnings; casualisation; and a deterioration in terms and conditions of work. These themes are echoed in later studies (such as many of those referenced above).

In this investigation, we examine career narratives of the subsequent generation of media workers: those beginning their working lives in the 1990s, who, at the point of our interviews, were in mid-career. We chose as our focus, therefore, a single cohort of graduates who began their careers at the time of the BFI study. By the mid-1990s, the BA Media Production programme at Bournemouth University in the South of England, had become well-known for its three practice-based strands: television production; radio production; and computer animation. By determining to make our focus a single cohort of graduates leaving University for media careers at the same moment – the Summer of 1995 - we not only hoped to gain a big-picture snap-shot of media career trajectories over time, but to ensure that our sample included both those who do not currently work in media, as well as those continuing to do so more than two decades after their graduation.

Data collection and methodology

We began our search armed with a list of graduands from the 1995 awards ceremony, uncovered from the University's archives[1]. Utilising the University's alumni records (and with some advice from an alumna of this cohort then working on the staff of the University[2]), we adopted a snowball sampling approach as individual contributors were able to point us to others. Within the timeframe available, we were thus able to find up-to-date contact details for approximately half of the 79 names on our graduands list. Of these, some proved unresponsive, or declined our request for an interview, some agreed but never settled on a date for a variety of reasons, and one had died. Those we eventually interviewed constituted a sample of 28 graduates: just over one third of the cohort. Twelve of our sample were female, and 16 male, making it slightly under-representative of women, as the original cohort had been equally split by gender.

Between June 2017 and the April 2018, informal semi-structured interviews were undertaken with this self-selecting sample. Although we used a schedule, interviews were informal, designed to encourage reflexivity and to allow for wide-ranging conversations and sometimes unplanned digressions. The set of questions that we began with was generated from emergent themes from a corpus of the existing cultural and creative industries literature. We also pursued threads that emerged more spontaneously from the interviews themselves.

Ours is therefore, not a longitudinal study, but a study of retrospective accounts. We wanted to listen to the career narratives of these graduates reflecting back on the period from when they had graduated and entered the world of work. We have paid attention to both what was said, and what was unsaid, and the way these stories were told to us. In coding and analyzing the transcripts of our interviews, we have adopted the three-stage pattern of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989): *description*, noting precisely what was said, and how; *interpretation*, identifying significant themes, and recognising attitudinal statements, values and assumptions; and *explanation*, relating these observations to the broader context, and to what we know from

other sources. What has resulted from this analytical process is presented below in five broad themes: transition into work; freelancing; job satisfaction; perceptions of industry change; and work-life balance.

Results

'A foot in the door': transition into work

Given that in the late 1990s an increase in barriers to entry had been one of the findings reported by Ursell (2000), we wanted interviewees to reflect on their own transition into work at that time. From the outset, we had made no presumptions about the proportion of graduates who would have gone on to pursue careers in media, and we expected that such barriers may have been prohibitive for many. In fact, the majority of our interviewees told us that they worked, or had worked in media. Only five of our sample told us that, following graduation, they had not gone on to pursue such work, and in three of these cases, it transpired that their work had still been media-related (such as media teaching, or marketing and communication). Most worked (or had worked) in television, but radio and journalism also featured. Every interviewee had their own story of first steps into work, although few described anything that sounded like traditional linear career progression. Immediately following graduation, a period of temporary, low-paid and even unpaid work was the norm: 'it was all about networking really for that first six months' (C095-54). A few had developed lasting employer relationships through the industry placement offered within their degree programme. For most, however, getting started had been an enormous challenge: 'that first job – "a foot in the door" - is the hardest bit: once you're in the industry … you get taken a little bit more seriously … ' (Co95-18). Some recalled their sense of deep anxiety during this early phase of their working lives:

> … nailing that first job was always going to be the challenge. And, you know, would you have to take something that was desperately underpaid for a bit, like being a runner somewhere? Or would you have to do unpaid work for a bit, in order to get a staff job on a better salary? And how on earth were you going to afford to do it? And that was a worry. (Co95-18)

All our respondents recalled a personal struggle to stay focused and committed during this difficult transitional phase, with many referencing financial and emotional pressure to consider alternative career options:

> I did actually get offered a [teaching] job at a college in the Midlands, and I turned it down … much to the annoyance of my father, because he was a teacher … .And then I was actually on the dole for a bit, and I don't think I got my first job until the autumn. (Co95-18)

Success in securing media work, sustaining it, and not settling for alternative employment, was frequently associated with personal qualities, such as tenacity, resilience, determination, and sheer hard work. This was expressed by those who had successfully established media careers in terms such as: 'I'm extremely determined and I have a lot of perseverance' (Co95-26); 'You have to work really, really hard, and you do have to have big balls and a lot of confidence … ' (Co95-22); and 'I just had this

steely determination' (Co95-03). People with these qualities were sometimes contrasted with those 'who just haven't got the stamina' (Co95-03), or failed to understand just how hard one has to work. By attributing the success of securing desired work to these kind of personal qualities, failure to secure such work was expressed as personal failure: 'I guess partly it was my own fault for not searching hard enough' (Co95-48). This feeling was echoed by others:

> … however much I complain about the kind of people who were offering me crappy jobs, I wasn't hungry enough, you know. […] I guess I'm easily dissuaded and I think that's the thing though in media, the people who really shine are the people who never ever give up. And I gave up. (CO95-63)

> I tried. I failed. I just thought it's not going to work for me […] I was probably a bit of a coward. Too difficult to get in as a woman, too difficult to get in the BBC, and I kind of just gave up. (Co95-76)

This presumption of personal responsibility for success or failure in gaining work, often couched in terms of personality, and determination, was a notable and recurring theme, and one we consider further below. Yet, it was clear that dumb luck had played a critical role for many. Work when it came, could happen 'just by chance' (Co95-31). Neither had the playing field been a level one. Geography, for example, had been significant for industry entrants needing to establish themselves in close proximity to the UK's urban media hubs, and in particular, to London. As one interviewee said: 'to get an entry level job, which is very low paid, in one of the most expensive cities in Europe, is very difficult' (Co95-55).

The UK capital's dominance in cultural employment, and the extent to which 'the London effect' reinforces social class disparities, is now well documented (Oakley et al. 2017). Some of our interviewees recalled simply not wanting to live in the capital: 'I didn't really want to work in London, so that hampered me a bit [laughs] because if you want to work in the media it's very important to live in London' (Co95-27). For others, the simple impossibility of working in London for low or no pay without support, had led them eventually to conclude that they had no choice but to abandon the pursuit of a media career.

For many, a significant factor in being able to survive this hazardous transition stage had been the material support of family or connections (such as being able to live with 'the brother of a friend of my mum … .', Co95-06). Working for unsustainably low wages, working for expenses only, and working without expenses being refunded at all, were all mentioned as matters of fact. Many 'employers', it seemed, had taken full advantage of the fierce competition for entry level positions, and seemingly without compunction, had exploited the enthusiasm and passion of these aspiring young people. In many cases, the well-established media practice of 'paying ones' dues' (the obligation to work hard at the menial aspects of a job, before a career can progress) seems to have expanded into a general license for employers to abandon the most rudimentary duties of responsible employment. One interviewee described his discussion with a prospective employer, following a 'job offer' thus:

> I asked about money, and he said, 'Well, yeah, it's not really about the money, it's about the opportunity.' And so basically, I was earning £13,000 at the time, and they offered me six! And I said, 'Well … you're based in London, so I'll have to relocate to London'. He

said, 'Yeah'. I said, 'I can't rent anywhere for that in London'. […] I said to him 'look, you know, I'll come down', but I said 'you've got to do a bit more than that'. And he goes, 'No. We can't, because somebody will take this'. And somebody did. (Co95-78)

Another recounted how she had maintained official unemployment status for six months, whilst working *gratis* for a local newspaper. Yet another recalled his consternation in going for a runner's position at a Soho post-production house, only to find that the selection process from a shortlist of six graduates, required them to work unpaid for an entire week each. Descriptions of a prevailing culture of exploitation were seldom framed as having seemed especially shocking or remarkable, but more as a fact of life. Such negative experiences were not reported by all our interviewees, but the transition into work for the majority of those we spoke to was generally described as having been far from straightforward: a deeply inequitable process, fraught with uncertainty, insecurity, and financial instability. The benefit of hindsight had not significantly altered a resigned sense that this was how a competitive industry worked: transition from University into media work was bound to be all-consuming, exhausting, and characterized by high levels of anxiety.

'Never had a proper full-time job': Irregular working and self-employment

Much of the cultural and creative industries literature borrows the notion of *precariousness* (or 'precarity') to describe the subjective experience of creative work (Gill and Pratt 2008; Neilson and Rossiter 2008; de Peuter 2011), and our analysis certainly indicates that getting a 'foot in the door' had not marked the end of uncertainty or insecurity for these workers (rather, the contrary seemed to be the case, as discussed below). Employment contracts had normally been short-term, with staff jobs the exception rather than the rule. Of those within our sample continuing to earn their living from media work, all but four told us they were currently self-employed: 'I think the longest I've been at a company was … on a rollover - a yearly contract - and I was there probably for about two years, but other than that, I've never had a proper full-time job' (Co95-08). The prevalence of freelance contracts, together with the lack of formal career structures, could make it difficult to secure roles that provided a sense of direction and progression, while also paying a living wage: 'I think plenty of people want runners; plenty of people want junior researchers; but it's hard for people to have the opportunity to move on' (Co95-03).

As with other of the more negative characteristics of media work, the long-term downward pressure on rates of pay that our interviewees reported, the normalization of the 'buy out' (when a fixed rate is agreed for a job, irrespective of the hours taken), and the constant uncertainty of the pipeline of expected future work, were generally discussed with an air of inevitability and resignation, with comments like: 'that's not just media is it, because we have zero-hours contracts everywhere' (Co95-26).

> For all the years I was working, I would average working nine months of the year, and three months I wouldn't work. So you had to save enough money to cover that. So that's complicated. […] Getting a mortgage was complicated … And maintaining friendships and relationships […] when you work in TV drama it's completely all-consuming […] you can't see anybody, and then after three months you go and see your mates, and then you have to ditch them again, and go and work again [laughs]. (Co95-26)

As with the speaker above, uncertainties and insecurities associated with freelance work were acknowledged, but generally accepted as just 'the way the industry works' (Co95-03):

> On the one hand I think I'd love to give all of this up and have a nine-to-five job, where there's a pension, and there's holiday pay, and sick pay. Part of me would love that. But then you compromise on other things. (Co95-03)

'Other things' seemed to be primarily a sense of choice and variety of work: 'lots of people I know *want* to work freelance - they like that freedom' (C095-54). The freedom to choose work as a freelancer, however, was generally constrained by a reluctance to turn away paid work. Freedom to choose, therefore, seemed to be more of an ideal than a reality, and a psychological mechanism for rationalizing irregular work. Nonetheless, as a mechanism, it was highly effective. The decision to be self-employed had often prevailed, even when full employment had been a genuine option. However, over time, life events had prompted some interviewees to reconsider their priorities. One senior staffer described her own experience as follows:

> I fought to continue as a freelancer for ages and ages, because I think I wanted the freedom to choose. And then I suddenly realized I was choosing to stay, and it was really stupid, and I'd had a baby and I didn't get any maternity leave! So it was when we decided that we wanted to have a second kid […] that I became an employee. (Co95-22)

For the majority of our interviewees, self-employment and the insecurities that accompanied it, were explained as both an inevitability and a preference. Yet it was clear to us that for many, irregular working patterns had continued to cause anxieties about financial security well into their working lives. In later years particularly, it became a factor in considering alternative career options.

'The most satisfying thing … ': the appeal of media work

Despite the adversities reported as part of these career narratives, it was clear that media work had been (and remained) immensely appealing to the majority of those we spoke to. Asked to discuss work they had found especially satisfying, our respondents described their experiences in terms which we have categorised under five broad headings: individual agency and a job well done; privileged access; immersive and team work; meaningfulness; and recognition.

First, work was recalled as having been especially satisfying because it had aligned with a sense of their own competencies, skills, and abilities, often providing the conditions which we have associated with the notion of 'flow' (Csíkszentmihályi 1975). This often went hand-in-hand with a sense of individual agency, exemplified by personal passion projects: 'creatively I was completely free to do what I wanted' (Co95-70); and a project that had allowed expression of the individual's 'artistic and creative abilities' (Co95-48).

Second, work was often recalled as satisfying when it had given some level of privileged access. Interacting with celebrities, political leaders, or other famous individuals provided an element of pleasure and interest to the job, but so too did meeting and working with 'really interesting' or 'amazing' people (Co95-08). Admittance to special

places (such as those not available to the general public) was another aspect of this privileged access, as was travel more generally:

> I've been in a privileged position. My jobs have allowed me to travel around the world, and I've met massively interesting people from all walks of life […] Or you get to go and film in some weird place you'd never visit otherwise in a million years. And not just glamorous filming locations, but like really crazy places that you find yourself … (Co95-22)

This privileged access added an element of excitement and interest to work.

Third, the centrality of 'the team' was a common feature of many of these descriptions, especially in combination with the concentrated and immersive nature of the work itself:

> I loved the team. It was a lovely team I had. […] I went back to the [location of the television show she had worked on] for the first time in seven years, and it was actually quite an emotional experience, because a lot of the same people are there. I spent a lot of time there. I had a lot of good times, and made a lot of good television. And so I think that's - It's just a special connection. (Co95-22)

The 'special connection' that immersive teamwork engendered meant that working hard was often compensated for by playing hard. This particularly so when combined with long periods of time away from home: participants recalled this as having been a major draw of media work in early career, becoming more problematic with age and responsibility.

Fourth, another source of satisfaction was work that produced a sense of social consequence: 'making a difference'. We have identified this as *meaningfulness* as in 'when an individual perceives an authentic connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self' (Bailey and Madden 2017, 2). These projects in which 'you kind of invest personally' (Co95-03), were often described in contrast to (or to 'offset') work where such personal investment was absent.

Fifth, recognition for work done, symbolised by the production credit, was another motivational factor. As one interviewee put it: ' … the best part of all of my job is seeing the credit with my name on it at the end of the programme … ' (Co95-26) Projects identified as having been successful, or of having been high profile (or 'high-end'), may not necessarily have been glamorous, or conventionally enjoyable, but were immensely satisfying. Across these related characteristics of satisfying work, there were also positive references to *variety* in work - 'there's no such thing as a boring week' (Co95-03), and of work being 'exciting' (Co95-27) and 'fun' (Co95-31).

Here then, is the counter narrative to the more negative accounts of media work. McRobbie has described the 'pleasure-pain axis' as a 'shaping characteristic of this kind of work' (McRobbie 2014, 132), and indeed, these narratives of personal fulfilment suggest an intrinsic motivation that – for as long as it could be sustained - was thought to more than off-set the problematic aspects of media work. It was these aspects of media work, moreover, that were so poignantly missed when a career change was eventually made.

'A totally different world': changing times

Given the dramatic changes that had occurred across media industries during the working lives of these graduates, we asked our interviewees what impact they felt

these had had on their careers. Two related themes emerged: the transformation of work practices arising specifically from the changing technological tools of media production; and the consequences of the development of technology more broadly, with the inexorable rise and dominance of the new technology giants, and in particular, the pervasiveness of social media.

Many commented on the normalisation of multi-skilling, and the rise of the multi-operative producer (combining several of the roles traditionally considered to be discrete specialisms). The self-description 'I shoot, do the sound, and direct' (Co95-08) illustrates this reality, attributed to smaller, lighter, and cheaper kit, accompanied by a consequent 'squeeze' on resources. This was thought to have increased pressure all round: higher expectations, on fewer people, with decreasing budgets. It was also thought to have resulted in a growth in smaller companies willing to undertake lower-end production work.

The 'social media explosion' was identified by the majority as representing a further seismic shift in expectations of what media work included: ' … if you add in that social media equation, about, you know, how people partake in, interact with, share, and talk about media, it's a totally different world' (Co95-01). Another interviewee commented:

> … it's changing the way that you find a story, but also then how you put that story out, because people – you know, they're perhaps less prone to watch news on TV, they're more happy to go to their social platforms, and it's sort of quick bursts of information … (Co95-29)

Others were more explicitly critical, like the sometime BBC producer, who lamented a production culture in which it was necessary to 'produce quick content on iPhones, … memes, and gifs, and all of this bloody stuff, that just goes on and on' (Co95-28) . All this was thought to herald more upheavals ahead: the further fragmentation of the broadcast media market; more channels; more companies making niche content; the full integration of social media into television formats; and the likely end of free-to-air television. 'Essentially we still act like dinosaurs' a senior television executive said frankly: 'we constantly try to add a social media layer to our traditional free-to-air structured programming' (Co95-22).

The need to be fleet-of-foot in this constantly changing environment was unsettling, and over time, had added to the sense of insecurity and of being 'left behind'. Born mainly in the mid-1970s, this cohort of graduates reached adulthood at a time that became characterised by an apparent digital divide between so-called 'digital immigrants' and an emerging generation of 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001). If our interviewees had once seen themselves in these terms (and it was not especially apparent that they had), they certainly no longer did so. On the contrary, these supposed first generation 'digital natives' seemed to live with a palpable sense that younger, more digitally-savvy media workers were leaving them feeling much like the 'digital immigrants' of the generation that had preceded them.

'People depending on you': Changing priorities

One of the most striking findings of our study was that, despite the vast majority of these graduates beginning their working lives in media - and having made great

sacrifices to establish themselves in the early years - by the time of our interviews, only half continued to do so. The uncertainties of media work and its often heavy demands, were discussed as having been expected - even embraced - in early career: 'I was single. I didn't have any ties, so it was fine' (Co95-29). But these demands had often proved more difficult to sustain, as other concerns had begun to counter-weight, and alter priorities:

… you do the job you enjoy, but at some point, especially when you get older, you've got to say well, what is it? What are my priorities in life now? So my priorities are very different to what they were as a young man'. (C095-54)

The pressure to compromise work-life balance was a recurring theme. One interviewee, reminiscing about her early impressions from a BBC work placement, talked about how she had perceived the negative impact of the industry on family life:

I should say probably 75% of people on the crew were divorced. […] They work such long hours, and they're always away from home. And I thought, I'm not sure if I want to do this for a living … It was a good experience, but it did – you know, it helped me make up my mind [to choose an alternative career]. (Co95-27)

An interviewee continuing to work at the BBC, described his own challenges of negotiating anti-social hours:

If you're working, like I do, in broadcast news, then you've got to work shifts: earlies, lates, nights, weekends, Bank Holidays, Christmas, Easter, you know. And that's really difficult, particularly if you've got young kids. And it's very hard. And it means you've got childcare problems, because it's really hard to find a nursery that's open at four in the morning! [Laughs] … You know it's the only thing my wife and I argue about really. (Co95-18)

Major life events, such as the death of parents and the birth of children, featured prominently in these career narratives: ' … within a very short space of time, I lost my father and then my mother, and then I just thought, this is crazy!' (CO95-63). Others similarly described this as having been a crunch-point in their career trajectories:

[I had] no safety net of parents anymore; a family - a very young family; I had a mortgage; and so I had to start making some decisions based around that. You've got to kind of put your passion onto one side, and you've got to start earning some money. You've got people depending on you now. So that's where things sort of changed really I would say. (Co95-78)

Parenthood was a particular watershed moment. It was at this point that many told us they had changed the focus of their careers, with comments like: 'I didn't want to be away from my children, I didn't want to move to London, and you know, I didn't want to be away from my wife … ' (Co95-78).

Whilst a few seemed to be sanguine about an eventual decision to terminate their media careers – referring, for example, to being 'ready to close that chapter of my life' (Co95-06) - many described deeply conflicted feelings. Several women talked about the birth of children as having presented them with an impossible career dilemma. One interviewee described how she had tried to return to work after the birth of her daughter, but 'it didn't work' (Co95-26). Similar sentiments were expressed thus:

> … my husband, he works long hours and is away from home. And when you've got children, you can't have two parents doing that. So he carried on because he was the higher earner … and I took a back seat and put the family first. (Co95-27)

> I felt I had two choices, which was to either hire a nanny and, you know, just not be involved in my children's lives, which is not me at all. Or I had to leave television. […] I didn't feel it was very friendly to women, and certainly not to mothers. (Co95-06)

These narratives confirm the gendered patterns of disadvantage within creative labour, now widely acknowledged (Conor, Gill, and Taylor 2015). Women who had managed to maintain their media careers, despite motherhood, all suggested it had been difficult. Many had found themselves employed in roles where there was no history of workplace flexibility, or provision for part-time work and job-sharing: 'There's no halfway house. You can't just go 'I'll do a few hours a day'. It's literally all or nothing because … we're doing 12-hour days.' (Co95-31)

Supportive partners were sometimes able to facilitate the continuation of work that paid sufficiently: '[My husband is] a stay-at-home dad, and that's the only way we can do it, because I am out this door by about 6.15 in the morning … ' (Co95-31)

For some, there was an ambivalence, and even a tinge of regret, when discussing their decision to continue to pursue media work at what they identified as being the expense of a work-life balance:

> [Work-life balance] has just been awful at times, to be honest. I think I missed out … a lot of my friends would go on holidays and they'd book it in advance. There'll be a big group and I would never know because I felt like I was living hand-to-mouth … (Co95-08)

But such ambivalence was also evident among those who had eventually chosen to abandon media work in order to maintain a more balanced work-life. One interviewee described his misgivings in these terms:

> I don't regret it from the family point of view because I see my kids every day. I saw my kids every morning and I saw my kids every night. […] But for my personal fulfilment point of view, yeah, I have to be philosophical when I think about it, otherwise, I just think, oh what a wasted opportunity! (Co95-78)

Such conflicted feelings coincided with broader mid-career concerns, including lack of progression, and worries about being 'stuck' and becoming 'typecast' in a particular role or programme-type. A number, ostensibly successful and established in their careers, told us that they had felt they had become siloed. This came up with several interviewees in relation to working at the BBC: '[Having worked] in BBC Drama, I then found it very difficult to move out into something a bit lighter, and a bit entertaining, because I was established within a genre' (Co95-26). Others made similar comments:

> I'd been at the Beeb [BBC] for 13 years … I didn't want to go into management - BBC management in particular! God, I'd shoot myself in the head! It was 'do I do that, or do I move to London, or do I move to Bristol?' Well I don't want to do either of them, I'd had children by then. So I just decided to go for that job [A PR Manager role in a large corporate]. (Co95-28)

Among these media workers then, there seemed to be a general acceptance that the successful navigation of a media career would always take a certain toll on work-life balance - a toll that became more egregious over time, and with age. However, there was little sense among our interviewees that they felt that work-life imbalance

reflected any systemic problem, or indeed, was a concern that should be addressed at an industry level. Rather, it was simply a feature of their career choice: an individual dilemma which one simply had to manage. There seemed to be a tacit understanding that, at some point in a media career, alternative career choices might have to be considered, and at the point of our interviews, a high proportion had already come to that point.

Discussion: a career with a 'shelf-life'

By interrogating the narratives of a cohort of media graduates now in mid-career, we have examined their reported experience of transition into work; freelancing; job satisfaction; industry change; and work-life balance. Our findings reaffirm a number of the characteristics identified by other accounts of media work (many of which are evident in Creative Industries research more broadly), and the picture that has emerged is of a career landscape featuring great personal rewards as well as systemic exploitation, insecurity and little by way of clear career structure. Our interviewees were largely philosophical about this, accepting these affordances as just 'the way the industry works' and attributing any failure to survive in this environment to personal shortcomings. Those that had not had the connections to get that first major 'break' tended to internalise their lack of success as a lack of resilience, while the necessity of working on freelance and short-term contracts was internalised as a choice. Technology-dependent cost-cutting practices had been understood as technologically (rather than economically) determined. The affective rewards of their work were considered to have compensated for its many privations for as long as a career could be maintained.

The significant feature of this study, however, has been the way in which the impersonal and external forces of change that have been transforming the conditions of work in media industries, are experienced at the personal level, through the prism of age and life stage. Contrary to our presumption that the most challenging privations of media work would be experienced in the early-stages of working life, these accounts of long term career trajectories suggest that this may not be so. Whilst a positive attitude towards media work generally persisted, our interviewees' capacity to manage its unrelenting demands diminished over time and with age. The attrition rate of our media workers is especially striking, having reached 50% at the point we undertook our interviews. The reluctant 'choice' made by many to find alternative work, reflected the increasing tensions experienced between the demands of a personal life, and the persistent inflexibilities of the competitive workplace. The obstacles encountered by new entrants seeking to establish their careers were considerable, but sustaining the relentless pressures of such work over the longer-term was just as significant a feature of these narratives. Like consumable goods that come labelled with a 'best before' date past which flavour and texture begin to deteriorate, it seems that media careers may also come with a limited shelf-life.

We conclude with the observation that such high levels of wastage are bound to impact, not only upon individuals, but on media organisations themselves. The apparent incompatibility of media work with the demands of middle-life particularly, suggests that now, more than ever, media work is being skewed towards the young. This

is an area that needs further investigation: are media industries particularly susceptible to a systemic form of age bias, and if so, is it a feature more common to certain kinds of media work than others? To what extent does the phenomenon of age bias intersect with gender, ethnicity, disability and class? And what are the broader implications for the health of these industries?

Our study suggests that media industries (and perhaps other Creative Industries) have comfortably accommodated themselves to depend increasingly upon a large body of well-educated, highly motivated neophytes, as our interviewees had once been themselves: inexpensive, willing, and able to be flexible and self-exploiting. Not only do these neophytes represent the much-prized target demographic of media and technology industries, they constitute a highly desirable (if individually dispensable), flexible, tech-savvy, workforce. For those who endure the challenges of early-stage media careers, work can often be sustained and navigated into late-twenties and thirties. The demands of such work, however, ensure increasing attrition over time, which adds to the overall imbalance in the make-up of labour, further reducing the incentive for media industries to reward experience, or to address more awkward employment issues related to progression, professional development, or the necessary structural support needed to ensure the work-life balance of mid-career workers. We consider that this 'shelf life' problem should be treated as an ethical concern needing urgent attention and further investigation: over-reliance on the self-exploiting young, and a corresponding hemorrhaging of experience, honed skills, and organizational memory, cannot ultimately be for the good of the individual worker, the media organisations in which they work, or the Creative Industries as a sector.

Notes

1. We are indebted to our colleague, Iv Marks, for her work in establishing precise details of the cohort list and programe structure of the time.
2. We are indebted to our colleague, Annie East, for her help during our initial search for graduates of this era.

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