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The Talent Industry:

Television, Cultural Intermediaries and New Digital Pathways

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Television risks the "catastrophe" of losing a generation of creative talent to digital start-ups unless it makes significant changes to its working culture [ ] I believe that the single biggest threat facing our industry is the loss of talent to digital. If we don't attract the right kind of people today, we won't make the right kind of programmes and services tomorrow.

UKTV CEO Darren Childs, speaking at the Creative Week Industry conference 2 June 2015.

Introduction

The television industry has always been a talent hungry business. Both on and off-screen it is a cultural sector in which new ideas, forms and developing differing content have always been an integral part of both its self-identity and its industrial strength. As a researcher I was interested in exploring how the shift to a multi-platform digital environment had (if at all) shifted the relationship the UK television industry has with various types of on and off-screen talent. This was the jumping-off point for the book *The Talent Industry, Television, Cultural Intermediaries and New Digital Pathways,* which was published in September 2018 and draws on extensive interviews with key stakeholders from across the UK television sector as well as some of the biggest television agents in the UK.

The book sets out to explore how digital multiplatform delivery is affecting the role performed by cultural intermediaries responsible for talent identification and development such as broadcasters, commissioning editors, producers, platform operators, programme-makers, talent agencies and public relations firms and whether the process of digitization can offer new pathways to capture and nurture a diverse talent base within the UK television industry. Who are the traditional gatekeepers of talent in television and what role are cultural intermediaries, such as broadcasters, commissioning editors, producers, platform operators, programme-makers, talent

agencies and public relations firms playing in managing and promoting both contemporary on and off-screen talent?

The book also investigates to what extent the transition to a digital media environment has diminished entry barriers, reshaped frameworks of support for emerging talent, and created new pathways that overcome earlier blockages which may have affected the development of talent. Also it looked at how recent transformative changes in the technology of television distribution have affected the role played by cultural intermediaries in developing, managing, promoting and valuing talent.

At the centre of this book sits the term talent. For such a seemingly ubiquitous and supposedly benign term, it masks a myriad of meanings and values that are indicative of how the television industry draws on the history it has created and constructed to legitimise current practice. Indeed, the term in relation to television comes originally from its association with a talent agent in the very early days of television. Nowadays, of course, the concept of 'talent' has emerged within creative industry policy discussions as central to unlocking economic success within the creative economy. However, I was interested in taking the longer view of debates around 'talent'. Hence the book explores how the term 'talent' has historically been interpreted and understood across comparative fields, such as light entertainment and news and current affairs within the UK television industry by the BBC and commercial PSBs such as ITV and Channel 4. At the core of the book is an interest in the role of the talent agent, that crucial intermediary between performer and the television industry.

Talent and Agents

A central part of this story is the role of cultural intermediaries such as the talent agent. Indeed, given the importance of the talent agent as cultural intermediary within the broader network of relationships that inform and shape the field of television organisation and culture they remain remarkably under researched in media and communication studies. Work on the film industry and the role of agents (notably Rouseel, 2017) only serves to highlight the lack of academic attention focused on this part of the television food chain. As Kuipers has argued:

> Cultural intermediaries are easily overlooked. In part, this is because they work behind the scenes of (cultural) production (2014: 52).

When attention is turned to UK television specifically there is even less dedicated focus, even though a significant amount of research around media and communication studies, television and screen studies has positioned television at the centre of its research agenda. In part, this may be because their power and influence exist away from the screen itself (although I would argue that indirectly they play a key role in shaping the television culture of any generation of viewers). Also, they are part of the wider 'field' of influencers that shape the milieu within which television operates, often overshadowed by television controllers and commissioners in research that seeks to understand how particular types of content reaches our screens. Again, Kuipers reflects that for academic researchers:

> The actual work of intermediaries often is hard to observe, let alone 'measure'. It typically consists of long hours spent behind computers, emailing, browsing, twittering and writing, interspersed with meetings that are often off limits to researchers. Moreover, much of the work done by cultural intermediaries does not look like work. Their professional encounters and activities look deceivingly casual: sipping lattes at Starbucks, having lunch in hip venues, flipping through magazines, browsing stands at festivals and fairs, and most of all: talking to people (2014: 53).

While not explicitly talking about talent agents, much of what Kuipers describes here is instantly recognisable to me. In truth, the work of these cultural intermediaries in this area remains less than central to many academic studies in television production, although this area this has begun to changein recent years. The trailblazer remains the work of Jeremy Tunstall (1993; 2001; 2015), whose ground breaking forensic investigations into professional culture and the role of both *structure* and *agency* within seemingly all-powerful media and organisational structures has remained consistently insightful and impressive over many years.

The Online Talent Environment
What emerged during the research for the book was an historical shift from defining on-screen talent around its cultural and artistic value, to one that increasingly views talent

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through a more commercial prism, in which the ability to deliver audiences and enhance channel or programme brand identities has become increasingly central. This is particularly evident in the social video environment.

Hence the book was interested in how the developing structures around the social video environment (for example the YouTube platform) were impacting how television understood how new talent was being developed. There certainly existed a deep concern among the television sector that the new online digital culture was attracting and enticing talent (a.k.a. young people) that previously would have viewed television as the cultural medium of choice, both to watch and potentially develop a career in.

What emerged in the book was the existence of two related but distinct cultures, television and the social video arena, each with its own particular set of values, norms and practices and with surprisingly little overlap between them. The research documents innovative and exciting ways in which Channel 4 and the BBC, through projects such as The Social (created in Glasgow at BBC Scotland) and channels such as BBC3 have attempted to reach out into this online culture by building bridges and developing possible talent pathways. It also documents the highly commercial and brand-orientated online social video sector, examines the speed at which this part of the internet has been commodified by advertising in a remarkably short space of time, and considers the implications of this for talent working in this sector.

What was particularly interesting was the way the role of talent agents was central to the success of the top YouTubers such as Zoella, Ali A or DanDTM. Here was the new digital talent using agents to enhance their reputation and career profile through book deals, live appearances and theatrical tours. In so doing, they carry with them a strong echo of the working practice of early television agents who came out of the theatre (as indeed did much of the early television on and off-screen talent).

The book argues that the importance of cultural intermediaries is becoming more important in the internet era. In this sense it echoes Thompson's (2017) findings around intermediaries in the publishing industry. Across the television sector, their role is evolving and in the social video space the role of agents or talent/management agencies

remains an important part of what has become a highly commercial environment. These agents perform many of the functions that intermediaries have always carried out, but with the significant difference that the values underpinning much of the activity is overwhelmingly commercial and advertising/brand-focused in orientation. In other words, talent in this space has become a narrowly defined concept, less concerned with artistic endeavour, but rather embedded in broader structures of advertising driven patterns of consumption and market popularity.

Within the creative industries, re-invention has always been an important part of extending the talent life cycle. In the multi-platform age, as evidenced throughout the book, what we see is a significant increase in the rate of churn and change at all levels in the hierarchy of talent within the television industry as commissioning editors change and move on and the freelance labour market, with its inbuilt insecurity, becomes commonplace. This also raises a challenge around the role of mentoring within the television industry and the creation of space for new and, indeed, established talent.

The Creative Economy

The contemporary television industry is one characterised by freelance contracts and it demands that its creative workforce be both flexible and responsive to change. In a sense the television industry is an exemplar of what Jo Littler has identified as the myth of 'neoliberal meritocracy'. She argues that:

> a potent blend of an essentialised notion of 'talent', competitive individualism and belief in social mobility, is mobilised to both disguise and gain consent for the economic inequalities wrought through neoliberalism (2018: 223).

In many ways these aspects are equally applicable to the online social video environment, the home of so much of what Brooke Erin Duffy (2018: 191) calls 'aspirational labour'. Many of the YouTube generation of both creators and consumers of social video content have been inculcated with the dominant neoliberal myths of competitive individualism and entrepreneurial opportunities.

There remains a hierarchal dimension to how power is located and exercised within the television industry. As argued throughout the book, the seemingly benign term talent masks a myriad of trends and power relations. The increasingly advertising-driven

definition of talent, valued through its ability to deliver audiences has of course always been part of the UK television landscape. However, the multi-platform environment has seen these commercial values associated with - certainly in terms of on-screen talent - become much more central to the industry, and as a result this has tended to squeeze out other no-economic values or even more often intangible assets such as artistic or cultural significance that may be associated with talent.

Television, Talent and Barriers of Entry

The UK television industry had a clear sense of what it meant by the term talent in the past. I would argue that in many ways this remains the case today despite the overarching commercialisation of the sector that has reshaped much of its culture in the last few decades. I would suggest that those routes into the industry have always been unpredictable to an extent, often driven by contacts, networks of influence (historically key universities, such as Oxbridge at the BBC) and chance.

The BBC and other PSBs need to be leading the drive to enhance, nurture and develop talent. Commercial companies are driven in the UK by shareholder concerns, and the historical opportunities and economies of scale that existed and provided spaces to allow development, increasingly do not exist to the same extent, despite the potential that the multi-platform environment could offer for experimentation and the transition of talent through and across differing sectors of the television industry.

At the outset of the book the issue was raised, by the television industry itself, that it was at risk of losing a generation of talent to the online world unless it adapted and reached out to entice this generation into the television sector. As I have argued, there are broader structural economic and regional factors that often act as a blockage to new talent entering the UK industry. Despite technological disruption and attempts at de-centralisation (mainly by the BBC and more recently Channel 4), in truth the UK industry's centre of gravity continues to be London.

If this remains the case then real economic barriers around housing and basic cost of living mean that, for non-London-based potential television workers, the material costs are too much unless you have family-based connections or are sufficiently affluent to be able to in truth pay to work. For working class young people coming to London, the odds remain stacked against you being able to carve out the time and contacts needed to

develop a career in the city around the television industry. Attempts by some more enlightened television employers such as UKTV (operating in a highly competitive market with no public funding) to offer fully funded apprenticeships is to be welcomed, but unless this is systematically rolled out across the industry with a sustained and long-term commitment then any pipelines into the industry are going to remain highly congested. Littler (2018: 7) reminds us that one of the key myths of the meritocratic society is that individual 'effort' tends to be over-valued, while you're social or economic location is ignored; to this list I would add geographical location.

Finally….

What is striking about the online social video space is the ease and speed with which corporate businesses and national and global brands have moved into that environment (often taking advertising revenues away from other forms of media) and mobilised new forms of online talent and its audience as part of their promotional and often consumerist activity. It is interesting, in terms of the growing social criticism of the negative social impact of major technology platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, that a response has been to reposition these organisations (by themselves, it must be said) as not just highly commercial spaces for entertainment, but also as providers of education and socially useful information.

As the UK television industry continues to evolve with increasingly competition from the technology/media companies such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, while at the same time the consolidation of global media organisations such as Disney continues apace, there are many challenges ahead for the industry in the UK. In simple terms, now is not the moment for risk-averse decision-making but rather a time to seek to capture and draw on as wide a talent base as possible.

The Talent Industry: Television, Cultural Intermediaries and New Digital Pathways, was published by Palgrave Macmillan, September, 2018.

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