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The Ties that Bind us: Networks, Projects and Careers in British TV

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The Ties that Bind us: Networks, Projects and Careers in British TV

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Abstract

The dominant view of careers is that they have been transformed by the emergence of 'post-bureaucratic' organizations. 'Neo-bureaucratic' structures have emerged, retaining centralized control over strategy and finance while outsourcing production, creating employment precarity. British television epitomises a sector that has experienced long-run deregulation. Producing television content is risky highly competitive. How do broadcasters minimise the risks of television production? Broadcasting neo-bureaucracies avoid relying on fragmented labour markets to hire technically self-disciplining crews. Control regimes are enacted through activating social networks by broadcast commissioners, green-lit to trusted creative teams who recruit key crew, through social networks which complement diffuse forms of normative control. Social networks and the self-discipline of crews are mutually constitutive, (re)producing patterns of labour market advantage/disadvantage. Younger freelancers prove vulnerable, exposed to precariousness inherent in freelance employment; to build a career they must access and sustain their social network membership. We locate individual decisions around career narratives in the context of specific social networks and industry structures. Careers are not boundaryless, individual constructs. We introduce the concept of 'mosaic-career', capturing the complexity of individual work histories, composed of fragmented employment in organisations/projects. How do neo-bureaucracies, then, intervene in labour markets? What are the consequences of those interventions?

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Keywords: Careers, Creative industries, neo bureaucracy, networks, interviews

Introduction

Over three decades careers have been portrayed as transformed. The catalyst was corporate restructuring that signalled the death knell of the managerial bureaucracy and the internal labour market (Hodgson and Briand, 2013; Jones and Maoret, 2018; Morris et al, 2016; Morris and Farrell, 2017; Sydow, 2018). In bureaucratic careers, employees developed firm-specific expertise in return for security and career progression (McKinlay, 2002). The shift to post-bureaucratic organization disrupted this social compact between organization and individual: careers were no longer the joint responsibility of organization and individual. The organization absolved itself of responsibility for career management. The 'boundaryless career' has become hegemonic in contemporary career research despite its neglect of social and historical context (Arnold and Cohen, 2008; Clarke, 2013; Pringle and Mallon, 2003; Stoyanova and Grugulis, 2012; Tomlinson et al, 2018).   'Boundaryless' labour switched employers pursuing personal development, indifferent to which organization was their temporary host, their tenure at their discretion and decided by their criteria. This was the antithesis of the managerial bureaucracies and the predictable, linear careers of twentieth century 'organization man'. The 'boundaryless career' invoked the emergence of nomadic individuals producing their own future (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996).

How do broadcast neo-bureaucracies intervene in labour markets? And what are the consequences of those interventions? We have two objectives. First, to evaluate the emergence and role of neo-bureaucracies and the location of power and control in them

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which lies with (broadcaster-based) commissioners and second, their links with the

development of UK television careers. We focus on the relationship between neo-

bureaucratic broadcasters and the freelance labour market. Commissions for television

projects are organized around personal relationships between commissioners and senior

creative teams. An implicit element of the commission is that senior creatives will activate

their social networks to recruit reliable technical and craft crews. Here we go beyond

existing research which correctly emphasises the importance of the social network and the

crew's latent organization in the television labour market and labour process but portrays

these as disconnected from broadcasting organizations. We also go beyond existing research

on media careers by highlighting the active mediating role played by broadcasters rather than

ascribing precarity to structural change in the sector. Second, to demonstrate that these

careers are not boundaryless but marked by structural constraints and inequalities, and as

could be characterised as mosaic. We consider how contemporary careers are experienced

and understood by freelancers. We follow Eikhof (2017) in locating individual's decision-

making and career narratives in the context of industry structures and particular social

networks. The freelance labour market is not individualised, but traversed by social networks

based on trust, reputation and reciprocity. Navigating between projects and networks is a

vital skill for freelancers. Careers are not defined by income or promotion but by fragments

that become 'mosaics', whose completeness and coherence rests on the individual's skill in

manoeuvring between projects and networks. Mosaic careers retain individual agency

without the voluntarism of the 'boundaryless career' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Mosaic

refers to process and outcome, a pattern emergent over time, but also refers to the piecemeal

nature related to precarity which in turn is contingent on the emergence of neo bureaucratic

forms. The legitimacy of bureaucratic internal labour markets was premised upon

transparency and rules-based predictability: individuals could plot their progress against their

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peers and seek redress if the organization's procedural justice was breached. Expectations

and constraints were known and long-run career trajectories manageable. Mosaic careers are

made of fragments, their development and coherence only comprehensible retrospectively.

Mosaic careers have limited transparency, predictability or procedural justice. The gain of

rethinking careers as mosaics is that it shifts the focus from structural constraints to a

contextual, processual understanding that retains individual agency within the context of

specific projects and the recurring ties that bind social networks (Manning, 2010: 570), which

are themselves a consequence of the shift to neo-bureaucratic governance regimes.

The paper is organised in four sections. First, we consider the emergence of new

organizational forms, the role of power and control within these forms (and specifically

broadcaster commissioners) and their impact on careers and precarity in television. Second,

we detail our methods, particularly how we produced data about the practices of

commissioning executives, the diverse experience of precarious employment and social

networks across different age cohorts and gender. Third, we present our data which considers

how social networks operate in the labour market to create, reinforce and mitigate advantage

and disadvantage. Finally, we reflect upon our empirical findings on the organisation of

precarity and creative labour's experience of mosaic careers.

Organising Precarity

Neo-bureaucracy entails the hierarchical structure, centralised knowledge, power and

strategy, and the comprehensive deployment of rules-based organising. These features are

powerful continuities from the ideal-type of managerial bureaucracy. Functional hierarchies

are organised around specialists responsible for defining and enforcing regulation corporate

strategy and external standards (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004). In knowledge-based or

creative sectors, key functions concentrate on finance and audit, and on protecting reputation

and intellectual property rights. The project is a routine form of neo-bureaucratic organizing

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both inside and beyond the organization's boundaries. Equally, the project time-limited

structures are central organizing principles to achieve strategic as well as operational

objectives (Engwall, 2003: 789; Mitever et al, 2017: 9). Neo-bureaucracy is a shifting hybrid

that combines market and bureaucracy, centralised and decentralised control in pursuit of 'a

deft combination of remote strategic leadership and detailed operational management' (Reed,

2011: 243). Far from being threatened by the rise of temporary organizing, neo-bureaucracy

has been fundamental to this process by articulating systems to regulate outsourced

production and temporary projects. The permanence of the neo-bureaucracy is 'a vital

precondition for temporary organising' (Sydow and Windeler, 2020: 488).

The 'boundaryless careers' rise should be most marked in industries where production was

project based; and vertically integrated hierarchies and industry-wide regulation were

disrupted and marketised. UK television exemplifies these conditions. The end of national

bargaining in commercial television in 1989 and the consolidation of the ITV network

increased outsourcing (McKinlay and Quinn, 2007). State interventions, particularly the

formation of Channel 4 and the 1990 Broadcasting Act, created new markets for content and

labour, and reduced the non-market provisions, including training, required of broadcasters

(Carter et al, 2020). From 1992 the BBC was legally compelled to source at least 25% of its

output from the independent sector (Carter and McKinlay, 2013). Market reforms from 2007

accelerated the commercial logic in public service broadcasting. The BBC reduced its

guaranteed in-house production in 2007, and virtually eliminated it in 2017 to increase

competition between BBC Studios, established in 2015, and the external market (D'Arma,

2018; Nicoli, 2012; Turner and Lorenco, 2012). Asset specificity -the degree to which assets

can be switched to other activities - and fixed costs skewed competition in favour of external

competitors. The BBC created a market in which it was necessarily disadvantaged. Market

liberalization triggered the vertical disintegration of broadcasters and intensified

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marketization across television (Collins, 2008: 32; Greer and Doellgast, 2017: 196). Further, there was continuous pressure on costs; a combination of BBC license fee pressures, reduced advertising revenue (particularly post 2008), a rapid increase in outlets and reduced viewing figures per programme. Three decades of privatisation and deregulation have reshaped British television. An industry based on oligopolistic markets and managerial bureaucratic structures was replaced by fragmented product and labour markets (Currie et al, 2006). Freelancers, irrespective of legal status, are self-employed workers on short-term not rolling contracts (OFCOM, 2019: 5). 30% of the film and television workforce are freelancers, double that of the UK working population as a whole (BFI, 2020: 3) and freelancers comprise 50% of television production employment (Work Foundation, 2019: 6). Such employment purportedly promised individuals 'boundaryless careers,' endless opportunities to roam between projects, genres and employers. But regulatory change also triggered an explosion of media outlets that reduced viewers per programme so that freelance contracts came under severe and sustained pressure, at a time of vastly increasing supply in the UK via specialist higher education courses (Dex et al, 2000; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2011; 2012; Hodgson and Briand, 2013). Even successful freelancers report chronic insecurity and work intensification (Butler and Russell, 2018; Hodgson and Briand, 2013; Morris et al., 2016; Storey et al, 2005). Television freelancers confront the tension between work as a vocation realised through self-employment and everyday self-exploitation (Eikof and Warhurst, 2013). Entry-level routes into television production involve extended hyper-competitive tournaments (Ashton, 2015: 277). Demonstrating flexibility and enthusiasm were preconditions to tournament entry (Lee, 2011: 552). Novice media workers regard under-paid and unpaid work as exploitative, but also as a marker of personal conviction (Ekman, 2014: 142; Siebert and Wilson, 2013: 714-715).

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The quasi-markets of the early 1990s (and beyond) were dominated by former BBC and ITV

staff. For independent production companies, their reputation and relationships with

commissioners was an invaluable asset (Born, 2002: 72; Paterson, 2017: 291-292; Mills with

Horton, 2017: 106, 116). Commissioning remains the key moment in television production.

For neo-bureaucratic broadcasters, strategy establishes clear policy and programming

parameters together with tight financial control over commissioners (Preston, 2003: 7). The

broadcaster's role in making and remaking project-based crews remains under-researched

(Manning, 2010: 554, 568). The dependency inherent in the commissioner-producer

relationship is only partly offset by reputation. For independent producers, developing shared

tacit knowledge with commissioners is expensive, time-consuming and risky but also

constitutes a barrier to entry for new entrants (Zoellner, 2009; 2020).

Television production is organized through crews assembled for specific projects, then

disbanded. This has consolidated the power of commissioners operating within neo-

bureaucracies. The commissioner's centralised power is exercised through diffuse,

behavioural norms over independent companies and, through them, freelancers. Through the

commissioning process, broadcasters identify individuals capable of building reliable crews

to meet formal and informal quality standards within time and financial budgets (Lourenco

and Turner, 2019: 624). Crews are not built *de novo*, but through the activation of social

networks. Crew recruitment, vetting, and discipline are achieved by social networks more

durable than a given project (Powell, 1990: 328). A crew disbands at the close of production,

but social networks remain intact. The social network, not the individual is the basic unit of

the television labour market: individuals demonstrate their skills and experience, gain

reputations and employment through social networks. Reputation is a crucial but fragile asset

(Blair, 2001). Social networks complement project management technologies that schedule

and cost the labour process choreographed by the crew. The peer controls of social networks

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are superimposed on established routines. Routines and peer controls combine to exceed

project management methodologies in granularity and constancy. The crew's assumption of

individual and collective responsibility for the project produces powerful self-discipline.

For the broadcaster, commissioning a programme activates a social network. The

organization temporarily reaches beyond its formal boundaries. The organization's legal and

organizational boundaries are confirmed by the commissioning process. Once the contract is

operational, risk and responsibility lies with the independent company and indirectly with the

social network underpinning the crew (Morris and Farrell, 2017). Social networks are not

created but activated by commissioning. The broadcaster does not identify, schedule or

discipline freelancers, but mitigates this risk by selecting the project's key creatives who then

hire their crew. Through the commissioning process the broadcaster accesses the creative

leads' tacit knowledge of the labour market and the project's specific needs (Morris et al.,

2016). Broadcasters source freelance labour, endorsed by peers, and ensure compliance with

necessary standards through the self-discipline of networks (Antcliffe et al., 2007; Baumann,

2002; Tempest et al., 2004; OFCOM, 2019: 12). The crew's 'latent organization' entails

routine task demarcation combined with tacit knowledge mobilised to cope with everyday

contingencies. Television projects are diverse in technical complexity and duration: from

formulaic studio programmes with fixed cameras and routinized set-ups; through recurring

series requiring minimal technical adjustments; to live multi-camera events or dramas shot

over several weeks in different locations. In all cases, production requires co-ordination of

several distinct crafts mobilised in the moment. Television projects have varying

perishability and are reviewed by commissioners for compliance to contract, technical norms,

and popularity.

The research questions are threefold; how do social networks operate in the labour market to

create, reinforce and mitigate advantage and disadvantage, particularly in the context of neo-

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bureaucratic organizing; how is precarity organized; and what is creative labour's experience

of mosaic careers.

Methods

We report data collected from research into the development of new organizational forms in

UK television. Our 80 semi-structured interviews with managers and professionals

comprised commissioning broadcasters, independent television producers and freelance

operatives. We formally interviewed commissioners and senior broadcast executives,

independent production company executives and owners, most were formerly employed by

commissioning broadcasters. We conducted 30 unstructured and 50 semi-structured

interviews. Unstructured interviews were used to gain background information, pilot

questions and to develop themes for the subsequent semi structured interviews or as follow-

ups to clarify issues. The semi-structured interviews ranged between 60 and 90 minutes. A

majority of freelance respondents were former employees of broadcast networks. A minority

of respondents, generally younger, reported exclusively freelance work histories. Freelance

respondents represented 'above' and 'below' the line occupations. 'Above the line' labour is

creative professionals: cast, directors and writers; while 'below' the line comprise production

crew plus administrative and managerial personnel (Mayers, 2011). All categories included

male and female respondents. Respondents were categorised by age: under thirty; from thirty

to fifty; and over fifty. These broad categories captured generational differences in

experience and career. All participants, programmes and companies are anonymised.`

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Two interview schedules were compiled: for industry executives, commissioners and

independent production executives; and another for freelancers. The first included questions

about product and labour markets; how commissions are secured; how production schedules

and crews are established.   Only one independent company executive had not worked for a

major broadcaster, and all had 'pitch to production' experience, from programme

development through commissioning to production and broadcast. These respondents had

comprehensive strategic and operational knowledge. The second interview schedule included

why and how individuals became freelancers; employment search; perceptions of how they

manage their reputation, networks and career. The interview sample was drawn from a

combination of industry directories, from personal industry contacts and purposive snowball

sampling (from suitable contacts drawn from the personal ones). Interviews lasted between

45 and 60 minutes and were followed by email, telephone and informal conversations. Initial

interviews were conducted in 2014-16.   Data analysis was conducted, with further interviews

in 2020, including five interviews with commissioners.   All three authors were involved at

various stages of data collection.

Our interviewees ranged from novice television labour to individuals with decades of

experience. Semi-structured interviews generated rich, detailed and comparable data. But

also provided opportunities for respondents to reflect on the importance of taken-for-granted

practices (Alvesson, 2003: 19-20). Broad questions opened up the respondent's own

employment history and their perceptions of how structural change had impacted upon them

and their peers. Our interviews focused on: why they were motivated to pursue a television

career; how they joined or were recruited to social networks; and how important these social

networks were for their employment and career development. More specifically, we then

asked participants to discuss particular examples of their own networking practices and how

these had shaped their career. These more focused questions also identified mentors and

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sponsors who were important in accessing social networks and projects the respondent

considered important for their career. We challenged respondents to develop and reflect upon

points where, for instance, their account contrasted with other participants' perceptions of the

role of social networks and their own networking behaviours for their careers. Interviewees

were asked to suggest others who might be willing to be interviewed, particularly those

whom they regarded as members of their social network and/or were important to their

career. Novel or surprising insights were pursued in subsequent interviews. Using

contrasting experiences of unnamed others as prompts alerted us to how the commissioning

process mediates between neo-bureaucratic broadcasters and the labour market. Our

interviews with producers with deep experience of the commissioning process concentrated

upon the importance of the informal personal ties that paralleled formal contractual

relationships. This insight emerged from the interview process and was not evident from the

extensive literature on media work and labour markets. Producers understood their personal

ties to commissioners as a vital but fragile form of competitive advantage. Our interviews

concentrated on the producers' perceptions of how that relationship had evolved; how the

formal and informal dimensions of commissioning worked in practice; and how

commissioners draw on producers' tacit knowledge and connections to key creative teams

that in turn accesses their social networks to build project-specific crews.

The data was categorised into themes and analysed manually following the step-by-step

framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Grounded coding and inductive questioning

categorised this data into meaningful themes. We worked from our transcripts thematically,

moving from general reflection on industry structures, career trajectories and creative work to

individual experiences. This allowed us to follow a pragmatic iterative process moving

between our identified themes, the existing literature and novel themes that emerged during

our interview process, notably the vital but neglected role of commissioning as the

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moment that binds the neo-bureaucratic broadcaster and the television labour market. A second interpretive stage followed in which categories were saturated by relevant cases, to demonstrate empirical and theoretical relevance (Corbin and Strauss, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 2009; Jay, 2013).

Precarious Careers

What is the relationship between broadcast neo-bureaucracies and creative labour? Such relationships are commercial, technical and social. The risk of commissioning places a premium on durable social networks. *Edward*, a mid-career freelance director of highly successful British dramas across genres, understood that his privileged status reflected his relationship with executive producers and commissioners who had commissioned him for over a decade. In general, over-50s are under-represented in off-screen roles. The exceptions are in comedy and drama especially in senior roles such as director and executive producer (Diamond, 2020: 3,5,15,18). Men consistently direct over 80% of all episodes of comedy and drama (Directors UK, 2018: 17, 22). *Edward* directed *First Dance* and had previously worked for the executive producer; and had collaborated on several projects with the *First Dance's* producer. Meanwhile *Wilson*, a multi-award winning producer/director, explained the obligations that bound commissioners to elite creative teams and, in turn, to production crews:

> Commissioners don't want any surprises. They need to know they can rely on you.
>
> They know *their* reputation is on the line as much as yours. They need to know in
>
> their bones that you can manage cast and crew. They want to see every penny on the
>
> screen. Because green lights can happen suddenly, you have to have essential crew

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ready. So, you use your contacts, and hope that people you can rely on will bring

along others. All of this is tough (pause) stressful.

This was part of a significant change in the industry, associated with the emergence of neo-

bureaucracies. *Gareth*, for example was nearing retirement and had worked in a senior

position for the BBC before starting up and running an independent. He reflected:

Well, I think one of the big changes I've seen in my career, is the emergence of the

commissioner as the key and influential figure in how programmes are – get to be

made at all….when I began, if you had the status of a producer within the BBC, you

had an enormous amount of flexibility with the kind of programmes that you could

make, and the specifics of them. And providing that, over a reasonable period, you

delivered what you thought to be good programmes, then that freedom continued….I

think this is true 'in-house' as well as in an independent – a producer wants to make a

programme, there are an enormous number of hoops that we have to jump through to

satisfy the commissioner that the programme is going to satisfy their needs as they see

them, the audience needs that they represent. So, we've got the stage now, where,

you know, not only 'taster tapes', 'sizzlers' but very detailed, umm, development

documents are required before even a commission gets made.

Broadcasters retain control over key roles in development and production when a commission

is awarded to an independent company. This was particularly true for peak-time drama,

because of their cost/investment and importance. One executive producer, experienced in

several genres, considered the complexities and shared assumptions of his relationship with

commissioners:

My talent is sucking all the ideas and energy out of any room with commissioners in

it. Then you sell them your ideas back to them as *their* ideas. You have to make sure

that the commissioner has become personally invested in your project. A good

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> E[xecutive] P[roducer] already has the commissioner's confidence that you can
> deliver ...*that's* money in the bank... and *that's* all about them having confidence in
> you, and the crew you will bring together. They know the sort of crew you've used
> before, they may even know some of them personally. The good Exec Producer has a
> reputation for making programmes but commissioners also know their reputation for
> managing production all the way to edits.

Even where the broadcaster had allocated the contract informally to a senior creative team,
this remained contingent upon them securing named individuals for senior production roles:
'The BBC have huge influence on the key creatives, such as the producer, the director, the
director of photography, the designer, the editor: this is in their control' (*Elliot,* ex-BBC
commissioner, independent producer). Similarly, *Edward*, a highly-regarded producer,
explained:

> I then make the creative casting decisions, when the BBC will let me, and I normally
> have someone I can rely on that I want to pick …this is a crucial job and the market is
> international. You need to have someone who understands the emotions of a
> programme and how to frame a shot as we want.

The commission is contingent upon the producer's relationship with senior crew members.
Edward's description reflects the negotiated nature of crewing decisions while hinting that
the commissioner retains the final say over key crewing decisions, especially for repeat
productions.   For *David*, producer/director of network documentaries, commissioners
accurately assumed that creative leads would 'drive production': 'There's no time to be
'managing' during production. Everyone has to know what they're doing and manage each
other. You have to be part-psychologist when pulling a crew together'.

The pivotal, and all-powerful role of commissioners, was reported by commissioners, ex-
commissioners, typically independent company owners, and go-to freelancers alike.

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How do freelance television workers experience and understand their careers? Self-exploitation was a recurring theme and assumed various forms. First, 'budget cuts means that we have to take short cuts. For example, I charge a day rate but I end up working many more days. I get twenty days per programme but I end up doing twenty-three to twenty-five days' (*Diane*, location manager). *Ray*, an older experienced camera operator, noted the impact of budgetary pressure on freelance workers:

> My rates have hardly gone up: it is only nine pounds a day more than fourteen years
> ago. It's tougher too. I did nine months of *SciFi* and I was on the studio floor from
> 7:30 to 7:00 every day. It was great but it was exhausting and I had to do my books
> over and above this. I also did *Fantasy* and I had to start at 8:15, this meant me
> leaving at 7:15 and I didn't get paid for travelling or the cost of travelling.

This issue of 'pay-for-travelling', both time and expenses, was an important secondary concern as these freelancers were frequently working on location a (sometimes considerable) distance from their home-base and had formerly been reimbursed for this.

Second, self-exploitation was regarded not just as inevitable but positively as the everyday expression of vocation. 'Are we in danger of exploiting ourselves', asked *Pete,* another experienced freelance camera operator: 'Yes, the problem is that work is my passion. Also, the work we do for ourselves is often on the weekend and this is subsidised by the day job'. Technical competence and experience did not eliminate the need to perform flexibility *passionately*.

For *Eric*, an extremely experienced former ITV staffer and BBC commissioning editor, the 'good' freelancer was: 'technically good, well networked, reliable, etc'. *Ray's* career, as an older freelance camera operative, confirmed the importance of embedding himself in networks inside and beyond the commissioning broadcasters:

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> …joined the BBC in 1981, I was on staff for 19 years. At that time, the freelance market did down-market stuff – news and sports – no documentaries, no drama. All the interesting stuff was done in-house… there was loads of training then, which was brilliant, and loads of on-the-job stuff. …Then in 1988 I was one of the people who could operate the new technology. I was thirty and I had a great portfolio, I'd built up great contacts: news and current affairs and drama – I could do the lot. Then John Birt came along as D[irector] G[eneral] and encouraged people to work as independents, and so I just went.

His solid BBC training, strong technical reputation meant that he was 'guaranteed' freelance BBC work for long periods. Upgrading his technical skills from a strong base was incremental and informal: 'bullshit, mates and the internet.' Technical competence was necessary but insufficient for an individual to be hired. How an individual contributed to the project's transient habitus was vital. One floor manager ascribed his steady employment to his 'good guy' reputation. Certain roles, such as floor manager who maintains the rhythm of production, require acute social skills rather than sophisticated technical competence. Sociability was a recurring trope.   Networks develop informal behavioural and attitudinal disciplines: the individual has to observe and enforce normative controls on themselves and others. An experienced director commented on the intimacy and intensity of a crew's self-discipline: 'some crews think of themselves as a family. They all know each other. They're loyal like families but there is a pecking order; there are squabbles but everyone knows that can't come onto production'.

Ray's formative BBC years provided skills, experience and reputation. Contemporary freelancers had little opportunity to establish comparable career trajectories. *Heather*, aged 25, graduated with a media degree and won a place on a government scheme around the 2012 Olympics; then a government-sponsored media training scheme. After several months and

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hundreds of applications, Heather secured a four-month unpaid internship: 'then it went

completely quiet for six months'. A series of extremely short-term contracts followed,

including one eight-week unpaid 'traineeship' performing mundane tasks that added nothing

to her skills or reputation. More short-term contracts followed, including one that required

her availability for two days per week on call. For *Heather*, this series of limited contracts

equated to stable employment. All younger freelancers experienced such uneasy transitions

in their work histories. Four out of five lived with their parents, including *Heather* who was

engaged to a freelance sound engineer who lived separately with his parents. The exception,

Rod, was a successful producer/director who typically worked four days a week and was

rarely unemployed. He was networked through family and family friends:

> I answered an advert for a research job with 'A' (an independent production
>
> company) for a couple of months. They rang me up the next day and said when can
>
> you start? I knew people in the industry as my dad is a well-known producer/director
>
> and knew the boss of 'A'.

For *Rod*, a partner with secure professional employment underwrote his career: 'I don't think

that you could have two people working freelance in one family'. Despite these advantages

he had little sense of how he could actively *manage* his career. Despite significant social

capital advantages, his fatalism spoke of the absence of a strategy to exploit his relative

advantage or develop marketable technical skills. Family ties were an important form of

networking, and a significant disadvantage for those without sponsors. One respondent, a

middle-aged female producer/director, had a mother who was a well-known weather

presenter and a brother who was a Sky Sports presenter. Another middle-aged presenter

described how she moved through several freelance contracts before:

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..my mother met someone she knew who was going on maternity leave who worked

at 'T' (a large independent) and this got me the job there, on a day-to-day basis but I

stayed there for a long time *(Laura)*.

Similarly, *Steve,* a 35-year old producer/director, was the son of an actor who had starred in

many major television dramas, which connected her to elite creatives and their networks.

Novice freelancer *Heather,* however, was unable to develop her skills, reputation or network

to establish her marketability without long-term sponsorship through a social network.

Crucially, *Ray* had mentored her on one government-funded scheme, and this proved

essential to moving her from the margins of the labour market.

I had been contacting the focus puller at *SciFi* for years with no joy, but *Ray* rang him up

and he got in touch immediately. This was my big break.

Heather acknowledged her mentor's importance in brokering her relationship with his

network. Crossing the boundary into *Ray's* network and the possibility of gaining

experience, screen credits and expanding her contacts were essential to her career

progression, albeit that it remained precarious. *Heather* perceived her career as dependent

upon remaining within *Ray's* network and that her progression was contingent upon

movements inside the network. For *Heather*, her reputation was not transferrable outside

Ray's network. Despite this precarity, *Heather* embraced the openness and variety promised

by freelancing, although this was qualified by a desire for certainty: 'what I really want is

stability'. This exemplified the ambivalent pragmatism of younger freelancers: the allure of

variety but aware of the inherent risk of the television labour market. Career aspirations were

vague yet realistic, in their awareness that employment uncertainty made long-term career

planning impossible *and* their assumption of responsibility for their employability. *Rod*

reflected that his initial foothold in the industry at 'A' where his 'contract kept getting

renewed. I've been on the books of the BBC, I worked for 'B' (another independent) and for

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ITV; all for about a year. But I've always left, my own choice, I've wanted to do my own thing. I love the freedom and variety of being freelance. I work across the board. If work dried up, I'd try something else'.

For the young freelancer, building their reputation required them to be on-call even when on another contract. Alternatively, technical development and network building could be traded-off against enhanced job security. *Jim,* another young freelancer, rejected an open-ended contract with Sky in favour of freelancing: 'They are totally market-focused …their production standards are crap'. Gaining experience, while building reputation and social networks, was collapsed in both *Jim* and *Rod's* narrative of individual agency. For *Heather*, meanwhile, a five-year career plan was futile; three-years unlikely; and one year was – perhaps - realistic. Within three years she hoped to be a focus puller. The time-scale was not about skill acquisition so much as the current job holder was three years her senior in the network. Her next transition was possible *if* she retained her current role; and the incumbent focus puller, a freelancer, was unavailable since it was unlikely she could displace him. In three years, her technical skills, experience and reputation might be sufficiently established to make her the obvious network successor to the current focus puller. Three years production experience would allow *Heather* to demonstrate her technical skills and absorption of the crew's and network's normative expectations.

Jim was a 23 year-old post-production freelancer. He terminated an open-ended contract producing standardised content for an independent company. His rejection of security, was a rejection of work that was technically undemanding in a 'totally market focused' firm. There was a paradox in how *Jim* scripted his choice. He reproduced the trope of the auteur who rejected the mass market. Conversely, his embrace of freelance status to 'produce vibrant quirky material' was because 'lots of our potential competitors are fairly staid, corporate and bland'. 'We are hoping to get work by word-of mouth. We will begin by doing promos,

corporate videos, weddings: anything to pay the bills.' *Jim* was expressing a form of

competitive strategy that prioritised personal development and technical quality. However,

irrespective of quality, the product provides no clues to the maker's sociability, their

readiness to work beyond contract, or to set aside any aesthetic misgivings to meet deadlines

or budgets: all attributes critical to media networking. To see the career *solely* as an

individual project, like *Jim*, was to misunderstand the importance of the social networking

that underpins media labour markets.

Precarity is internalised: reputation and identity are rendered precarious. *All* freelancers

faced chronic insecurity, characterised by long hours and (self) exploitation, even amongst

those whose skills, reputation and contacts provided comparatively stable employment.

Despite his thriving career, *Edward* (regarded as a 'go-to' top UK producer) reported that his

nagging insecurity proved a demanding taskmaster:

> Reputation is everything, but it is a very precarious profession. I am up at the
>
> moment, but I could be down and out next year. All you need is a couple of
>
> bum projects, I've seen it so many times.

Discussion

Broadcasters moved from vertically integrated hierarchies to neo-bureaucracies

commissioning projects (Burns, 1997). Commissioners do not simply award contracts

through markets. Rather, markets for television programmes are mediated through social

networks. We have confirmed empirically that social networks are activated for particular

projects but that this also reproduced and sustained the social network beyond that project

(Manning, 2017: 1402; Grabher, 2004: 1492). Mediation activates the financial, technical

and social disciplines that minimise risk and maximise normative control inside the crew.

Our findings confirm that social networks are how creative workers navigate the structural

constraints of freelance employment. However, adopting a processual and relational

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perspective reveals that neo-bureaucracies actively intervene, more or less directly, in the

constitution and reproduction of the social networks that form the freelance labour market

(Manning and Sydow, 2011: 1388; Stjerne and Svejenova, 2016: 1782; Tunstall, 2015: 81-

82). This process does not mitigate freelance precarities. Projects are managed through

taken-for-granted routines and normative-based controls (Bechky, 2006; Ebbers and

Winberg, 2009; Townley et al, 2009). Given the product's inherent unknowabilty, relying on

crew's normative controls is efficient and reliable (Caves, 2000). The commissioner retains

control over the project without becoming entangled in organizing production. Strong ties

are particularly valuable in contexts with high levels of uncertainty and risk, which increases

the probability that networks will reproduce themselves in ways that preserve existing

patterns of advantage and disadvantage (Hesmonhalgh and Baker, 2015; Moran, 2005).

Trusted elite creatives are valuable for their technical and aesthetic skills *and* as gatekeepers

to networks from which reliable production teams are assembled.   The negotiation between

commissioners and favoured creative teams, is based on their track record and their ability to

build a crew tailored to a project's specific aesthetic and budgetary needs. Commissioners

rely on the senior creative team recruiting crew based on previous successful collaborations

and so embedding the double discipline of latent organisation and the social network

(Manning and Sydow, 2011: 1372). Informal quality assurance systems have increased in

value as regulatory standards have declined (Baumann, 2002).   For the commissioner, high

trust reduces governance, transaction and verification costs (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).

Fast trust, mobilised in real time, is a precondition of a crew's effectiveness (Carney, 1998).

This is achieved without the broadcaster's direct involvement through their reliance upon

lead creatives anxious for future commissions and by the crew's self-discipline. The more

embedded the social ties, the greater the propensity for mutual aid, deeper trust and reciprocal

transfer of otherwise restricted information and knowledge (Uzzi, 1997). Commissioners and

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senior project managers exercise control over staffing and quality through proxies: senior

creatives and their networks. During production, crew members' technical standards and

reliability are assessed through direct experience, especially the capacity to solve problems in

difficult moments of production (Tempest et al., 2004). Understanding the crew's self-

discipline as partly derived from the durability of social networks avoids regarding the

project as a 'lonely phenomenon in time,' but as neither unique nor routine but recurring

(Engwall, 2003: 790).

The language of 'boundaryless careers' is saturated with a voluntarism that elevates

individual freedom and ignores structural constraints. In practice, the individual assumes

personal responsibility for long-run skill development; a willingness to absorb employment

risks and turn psychological costs inwards (Mayrhofer et al., 2007; Roper et al., 2010;

Scharff, 2016). Some fifteen per cent of working time is unpaid, even for experienced

creative workers (Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2020). In fluid organizational and market

settings, the cues for individual and social action are deeply ambiguous, and provide no

durable, coherent scripts to guide enterprising selves: 'the career contract is not with an

organization, it is with the self' (Barley, 1989; Svejendva, 2005: 948). This is a tournament

labour market with inscrutable rules, uncertain performance standards and comparisons with

distant peers impossible, so that it is both extremely competitive and opaque (Stoyanova and

Grugulis, 2012). Creative workers' embrace of risk and opportunity is central to the 'hope

labour' that renders structural advantage and disadvantage into personal responsibility (Lee,

2012: 489; Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2020). The psychological rewards of creative work

combine with precarity's inherent anxieties, to produce an experience of intense sociality *and*

periodic isolation (Butler and Russell, 2018; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010: 16; Rowlands

and Handy, 2012).

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The novice learns their craft and how to perform their identity work embedded in both a crew and a social network (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 84-86). Strong ties, durable relationships and intense, frequent dialogue, provide the ideal conditions for producing and transferring tacit knowledge. Hiring through social networks reproduces existing patterns of advantage and disadvantage (CAMEo, 2018: 36; Gill, 2014). Camera operatives had once progressed from trainee, to assistant focus puller and eventually to craft status. *Heather's* experience speaks of the uncertainty of career transitions for freelancers. Rapid starts to commissions and intense production schedules reduced the porosity of television production, the frequent downtimes which enabled informal training (McKinlay and Quinn, 1999; ScreenSkills, 2020: 4). Her anxiety over the possibilities of skill acquisition and career progression was typical (Work Foundation, 2019: 25-26). Membership required the individual to understand and *contribute* to the studied informality of a television crew (Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 134; Randle et al., 2015: 598; Petrilieri et al, 2019: 157). Membership of a social network provided access to information, expertise and opportunity; but continued membership was contingent on accepting a particular role in the labour process. The social network incorporates an implicit, relatively fixed hierarchy that becomes explicit in the crew's work organisation. Heather's employment entailed her becoming entangled in a complex disciplinary web. She was subject to her own sense of professionalism and career development; to her employment contract's formal requirements; and to the highly specific expectations of *that* crew, on *that* project.   Her initial obligations were exclusively to *Ray* but through participation in *SciFi* she acquired ties to his network. Reducing her dependence upon *Ray* was conditional on her recognising, accepting and performing these communal obligations (Bechky and Chung, 2018: 620-621). This is the normative control that broadcasters mobilise without cost, and minimal risk, by recruiting a project's senior creative team which then activates its networks. Network connections were important to enter the

sector and gradually accumulated value (Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 115, 134). To

recommend another for a job signalled an expectation of present task performance and future

reciprocity (Antcliffe et al, 2007: 381).

Television's precarious employment has rendered careers as *mosaics*, enabled by networks

and measured and made meaningful by projects, emphasizing their relative precarity, rather

than the notion of 'boundarylessness' which emphasizes agency and self-determination

(Bevort and Stjerne, 2019). These 'boundaryless careers' are not, therefore, accurate, either

empirically or theoretically. Organizations are not post bureaucratic, neither are individuals

'free agents' in the market. Rather the description of 'mosaic careers' which allow for a

degree of individual agency but recognises that these careers are embedded in a neo

bureaucratic frame which are piecemeal and have considerable potential for 'dark sides' such

as long and unpredictable hours, pressures on pay and the potential for (self) may better fit

the theoretical and empirical reality, particularly for younger freelancers (and remembering

that we only interviewed survivors).

Conclusion

This paper had two objectives, first to evaluate the role of neo-bureaucracy and

commissioners in the development of TV careers in a project-based industry and second, to

locate individual careers within the social networks through which employment is found, and

reputations embedded. Over the last thirty years, television careers have been transformed.

Freelance employment now dominates television production. Initially, independent

producers and freelancers had previously worked for major broadcasters. Increasingly,

however, younger freelancers have employment histories without the reputation or

networking gains from direct employment with broadcasters. For all freelancers, careers

were not individual and boundaryless but centred on their technical and social skills within

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social networks and as such are better characterised as mosaic. Social networks and the self-discipline of crews are mutually constitutive: an individual's reputation is built during production and reproduced through social networks. Where older freelancers accessed networks via their previous work history, their younger peers used a variety of sponsorship and industry contacts to gain employment. Intangible social 'fit' was essential to access and sustain membership of social networks, highlighting the pivotal role played by commissioners. The freelancers' reputation was earned by credits on prestige programmes especially when embedded in social networks that included elite creatives. The structure of the industry here was important, particularly the commissioning function of neo-bureaucracies which incorporate centralisation - of strategy and information - and a high degree of cultural integration and socialisation. Combined, these have ensured a small group of trusted freelancers who are the hubs of social networks. *Heather's* failure and then success in accessing employment, dependent on *Rod's* sponsorship to gain her production credits and network membership is illustrative of this.

That the TV industry has fragmented has been well rehearsed in the previous literature, as is the precarity of the industry, and neither are novel, theoretically or empirically. However, our paper is novel in three respects. First, as characterising this fragmentation within a theoretical framework of neo-bureaucracy with its distinct set of power and control implications, in which the role of broadcaster-based commissioners are both all-powerful and pivotal. Second, by our characterisation of careers as mosaics. Third, by demonstrating the links between neo-bureaucracies and mosaic careers. In short, mosaic careers are a direct consequence of neo-bureaucratic structures, these concepts have not been addressed before and neither have their inter-connections.

The characterisation of careers as boundaryless, assumes unconstrained agency so that an individual's career progression is unrestricted and frictionless. 'Boundaryless' employees are

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thus purportedly free to switch employers in the search for personal advancement, largely

ignoring the temporary host, with their tenure dictated by themselves. Mosaic careers,

meanwhile, situate individuals within a series of structural constrains, both personal and

within the confines of the control of neo bureaucratic labour markets, and are thus often

piecemeal, sporadic etc. They capture the complexity of the work histories experienced by

individuals constrained by fragmented employment. This is the reality of all freelancers but

particularly younger ones, who are often caught in competitive 'tournaments' for work.

_____TABLE 1 HERE_____

How then, do neo-bureaucracies develop their strategy, structure and control processes?

Our research suggests the need for longitudinal studies of strategic and structural change of

neo-bureaucracies, particularly the development and diffusion of financial and statistical

controls inside and beyond the commissioning organisation. This would permit us to

understand the long-run dynamics of change in neo-bureaucracies and the process of

isomorphism in the television industry. Contemporary broadcast neo-bureaucracies do not

operate in boundaryless spaces but activate social networks that vet prospective crew

members and manage their performance. This is an oblique form of control that surpasses the

possibilities of market or hierarchy. Broadcast commissioners use the social networks of elite

creative workers to track and manage freelance workers by proxy. Freelance workers,

meanwhile, use their networks to find employment and progress their careers. Generation is

a defining boundary for television labour; older workers were much more likely to have

learnt their trade and established their reputation in the major broadcasters before 1992. This

advantaged these workers in the emergent freelance labour market. Relative labour market

advantages proved durable and cumulative, especially for crew with prestigious credits and

links to elite creatives. Conversely, younger workers found it more difficult to establish

themselves in these networks. It remains an open question how reputations are established

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and sustained over the long run although broadcasters and major independents are likely to

remain reputational touchstones. Social networks are neither permanent nor ephemeral, but

durable. The tension between craft and neoliberal values was greatest for those with longest

experience and less problematic for younger television workers. Equally, older respondents

were more likely to stress the importance of networking for job search and as a vehicle for

mutual support. Networking was a skill acquired, and its value recognised, over time (Lee,

2012b). Reputation, similarly, is not wholly individual but is bound up with membership of

social networks. Contemporary career research is predicated on a historic break from internal

labour markets, but is dominated by snapshots with little sense of temporality. The

temporality of networks remains a major gap in the literatures about project-based industries,

precarious labour markets and careers. Following Eikhof (2017), employment decisions and

career narratives have to be contextualised in terms of industry structure *and* how networks

operate and are reproduced over the long-run. In unregulated labour markets, individual

careers are necessarily embedded in social networks. Established freelancers reported

relatively regular employment. Freelancers, particularly but not exclusively younger

respondents, welcomed the flexibility promised by unregulated labour markets. However, the

nature of creative work plus the structural realities of the industry caused pervasive self-

exploitation. A recognition of external constraints is neither an acceptance nor, far less, an

endorsement in terms of equity. Freelancers' recognition of external constraints did not

signify fatalism but an acceptance of individual agency. To understand harsh market realities

was necessary to a sense of self as autonomous and enterprising. Precarious employment,

even when combined with satisfying work, does not signify the possibility of a boundaryless

career. All freelancers faced an insecure existence characterised by long hours and self-

exploitation, irrespective of craft, reputation or seniority. To understand the career, we must

track individuals and networks over projects, time and space. Television production careers

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are not boundaryless but mosaics: composed of fragments employment in organisations and

projects and defined by social networks, their overall pattern only discernible post-hoc.

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Table 1: Boundaryless and mosaic careers compared

Boundaryless Careers

Decontextualised, neo classical (free market) economic assumptions of fragmented labour markets.

Individuals 'free' agents and unrestrained and 'nomadic', largely unrestricted.

Individuals therefore pursue unrestrained career progress.

Importance of networks underplayed.

Mosaic Careers

Contextualised, neo-bureaucratic organizing of fragmented labour markets.

Individual agency, but constrained by institutions and marked by inequalities; role of power and control.

Careers piecemeal and characterised by fragmentation and uncertainty.

Social capital crucial, importance of networks