



## Book Review: Producing British Television Drama. Local Production in a Global Era

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### REVIEWED BOOK

McElroy, R. and Noonan, C. 2019. *Producing British Television Drama. Local Production in a Global Era*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

### KEYWORDS

television production, United Kingdom, Welsh language, television drama, labour in television production, tourism in Northern Ireland

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Ruth McElroy and Caitriona Noonan (2019) give a holistic overview of the production of drama for public service broadcasters (PSB) in their book *Producing British Television Drama*. The authors present an introduction to the importance of drama for audiences, arguing that we are not in the 'golden age' of television anymore. The book examines four main topics. First, the changes in production of television drama on an executive level of the PSB stations. Second, it assesses the importance of local production and regional representation in a globalized TV market. Furthermore, it looks at the conditions of labour in television production. Finally, it explores the impact of drama productions on tourism of a specific region.

The seven chapters of this book focus on different interconnecting aspects of British television production. The first two chapters function as an introduction and lay the foundation for a controversial thesis: the absence of a second 'golden age' of television. Chapter three and five investigate the ecology of production, concretely the changes in production and the new head in charge – i.e. the commission. The fifth chapter evaluates the labour in television production and gives room for an empirical study of workers, a shift away

from the common examinations of actors, producers, directors and cinematographers. The importance of the region as a representation and place of productions is discussed in chapter four. Tourism as an aspect of local production is observed in chapter six. The final chapter offers future-oriented interpretations of the current television and video-streaming service market.

McElroy and Noonan's overarching argument throughout the chapters is that drama is highly popular with the British audience because it reflects their living environment or represents their location, an assumption rooted in audience ratings. However, as the authors point out, the process of producing drama for television has shifted as "commissioning editors form a well-established elite in television production, operating as an intermediary between the broadcast organization and program supplier" (McElroy and Noonan 2019, p. 52). Commissioners supersede the foremost role of the producers. Here, McElroy and Noonan (2019) confirm the results of Gillian Doyle (2016, pp. 637-639), Jonathan Bignell and Stephen Lacey (2014, pp. 9-11). As a side note, the authors add that this does not mean a bigger diversity during the process of production. Furthermore, they point out the development in terms of distribution between the in-house production companies and independent production companies, as well as foreign ones. The new idea that McElroy and Noonan (2019) lay out is their evaluation of a specific production approach in the UK. It is the combination of commissioners rather than showrunners who pitch a new drama series, now financed by more and more independent production companies. This change in production forms a new type of risk. The risk for a production exists now more for independent production companies and not PSBs.

The labour force in television production has so far been neglected in media studies, according to chapter five. As the focus is shifted from stage production to manual labour, new objects of research are presented, along with the results of the analysis of television production. In this section, the authors differ from Steve Blanford, Beth Johnson, and Matthew Pateman (cited in McElroy and Noonan 2019, p. 98) who analysed labour in the form of showrunners and scriptwriting. McElroy and Noonan's approach (2019) is more in line with the works of Mark Banks, Helen Blair, Susan Christopherson, Sarah Baker, and David Hesmondhalgh (cited in McElroy and Noonan 2019, pp.101-104) because they talked about the working conditions of the often-unseen workforce in the craft labour.

The results presented in this chapter are based on interviews with people in the workforce of TV production companies. The authors emphasize the importance of female voices because they make up more than 50% of the workforce in television production. They argue that, due to work conditions, people in TV production tend to have a low median age and a

wealthier middle-class background because of a high rate of unpaid extra work. The quality of labour is not included in policy, as it is seen as merely an economic good, rather than a cultural one.

In an in-depth example, the authors describe the Roath Lock Studios in Cardiff as the main production place for *Doctor Who* (2005-present). The success of the series was the reason for building up this labour market and developing the region. A long-running series is a safe requiring labour market, which is described by McElroy and Noonan (2019) as high-volume production, in contrast to high-value production. An established and base production helps the well-being of workers and benefits their careers.

Another aspect of regional production is presented in chapter six. The analysis is based on Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural intermediaries', different forms of intermediaries, and the strategic value "that screen agencies and tourism boards derive from their work" (McElroy and Noonan 2019, p. 124). The analysis focuses on the screen agency Northern Ireland Screen and the tourist board in Northern Ireland. For the authors, cultural intermediaries lower the financial risks of television productions into a 'growth coalition' as developed by Susan Christopherson. The UK has a diverse competing structure of screen agencies that function as co-producers and co-financers. In their conclusion, the agencies get to be government-supported investors. McElroy and Noonan (2019) say it is remarkable that Northern Ireland was chosen for such a large-scale TV production as *Game of Thrones* (*GoT*) (2011-2019). A significant thesis is that *GoT* went to Northern Ireland not solely because of the First Minister's involvement, but rather because of Northern Ireland Screen and their promise of substantial public investments. The authors say it is difficult to assess the return of money in the local Northern Irish economy, and here they agree with Susan Christopherson (cited in McElroy and Noonan 2019, p. 132) who suggests it is a marginal return, especially in the case of non-recurring productions. As the only available numbers for *GoT* are provided by Northern Ireland Screen, this allowed the authors to rightfully hesitate with provision of a decisive answer in this matter.

The development of tourism because of a TV drama production is the other aspect in this chapter. Different reasons why there could be tourism leverage out of *GoT* are presented. First, the success of *GoT* in the USA and its incredible importance for Irish tourism stems from the fact that "a substantial diaspora travel to Ireland in the hope of reconnecting with their genealogy" (McElroy and Noonan 2019, p. 135). The second reason is the production value of *GoT* and the usage of the environment for filming, which benefits smaller locations. HBO and Northern Ireland Tourism had an agreement on using trademarks from the show. Another remarkable argument made by McElroy and Noonan (2019) is the adaptation of

Rodanthi Tzanelli's idea for shifting the tourism memory from factional violence in Northern Ireland to the fictional conflicts on *GoT*'s continent, Westeros. They give examples of touristic marketing of *GoT* in their chapter conclusion, including augmented reality tours on filming locations or fan involvement strategies on social media. Yet, the latter can cause problems, like the showrunners' comments on Belfast as an 'un-cosmopolitan city'.

Finally, the fourth chapter about regional identity and representation is thematically the most important chapter. The main ideas of this chapter can also be found across the whole book. The authors "note a research gap in terms of regional and national structure of contemporary UK television drama production" (McElroy and Noonan 2019, p. 74). They give an overview of PSB stations and their connection to the regions, with a special focus on Wales. One of the premises is that there is a differentiation of regionality between ITV and the BBC. ITV was founded with regionality in mind, especially in regional advertisement aspects, while the BBC was a staple of centralization. Moreover, after the Brexit referendum and its different regional voting patterns, the PSB landscape also changed, creating a greater valuation of single nations. For this, the authors present the example of Channel 4 and its campaign '4 all the UK', which was a competition for production locations and headquarters outside London. This echoed an earlier attempt by the BBC for more production outside of London. Wales benefits the most because of long-running show productions there, according to McElroy and Noonan (2019), but still not every region and nation is represented equally. The production on location has a significant role in representation, especially if the show is set in that region and not only used for production. An interconnected aspect to representing a region is the language. The authors give examples of Welsh programming and series like *Y Gwyll/Hinterland* (2013-2016), arguing that mono- or bilingual series help to represent and strengthen minority languages in the UK.

The book provides a great overview of the conditions of television production in the UK. Especially chapters four and six give room for new ideas concerning the analysis of production processes. My biggest concern with the book is that there are some instances where exceptionalism of the UK television market is created by the authors; however this is not attributed to or confirmed by other sources (McElroy and Noonan 2019, pp. 47, 61). Nevertheless, this book is significant due to its holistic approach and single analysis of the UK television ecology.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julien Grub has a B.A. in modern history and German literature and an M.A. in comparative history from the University of Freiburg, Germany. The author previously worked with Valentina Escherich on the food situation and cookbooks during World War I, *Krieg in der Küche*, for *Badische Heimat* and on the connection of the film *Suspiria* (1977) to Freiburg for a cooperative book, *Okkultes Freiburg*, edited by Günther Klugermann, Anna Lux and Uwe Schellinger. Julien Grub is part of the bisexual research group founded by Julia Shaw.

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