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human relations**The Ties that Bind us: Networks, Projects and Careers in
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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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3 Keywords: Careers, Creative industries, neo bureaucracy, networks, interviews
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15 **Introduction**

16
17 Over three decades careers have been portrayed as transformed. The catalyst was corporate
18 restructuring that signalled the death knell of the managerial bureaucracy and the internal
19 labour market (Hodgson and Briand, 2013; Jones and Maoret, 2018; Morris et al, 2016;
20 Morris and Farrell, 2017; Sydow, 2018). In bureaucratic careers, employees developed firm-
21 specific expertise in return for security and career progression (McKinlay, 2002). The shift to
22 post-bureaucratic organization disrupted this social compact between organization and
23 individual: careers were no longer the joint responsibility of organization and individual. The
24 organization absolved itself of responsibility for career management. The ‘boundaryless
25 career’ has become hegemonic in contemporary career research despite its neglect of social
26 and historical context (Arnold and Cohen, 2008; Clarke, 2013; Pringle and Mallon, 2003;
27 Stoyanova and Grugulis, 2012; Tomlinson et al, 2018). ‘Boundaryless’ labour switched
28 employers pursuing personal development, indifferent to which organization was their
29 temporary host, their tenure at their discretion and decided by their criteria. This was the
30 antithesis of the managerial bureaucracies and the predictable, linear careers of twentieth
31 century ‘organization man’. The ‘boundaryless career’ invoked the emergence of nomadic
32 individuals producing their own future (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996).

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54 How do broadcast neo-bureaucracies intervene in labour markets? And what are the
55 consequences of those interventions? We have two objectives. First, to evaluate the
56 emergence and role of neo-bureaucracies and the location of power and control in them
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3 which lies with (broadcaster-based) commissioners and second, their links with the
4
5 development of UK television careers. We focus on the relationship between neo-
6
7 bureaucratic broadcasters and the freelance labour market. Commissions for television
8
9 projects are organized around personal relationships between commissioners and senior
10
11 creative teams. An implicit element of the commission is that senior creatives will activate
12
13 their social networks to recruit reliable technical and craft crews. Here we go beyond
14
15 existing research which correctly emphasises the importance of the social network and the
16
17 crew's latent organization in the television labour market and labour process but portrays
18
19 these as disconnected from broadcasting organizations. We also go beyond existing research
20
21 on media careers by highlighting the active mediating role played by broadcasters rather than
22
23 ascribing precarity to structural change in the sector. Second, to demonstrate that these
24
25 careers are not boundaryless but marked by structural constraints and inequalities, and as
26
27 could be characterised as mosaic. We consider how contemporary careers are experienced
28
29 and understood by freelancers. We follow Eikhof (2017) in locating individual's decision-
30
31 making and career narratives in the context of industry structures and particular social
32
33 networks. The freelance labour market is not individualised, but traversed by social networks
34
35 based on trust, reputation and reciprocity. Navigating between projects and networks is a
36
37 vital skill for freelancers. Careers are not defined by income or promotion but by fragments
38
39 that become 'mosaics', whose completeness and coherence rests on the individual's skill in
40
41 manoeuvring between projects and networks. Mosaic careers retain individual agency
42
43 without the voluntarism of the 'boundaryless career' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Mosaic
44
45 refers to process and outcome, a pattern emergent over time, but also refers to the piecemeal
46
47 nature related to precarity which in turn is contingent on the emergence of neo bureaucratic
48
49 forms. The legitimacy of bureaucratic internal labour markets was premised upon
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51 transparency and rules-based predictability: individuals could plot their progress against their
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3 peers and seek redress if the organization's procedural justice was breached. Expectations
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5 and constraints were known and long-run career trajectories manageable. Mosaic careers are
6
7 made of fragments, their development and coherence only comprehensible retrospectively.
8
9 Mosaic careers have limited transparency, predictability or procedural justice. The gain of
10
11 rethinking careers as mosaics is that it shifts the focus from structural constraints to a
12
13 contextual, processual understanding that retains individual agency within the context of
14
15 specific projects and the recurring ties that bind social networks (Manning, 2010: 570), which
16
17 are themselves a consequence of the shift to neo-bureaucratic governance regimes.
18
19 The paper is organised in four sections. First, we consider the emergence of new
20
21 organizational forms, the role of power and control within these forms (and specifically
22
23 broadcaster commissioners) and their impact on careers and precarity in television. Second,
24
25 we detail our methods, particularly how we produced data about the practices of
26
27 commissioning executives, the diverse experience of precarious employment and social
28
29 networks across different age cohorts and gender. Third, we present our data which considers
30
31 how social networks operate in the labour market to create, reinforce and mitigate advantage
32
33 and disadvantage. Finally, we reflect upon our empirical findings on the organisation of
34
35 precarity and creative labour's experience of mosaic careers.
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41 42 **Organising Precarity**

43
44 Neo-bureaucracy entails the hierarchical structure, centralised knowledge, power and
45
46 strategy, and the comprehensive deployment of rules-based organising. These features are
47
48 powerful continuities from the ideal-type of managerial bureaucracy. Functional hierarchies
49
50 are organised around specialists responsible for defining and enforcing regulation corporate
51
52 strategy and external standards (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004). In knowledge-based or
53
54 creative sectors, key functions concentrate on finance and audit, and on protecting reputation
55
56 and intellectual property rights. The project is a routine form of neo-bureaucratic organizing
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3 both inside and beyond the organization's boundaries. Equally, the project time-limited
4
5 structures are central organizing principles to achieve strategic as well as operational
6
7 objectives (Engwall, 2003: 789; Mitever et al, 2017: 9). Neo-bureaucracy is a shifting hybrid
8
9 that combines market and bureaucracy, centralised and decentralised control in pursuit of 'a
10
11 deft combination of remote strategic leadership and detailed operational management' (Reed,
12
13 2011: 243). Far from being threatened by the rise of temporary organizing, neo-bureaucracy
14
15 has been fundamental to this process by articulating systems to regulate outsourced
16
17 production and temporary projects. The permanence of the neo-bureaucracy is 'a vital
18
19 precondition for temporary organising' (Sydow and Windeler, 2020: 488).
20
21
22 The 'boundaryless careers' rise should be most marked in industries where production was
23
24 project based; and vertically integrated hierarchies and industry-wide regulation were
25
26 disrupted and marketised. UK television exemplifies these conditions. The end of national
27
28 bargaining in commercial television in 1989 and the consolidation of the ITV network
29
30 increased outsourcing (McKinlay and Quinn, 2007). State interventions, particularly the
31
32 formation of Channel 4 and the 1990 Broadcasting Act, created new markets for content and
33
34 labour, and reduced the non-market provisions, including training, required of broadcasters
35
36 (Carter et al, 2020). From 1992 the BBC was legally compelled to source at least 25% of its
37
38 output from the independent sector (Carter and McKinlay, 2013). Market reforms from 2007
39
40 accelerated the commercial logic in public service broadcasting. The BBC reduced its
41
42 guaranteed in-house production in 2007, and virtually eliminated it in 2017 to increase
43
44 competition between BBC Studios, established in 2015, and the external market (D'Arma,
45
46 2018; Nicoli, 2012; Turner and Lorenzo, 2012). Asset specificity -the degree to which assets
47
48 can be switched to other activities - and fixed costs skewed competition in favour of external
49
50 competitors. The BBC created a market in which it was necessarily disadvantaged. Market
51
52 liberalization triggered the vertical disintegration of broadcasters and intensified
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3 marketization across television (Collins, 2008: 32; Greer and Doellgast, 2017: 196). Further,
4
5 there was continuous pressure on costs; a combination of BBC license fee pressures, reduced
6
7 advertising revenue (particularly post 2008), a rapid increase in outlets and reduced viewing
8
9 figures per programme. Three decades of privatisation and deregulation have reshaped British
10
11 television. An industry based on oligopolistic markets and managerial bureaucratic structures
12
13 was replaced by fragmented product and labour markets (Currie et al, 2006). Freelancers,
14
15 irrespective of legal status, are self-employed workers on short-term not rolling contracts
16
17 (OFCOM, 2019: 5). 30% of the film and television workforce are freelancers, double that of
18
19 the UK working population as a whole (BFI, 2020: 3) and freelancers comprise 50% of
20
21 television production employment (Work Foundation, 2019: 6). Such employment
22
23 purportedly promised individuals ‘boundaryless careers,’ endless opportunities to roam
24
25 between projects, genres and employers. But regulatory change also triggered an explosion
26
27 of media outlets that reduced viewers per programme so that freelance contracts came under
28
29 severe and sustained pressure, at a time of vastly increasing supply in the UK via specialist
30
31 higher education courses (Dex et al, 2000; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2011; 2012; Hodgson
32
33 and Briand, 2013). Even successful freelancers report chronic insecurity and work
34
35 intensification (Butler and Russell, 2018; Hodgson and Briand, 2013; Morris et al., 2016;
36
37 Storey et al, 2005). Television freelancers confront the tension between work as a vocation
38
39 realised through self-employment and everyday self-exploitation (Eikof and Warhurst, 2013).
40
41 Entry-level routes into television production involve extended hyper-competitive tournaments
42
43 (Ashton, 2015: 277). Demonstrating flexibility and enthusiasm were preconditions to
44
45 tournament entry (Lee, 2011: 552). Novice media workers regard under-paid and unpaid
46
47 work as exploitative, but also as a marker of personal conviction (Ekman, 2014: 142; Siebert
48
49 and Wilson, 2013: 714-715).
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3 The quasi-markets of the early 1990s (and beyond) were dominated by former BBC and ITV
4 staff. For independent production companies, their reputation and relationships with
5 commissioners was an invaluable asset (Born, 2002: 72; Paterson, 2017: 291-292; Mills with
6 Horton, 2017: 106, 116). Commissioning remains the key moment in television production.
7
8 For neo-bureaucratic broadcasters, strategy establishes clear policy and programming
9 parameters together with tight financial control over commissioners (Preston, 2003: 7). The
10 broadcaster's role in making and remaking project-based crews remains under-researched
11 (Manning, 2010: 554, 568). The dependency inherent in the commissioner-producer
12 relationship is only partly offset by reputation. For independent producers, developing shared
13 tacit knowledge with commissioners is expensive, time-consuming and risky but also
14 constitutes a barrier to entry for new entrants (Zoellner, 2009; 2020).
15
16 Television production is organized through crews assembled for specific projects, then
17 disbanded. This has consolidated the power of commissioners operating within neo-
18 bureaucracies. The commissioner's centralised power is exercised through diffuse,
19 behavioural norms over independent companies and, through them, freelancers. Through the
20 commissioning process, broadcasters identify individuals capable of building reliable crews
21 to meet formal and informal quality standards within time and financial budgets (Lourenco
22 and Turner, 2019: 624). Crews are not built *de novo*, but through the activation of social
23 networks. Crew recruitment, vetting, and discipline are achieved by social networks more
24 durable than a given project (Powell, 1990: 328). A crew disbands at the close of production,
25 but social networks remain intact. The social network, not the individual is the basic unit of
26 the television labour market: individuals demonstrate their skills and experience, gain
27 reputations and employment through social networks. Reputation is a crucial but fragile asset
28 (Blair, 2001). Social networks complement project management technologies that schedule
29 and cost the labour process choreographed by the crew. The peer controls of social networks
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3 are superimposed on established routines. Routines and peer controls combine to exceed
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5 project management methodologies in granularity and constancy. The crew's assumption of
6
7 individual and collective responsibility for the project produces powerful self-discipline.
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10 For the broadcaster, commissioning a programme activates a social network. The
11
12 organization temporarily reaches beyond its formal boundaries. The organization's legal and
13
14 organizational boundaries are confirmed by the commissioning process. Once the contract is
15
16 operational, risk and responsibility lies with the independent company and indirectly with the
17
18 social network underpinning the crew (Morris and Farrell, 2017). Social networks are not
19
20 created but activated by commissioning. The broadcaster does not identify, schedule or
21
22 discipline freelancers, but mitigates this risk by selecting the project's key creatives who then
23
24 hire their crew. Through the commissioning process the broadcaster accesses the creative
25
26 leads' tacit knowledge of the labour market and the project's specific needs (Morris et al.,
27
28 2016). Broadcasters source freelance labour, endorsed by peers, and ensure compliance with
29
30 necessary standards through the self-discipline of networks (Antcliffe et al., 2007; Baumann,
31
32 2002; Tempest et al., 2004; OFCOM, 2019: 12). The crew's 'latent organization' entails
33
34 routine task demarcation combined with tacit knowledge mobilised to cope with everyday
35
36 contingencies. Television projects are diverse in technical complexity and duration: from
37
38 formulaic studio programmes with fixed cameras and routinized set-ups; through recurring
39
40 series requiring minimal technical adjustments; to live multi-camera events or dramas shot
41
42 over several weeks in different locations. In all cases, production requires co-ordination of
43
44 several distinct crafts mobilised in the moment. Television projects have varying
45
46 perishability and are reviewed by commissioners for compliance to contract, technical norms,
47
48 and popularity.
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51 The research questions are threefold; how do social networks operate in the labour market to
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53 create, reinforce and mitigate advantage and disadvantage, particularly in the context of neo-
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3 bureaucratic organizing; how is precarity organized; and what is creative labour's experience
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5 of mosaic careers.
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17 **Methods**

18
19 We report data collected from research into the development of new organizational forms in
20 UK television. Our 80 semi-structured interviews with managers and professionals
21
22 comprised commissioning broadcasters, independent television producers and freelance
23
24 operatives. We formally interviewed commissioners and senior broadcast executives,
25
26 independent production company executives and owners, most were formerly employed by
27
28 commissioning broadcasters. We conducted 30 unstructured and 50 semi-structured
29
30 interviews. Unstructured interviews were used to gain background information, pilot
31
32 questions and to develop themes for the subsequent semi structured interviews or as follow-
33
34 ups to clarify issues. The semi-structured interviews ranged between 60 and 90 minutes. A
35
36 majority of freelance respondents were former employees of broadcast networks. A minority
37
38 of respondents, generally younger, reported exclusively freelance work histories. Freelance
39
40 respondents represented 'above' and 'below' the line occupations. 'Above the line' labour is
41
42 creative professionals: cast, directors and writers; while 'below' the line comprise production
43
44 crew plus administrative and managerial personnel (Mayers, 2011). All categories included
45
46 male and female respondents. Respondents were categorised by age: under thirty; from thirty
47
48 to fifty; and over fifty. These broad categories captured generational differences in
49
50 experience and career. All participants, programmes and companies are anonymised.
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3 Two interview schedules were compiled: for industry executives, commissioners and
4 independent production executives; and another for freelancers. The first included questions
5 about product and labour markets; how commissions are secured; how production schedules
6 and crews are established. Only one independent company executive had not worked for a
7 major broadcaster, and all had ‘pitch to production’ experience, from programme
8 development through commissioning to production and broadcast. These respondents had
9 comprehensive strategic and operational knowledge. The second interview schedule included
10 why and how individuals became freelancers; employment search; perceptions of how they
11 manage their reputation, networks and career. The interview sample was drawn from a
12 combination of industry directories, from personal industry contacts and purposive snowball
13 sampling (from suitable contacts drawn from the personal ones). Interviews lasted between
14 45 and 60 minutes and were followed by email, telephone and informal conversations. Initial
15 interviews were conducted in 2014-16. Data analysis was conducted, with further interviews
16 in 2020, including five interviews with commissioners. All three authors were involved at
17 various stages of data collection.

18
19 Our interviewees ranged from novice television labour to individuals with decades of
20 experience. Semi-structured interviews generated rich, detailed and comparable data. But
21 also provided opportunities for respondents to reflect on the importance of taken-for-granted
22 practices (Alvesson, 2003: 19-20). Broad questions opened up the respondent’s own
23 employment history and their perceptions of how structural change had impacted upon them
24 and their peers. Our interviews focused on: why they were motivated to pursue a television
25 career; how they joined or were recruited to social networks; and how important these social
26 networks were for their employment and career development. More specifically, we then
27 asked participants to discuss particular examples of their own networking practices and how
28 these had shaped their career. These more focused questions also identified mentors and
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3 sponsors who were important in accessing social networks and projects the respondent
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5 considered important for their career. We challenged respondents to develop and reflect upon
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7 points where, for instance, their account contrasted with other participants' perceptions of the
8
9 role of social networks and their own networking behaviours for their careers. Interviewees
10
11 were asked to suggest others who might be willing to be interviewed, particularly those
12
13 whom they regarded as members of their social network and/or were important to their
14
15 career. Novel or surprising insights were pursued in subsequent interviews. Using
16
17 contrasting experiences of unnamed others as prompts alerted us to how the commissioning
18
19 process mediates between neo-bureaucratic broadcasters and the labour market. Our
20
21 interviews with producers with deep experience of the commissioning process concentrated
22
23 upon the importance of the informal personal ties that paralleled formal contractual
24
25 relationships. This insight emerged from the interview process and was not evident from the
26
27 extensive literature on media work and labour markets. Producers understood their personal
28
29 ties to commissioners as a vital but fragile form of competitive advantage. Our interviews
30
31 concentrated on the producers' perceptions of how that relationship had evolved; how the
32
33 formal and informal dimensions of commissioning worked in practice; and how
34
35 commissioners draw on producers' tacit knowledge and connections to key creative teams
36
37 that in turn accesses their social networks to build project-specific crews.
38
39 The data was categorised into themes and analysed manually following the step-by-step
40
41 framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Grounded coding and inductive questioning
42
43 categorised this data into meaningful themes. We worked from our transcripts thematically,
44
45 moving from general reflection on industry structures, career trajectories and creative work to
46
47 individual experiences. This allowed us to follow a pragmatic iterative process moving
48
49 between our identified themes, the existing literature and novel themes that emerged during
50
51 our interview process, notably the vital but neglected role of commissioning as the
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3 moment that binds the neo-bureaucratic broadcaster and the television labour market. A
4
5 second interpretive stage followed in which categories were saturated by relevant cases, to
6
7 demonstrate empirical and theoretical relevance (Corbin and Strauss, 1998; Glaser and
8
9 Strauss, 2009; Jay, 2013).
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19 **Precarious Careers**

20
21 What is the relationship between broadcast neo-bureaucracies and creative labour? Such
22
23 relationships are commercial, technical and social. The risk of commissioning places a
24
25 premium on durable social networks. *Edward*, a mid-career freelance director of highly
26
27 successful British dramas across genres, understood that his privileged status reflected his
28
29 relationship with executive producers and commissioners who had commissioned him for
30
31 over a decade. In general, over-50s are under-represented in off-screen roles. The exceptions
32
33 are in comedy and drama especially in senior roles such as director and executive producer
34
35 (Diamond, 2020: 3,5,15,18). Men consistently direct over 80% of all episodes of comedy
36
37 and drama (Directors UK, 2018: 17, 22). *Edward* directed *First Dance* and had previously
38
39 worked for the executive producer; and had collaborated on several projects with the *First*
40
41 *Dance's* producer. Meanwhile *Wilson*, a multi-award winning producer/director, explained
42
43 the obligations that bound commissioners to elite creative teams and, in turn, to production
44
45 crews:
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50
51 Commissioners don't want any surprises. They need to know they can rely on you.
52
53 They know *their* reputation is on the line as much as yours. They need to know in
54
55 their bones that you can manage cast and crew. They want to see every penny on the
56
57 screen. Because green lights can happen suddenly, you have to have essential crew
58
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3 ready. So, you use your contacts, and hope that people you can rely on will bring
4
5 along others. All of this is tough (pause) stressful.
6

7
8 This was part of a significant change in the industry, associated with the emergence of neo-
9
10 bureaucracies. *Gareth*, for example was nearing retirement and had worked in a senior
11
12 position for the BBC before starting up and running an independent. He reflected:
13

14
15 Well, I think one of the big changes I've seen in my career, is the emergence of the
16
17 commissioner as the key and influential figure in how programmes are – get to be
18
19 made at all....when I began, if you had the status of a producer within the BBC, you
20
21 had an enormous amount of flexibility with the kind of programmes that you could
22
23 make, and the specifics of them. And providing that, over a reasonable period, you
24
25 delivered what you thought to be good programmes, then that freedom continued....I
26
27 think this is true 'in-house' as well as in an independent – a producer wants to make a
28
29 programme, there are an enormous number of hoops that we have to jump through to
30
31 satisfy the commissioner that the programme is going to satisfy their needs as they see
32
33 them, the audience needs that they represent. So, we've got the stage now, where,
34
35 you know, not only 'taster tapes', 'sizzlers' but very detailed, umm, development
36
37 documents are required before even a commission gets made.
38
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43
44 Broadcasters retain control over key roles in development and production when a commission
45
46 is awarded to an independent company. This was particularly true for peak-time drama,
47
48 because of their cost/investment and importance. One executive producer, experienced in
49
50 several genres, considered the complexities and shared assumptions of his relationship with
51
52 commissioners:
53

54
55 My talent is sucking all the ideas and energy out of any room with commissioners in
56
57 it. Then you sell them your ideas back to them as *their* ideas. You have to make sure
58
59 that the commissioner has become personally invested in your project. A good
60

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2
3 E[xecutive] P[roducer] already has the commissioner's confidence that you can
4 deliver ...*that's* money in the bank... and *that's* all about them having confidence in
5 you, and the crew you will bring together. They know the sort of crew you've used
6 before, they may even know some of them personally. The good Exec Producer has a
7 reputation for making programmes but commissioners also know their reputation for
8 managing production all the way to edits.
9

10
11 Even where the broadcaster had allocated the contract informally to a senior creative team,
12 this remained contingent upon them securing named individuals for senior production roles:
13 'The BBC have huge influence on the key creatives, such as the producer, the director, the
14 director of photography, the designer, the editor: this is in their control' (*Elliot*, ex-BBC
15 commissioner, independent producer). Similarly, *Edward*, a highly-regarded producer,
16 explained:
17

18
19 I then make the creative casting decisions, when the BBC will let me, and I normally
20 have someone I can rely on that I want to pick ...this is a crucial job and the market is
21 international. You need to have someone who understands the emotions of a
22 programme and how to frame a shot as we want.
23

24
25 The commission is contingent upon the producer's relationship with senior crew members.
26 *Edward's* description reflects the negotiated nature of crewing decisions while hinting that
27 the commissioner retains the final say over key crewing decisions, especially for repeat
28 productions. For *David*, producer/director of network documentaries, commissioners
29 accurately assumed that creative leads would 'drive production': 'There's no time to be
30 'managing' during production. Everyone has to know what they're doing and manage each
31 other. You have to be part-psychologist when pulling a crew together'.
32

33
34 The pivotal, and all-powerful role of commissioners, was reported by commissioners, ex-
35 commissioners, typically independent company owners, and go-to freelancers alike.
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3 How do freelance television workers experience and understand their careers? Self-
4 exploitation was a recurring theme and assumed various forms. First, ‘budget cuts means that
5 we have to take short cuts. For example, I charge a day rate but I end up working many more
6 days. I get twenty days per programme but I end up doing twenty-three to twenty-five days’
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11
12 (*Diane*, location manager). *Ray*, an older experienced camera operator, noted the impact of
13 budgetary pressure on freelance workers:
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16
17 My rates have hardly gone up: it is only nine pounds a day more than fourteen years
18 ago. It’s tougher too. I did nine months of *SciFi* and I was on the studio floor from
19 7:30 to 7:00 every day. It was great but it was exhausting and I had to do my books
20 over and above this. I also did *Fantasy* and I had to start at 8:15, this meant me
21 leaving at 7:15 and I didn’t get paid for travelling or the cost of travelling.
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28 This issue of ‘pay-for-travelling’, both time and expenses, was an important secondary
29 concern as these freelancers were frequently working on location a (sometimes considerable)
30 distance from their home-base and had formerly been reimbursed for this.
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35 Second, self-exploitation was regarded not just as inevitable but positively as the everyday
36 expression of vocation. ‘Are we in danger of exploiting ourselves’, asked *Pete*, another
37 experienced freelance camera operator: ‘Yes, the problem is that work is my passion. Also,
38 the work we do for ourselves is often on the weekend and this is subsidised by the day job’.
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44 Technical competence and experience did not eliminate the need to perform flexibility
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47 *passionately*.

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49 For *Eric*, an extremely experienced former ITV staffer and BBC commissioning editor, the
50 ‘good’ freelancer was: ‘technically good, well networked, reliable, etc’. *Ray*’s career, as an
51 older freelance camera operative, confirmed the importance of embedding himself in
52 networks inside and beyond the commissioning broadcasters:
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3 ...joined the BBC in 1981, I was on staff for 19 years. At that time, the freelance
4 market did down-market stuff – news and sports – no documentaries, no drama. All
5 the interesting stuff was done in-house... there was loads of training then, which was
6 brilliant, and loads of on-the-job stuff. ...Then in 1988 I was one of the people who
7 could operate the new technology. I was thirty and I had a great portfolio, I'd built up
8 great contacts: news and current affairs and drama – I could do the lot. Then John
9 Birt came along as D[irector] G[eneral] and encouraged people to work as
10 independents, and so I just went.

11
12 His solid BBC training, strong technical reputation meant that he was 'guaranteed' freelance
13 BBC work for long periods. Upgrading his technical skills from a strong base was
14 incremental and informal: 'bullshit, mates and the internet.' Technical competence was
15 necessary but insufficient for an individual to be hired. How an individual contributed to the
16 project's transient habitus was vital. One floor manager ascribed his steady employment to
17 his 'good guy' reputation. Certain roles, such as floor manager who maintains the rhythm of
18 production, require acute social skills rather than sophisticated technical competence.
19 Sociability was a recurring trope. Networks develop informal behavioural and attitudinal
20 disciplines: the individual has to observe and enforce normative controls on themselves and
21 others. An experienced director commented on the intimacy and intensity of a crew's self-
22 discipline: 'some crews think of themselves as a family. They all know each other. They're
23 loyal like families but there is a pecking order; there are squabbles but everyone knows that
24 can't come onto production'.

25
26 *Ray's* formative BBC years provided skills, experience and reputation. Contemporary
27 freelancers had little opportunity to establish comparable career trajectories. *Heather*, aged
28 25, graduated with a media degree and won a place on a government scheme around the 2012
29 Olympics; then a government-sponsored media training scheme. After several months and
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1
2
3 hundreds of applications, Heather secured a four-month unpaid internship: ‘then it went
4 completely quiet for six months’. A series of extremely short-term contracts followed,
5 including one eight-week unpaid ‘traineeship’ performing mundane tasks that added nothing
6 to her skills or reputation. More short-term contracts followed, including one that required
7 her availability for two days per week on call. For *Heather*, this series of limited contracts
8 equated to stable employment. All younger freelancers experienced such uneasy transitions
9 in their work histories. Four out of five lived with their parents, including *Heather* who was
10 engaged to a freelance sound engineer who lived separately with his parents. The exception,
11 *Rod*, was a successful producer/director who typically worked four days a week and was
12 rarely unemployed. He was networked through family and family friends:

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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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3 ..my mother met someone she knew who was going on maternity leave who worked
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5 at 'T' (a large independent) and this got me the job there, on a day-to-day basis but I
6
7 stayed there for a long time (*Laura*).
8
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10 Similarly, *Steve*, a 35-year old producer/director, was the son of an actor who had starred in
11
12 many major television dramas, which connected her to elite creatives and their networks.
13

14 Novice freelancer *Heather*, however, was unable to develop her skills, reputation or network
15
16 to establish her marketability without long-term sponsorship through a social network.
17

18 Crucially, *Ray* had mentored her on one government-funded scheme, and this proved
19
20 essential to moving her from the margins of the labour market.
21
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23
24 I had been contacting the focus puller at *SciFi* for years with no joy, but *Ray* rang him up
25
26 and he got in touch immediately. This was my big break.
27

28 *Heather* acknowledged her mentor's importance in brokering her relationship with his
29
30 network. Crossing the boundary into *Ray*'s network and the possibility of gaining
31
32 experience, screen credits and expanding her contacts were essential to her career
33
34 progression, albeit that it remained precarious. *Heather* perceived her career as dependent
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36 upon remaining within *Ray*'s network and that her progression was contingent upon
37
38 movements inside the network. For *Heather*, her reputation was not transferrable outside
39
40 *Ray*'s network. Despite this precarity, *Heather* embraced the openness and variety promised
41
42 by freelancing, although this was qualified by a desire for certainty: 'what I really want is
43
44 stability'. This exemplified the ambivalent pragmatism of younger freelancers: the allure of
45
46 variety but aware of the inherent risk of the television labour market. Career aspirations were
47
48 vague yet realistic, in their awareness that employment uncertainty made long-term career
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50 planning impossible *and* their assumption of responsibility for their employability. *Rod*
51
52 reflected that his initial foothold in the industry at 'A' where his 'contract kept getting
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54 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,

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3 corporate videos, weddings: anything to pay the bills.’ *Jim* was expressing a form of
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5 competitive strategy that prioritised personal development and technical quality. However,
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7 irrespective of quality, the product provides no clues to the maker’s sociability, their
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9 readiness to work beyond contract, or to set aside any aesthetic misgivings to meet deadlines
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11 or budgets: all attributes critical to media networking. To see the career *solely* as an
12
13 individual project, like *Jim*, was to misunderstand the importance of the social networking
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15 that underpins media labour markets.
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19 Precarity is internalised: reputation and identity are rendered precarious. *All* freelancers
20
21 faced chronic insecurity, characterised by long hours and (self) exploitation, even amongst
22
23 those whose skills, reputation and contacts provided comparatively stable employment.
24
25 Despite his thriving career, *Edward* (regarded as a ‘go-to’ top UK producer) reported that his
26
27 nagging insecurity proved a demanding taskmaster:
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31 Reputation is everything, but it is a very precarious profession. I am up at the
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33 moment, but I could be down and out next year. All you need is a couple of
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35 bum projects, I’ve seen it so many times.
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37 Discussion

38
39 Broadcasters moved from vertically integrated hierarchies to neo-bureaucracies
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41 commissioning projects (Burns, 1997). Commissioners do not simply award contracts
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43 through markets. Rather, markets for television programmes are mediated through social
44
45 networks. We have confirmed empirically that social networks are activated for particular
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47 projects but that this also reproduced and sustained the social network beyond that project
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49 (Manning, 2017: 1402; Grabher, 2004: 1492). Mediation activates the financial, technical
50
51 and social disciplines that minimise risk and maximise normative control inside the crew.
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53 Our findings confirm that social networks are how creative workers navigate the structural
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55 constraints of freelance employment. However, adopting a processual and relational
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3 perspective reveals that neo-bureaucracies actively intervene, more or less directly, in the
4
5 constitution and reproduction of the social networks that form the freelance labour market
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7 (Manning and Sydow, 2011: 1388; Stjerne and Svejenova, 2016: 1782; Tunstall, 2015: 81-
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9 82). This process does not mitigate freelance precarities. Projects are managed through
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11 taken-for-granted routines and normative-based controls (Bechky, 2006; Ebbers and
12
13 Winberg, 2009; Townley et al, 2009). Given the product's inherent unknowability, relying on
14
15 crew's normative controls is efficient and reliable (Caves, 2000). The commissioner retains
16
17 control over the project without becoming entangled in organizing production. Strong ties
18
19 are particularly valuable in contexts with high levels of uncertainty and risk, which increases
20
21 the probability that networks will reproduce themselves in ways that preserve existing
22
23 patterns of advantage and disadvantage (Hesmonhalgh and Baker, 2015; Moran, 2005).
24
25 Trusted elite creatives are valuable for their technical and aesthetic skills *and* as gatekeepers
26
27 to networks from which reliable production teams are assembled. The negotiation between
28
29 commissioners and favoured creative teams, is based on their track record and their ability to
30
31 build a crew tailored to a project's specific aesthetic and budgetary needs. Commissioners
32
33 rely on the senior creative team recruiting crew based on previous successful collaborations
34
35 and so embedding the double discipline of latent organisation and the social network
36
37 (Manning and Sydow, 2011: 1372). Informal quality assurance systems have increased in
38
39 value as regulatory standards have declined (Baumann, 2002). For the commissioner, high
40
41 trust reduces governance, transaction and verification costs (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).
42
43 Fast trust, mobilised in real time, is a precondition of a crew's effectiveness (Carney, 1998).
44
45 This is achieved without the broadcaster's direct involvement through their reliance upon
46
47 lead creatives anxious for future commissions and by the crew's self-discipline. The more
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49 embedded the social ties, the greater the propensity for mutual aid, deeper trust and reciprocal
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51 transfer of otherwise restricted information and knowledge (Uzzi, 1997). Commissioners and
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3 senior project managers exercise control over staffing and quality through proxies: senior
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5 creatives and their networks. During production, crew members' technical standards and
6
7 reliability are assessed through direct experience, especially the capacity to solve problems in
8
9 difficult moments of production (Tempest et al., 2004). Understanding the crew's self-
10
11 discipline as partly derived from the durability of social networks avoids regarding the
12
13 project as a 'lonely phenomenon in time,' but as neither unique nor routine but recurring
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16 (Engwall, 2003: 790).

17
18 The language of 'boundaryless careers' is saturated with a voluntarism that elevates
19
20 individual freedom and ignores structural constraints. In practice, the individual assumes
21
22 personal responsibility for long-run skill development; a willingness to absorb employment
23
24 risks and turn psychological costs inwards (Mayrhofer et al., 2007; Roper et al., 2010;
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26 Scharff, 2016). Some fifteen per cent of working time is unpaid, even for experienced
27
28 creative workers (Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2020). In fluid organizational and market
29
30 settings, the cues for individual and social action are deeply ambiguous, and provide no
31
32 durable, coherent scripts to guide enterprising selves: 'the career contract is not with an
33
34 organization, it is with the self' (Barley, 1989; Svejendva, 2005: 948). This is a tournament
35
36 labour market with inscrutable rules, uncertain performance standards and comparisons with
37
38 distant peers impossible, so that it is both extremely competitive and opaque (Stoyanova and
39
40 Grugulis, 2012). Creative workers' embrace of risk and opportunity is central to the 'hope
41
42 labour' that renders structural advantage and disadvantage into personal responsibility (Lee,
43
44 2012: 489; Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2020). The psychological rewards of creative work
45
46 combine with precarity's inherent anxieties, to produce an experience of intense sociality *and*
47
48 periodic isolation (Butler and Russell, 2018; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010: 16; Rowlands
49
50 and Handy, 2012).
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3 The novice learns their craft and how to perform their identity work embedded in both a crew
4 and a social network (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 84-86). Strong ties, durable relationships and
5 intense, frequent dialogue, provide the ideal conditions for producing and transferring tacit
6 knowledge. Hiring through social networks reproduces existing patterns of advantage and
7 disadvantage (CAMEo, 2018: 36; Gill, 2014). Camera operatives had once progressed from
8 trainee, to assistant focus puller and eventually to craft status. *Heather's* experience speaks
9 of the uncertainty of career transitions for freelancers. Rapid starts to commissions and
10 intense production schedules reduced the porosity of television production, the frequent
11 downtimes which enabled informal training (McKinlay and Quinn, 1999; ScreenSkills, 2020:
12 4). Her anxiety over the possibilities of skill acquisition and career progression was typical
13 (Work Foundation, 2019: 25-26). Membership required the individual to understand and
14 *contribute* to the studied informality of a television crew (Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 134;
15 Randle et al., 2015: 598; Petrilieri et al, 2019: 157). Membership of a social network
16 provided access to information, expertise and opportunity; but continued membership was
17 contingent on accepting a particular role in the labour process. The social network
18 incorporates an implicit, relatively fixed hierarchy that becomes explicit in the crew's work
19 organisation. Heather's employment entailed her becoming entangled in a complex
20 disciplinary web. She was subject to her own sense of professionalism and career
21 development; to her employment contract's formal requirements; and to the highly specific
22 expectations of *that* crew, on *that* project. Her initial obligations were exclusively to *Ray*
23 but through participation in *SciFi* she acquired ties to his network. Reducing her dependence
24 upon *Ray* was conditional on her recognising, accepting and performing these communal
25 obligations (Bechky and Chung, 2018: 620-621). This is the normative control that
26 broadcasters mobilise without cost, and minimal risk, by recruiting a project's senior creative
27 team which then activates its networks. Network connections were important to enter the
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3 sector and gradually accumulated value (Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 115, 134). To
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5 recommend another for a job signalled an expectation of present task performance and future
6
7 reciprocity (Antcliffe et al, 2007: 381).
8
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10 Television's precarious employment has rendered careers as *mosaics*, enabled by networks
11
12 and measured and made meaningful by projects, emphasizing their relative precarity, rather
13
14 than the notion of 'boundarylessness' which emphasizes agency and self-determination
15
16 (Bevort and Stjerne, 2019). These 'boundaryless careers' are not, therefore, accurate, either
17
18 empirically or theoretically. Organizations are not post bureaucratic, neither are individuals
19
20 'free agents' in the market. Rather the description of 'mosaic careers' which allow for a
21
22 degree of individual agency but recognises that these careers are embedded in a neo
23
24 bureaucratic frame which are piecemeal and have considerable potential for 'dark sides' such
25
26 as long and unpredictable hours, pressures on pay and the potential for (self) may better fit
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28 the theoretical and empirical reality, particularly for younger freelancers (and remembering
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30 that we only interviewed survivors).
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38 **Conclusion**

39
40 This paper had two objectives, first to evaluate the role of neo-bureaucracy and
41
42 commissioners in the development of TV careers in a project-based industry and second, to
43
44 locate individual careers within the social networks through which employment is found, and
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46 reputations embedded. Over the last thirty years, television careers have been transformed.
47
48 Freelance employment now dominates television production. Initially, independent
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50 producers and freelancers had previously worked for major broadcasters. Increasingly,
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52 however, younger freelancers have employment histories without the reputation or
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54 networking gains from direct employment with broadcasters. For all freelancers, careers
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56 were not individual and boundaryless but centred on their technical and social skills within
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3 social networks and as such are better characterised as mosaic. Social networks and the self-
4
5 discipline of crews are mutually constitutive: an individual's reputation is built during
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7 production and reproduced through social networks. Where older freelancers accessed
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9 networks via their previous work history, their younger peers used a variety of sponsorship
10
11 and industry contacts to gain employment. Intangible social 'fit' was essential to access and
12
13 sustain membership of social networks, highlighting the pivotal role played by
14
15 commissioners. The freelancers' reputation was earned by credits on prestige programmes
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17 especially when embedded in social networks that included elite creatives. The structure of
18
19 the industry here was important, particularly the commissioning function of neo-
20
21 bureaucracies which incorporate centralisation - of strategy and information - and a high
22
23 degree of cultural integration and socialisation. Combined, these have ensured a small group
24
25 of trusted freelancers who are the hubs of social networks. *Heather's* failure and then success
26
27 in accessing employment, dependent on *Rod's* sponsorship to gain her production credits and
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29 network membership is illustrative of this.
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35 That the TV industry has fragmented has been well rehearsed in the previous literature, as is
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37 the precarity of the industry, and neither are novel, theoretically or empirically. However, our
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39 paper is novel in three respects. First, as characterising this fragmentation within a theoretical
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41 framework of neo-bureaucracy with its distinct set of power and control implications, in
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43 which the role of broadcaster-based commissioners are both all-powerful and pivotal.
44
45 Second, by our characterisation of careers as mosaics. Third, by demonstrating the links
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47 between neo-bureaucracies and mosaic careers. In short, mosaic careers are a direct
48
49 consequence of neo-bureaucratic structures, these concepts have not been addressed before
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51 and neither have their inter-connections.
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56 The characterisation of careers as boundaryless, assumes unconstrained agency so that an
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58 individual's career progression is unrestricted and frictionless. 'Boundaryless' employees are
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3 thus purportedly free to switch employers in the search for personal advancement, largely
4
5 ignoring the temporary host, with their tenure dictated by themselves. Mosaic careers,
6
7 meanwhile, situate individuals within a series of structural constrains, both personal and
8
9 within the confines of the control of neo bureaucratic labour markets, and are thus often
10
11 piecemeal, sporadic etc. They capture the complexity of the work histories experienced by
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13 individuals constrained by fragmented employment. This is the reality of all freelancers but
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15 particularly younger ones, who are often caught in competitive ‘tournaments’ for work.
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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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3 and sustained over the long run although broadcasters and major independents are likely to
4 remain reputational touchstones. Social networks are neither permanent nor ephemeral, but
5 durable. The tension between craft and neoliberal values was greatest for those with longest
6 experience and less problematic for younger television workers. Equally, older respondents
7 were more likely to stress the importance of networking for job search and as a vehicle for
8 mutual support. Networking was a skill acquired, and its value recognised, over time (Lee,
9 2012b). Reputation, similarly, is not wholly individual but is bound up with membership of
10 social networks. Contemporary career research is predicated on a historic break from internal
11 labour markets, but is dominated by snapshots with little sense of temporality. The
12 temporality of networks remains a major gap in the literatures about project-based industries,
13 precarious labour markets and careers. Following Eikhof (2017), employment decisions and
14 career narratives have to be contextualised in terms of industry structure *and* how networks
15 operate and are reproduced over the long-run. In unregulated labour markets, individual
16 careers are necessarily embedded in social networks. Established freelancers reported
17 relatively regular employment. Freelancers, particularly but not exclusively younger
18 respondents, welcomed the flexibility promised by unregulated labour markets. However, the
19 nature of creative work plus the structural realities of the industry caused pervasive self-
20 exploitation. A recognition of external constraints is neither an acceptance nor, far less, an
21 endorsement in terms of equity. Freelancers' recognition of external constraints did not
22 signify fatalism but an acceptance of individual agency. To understand harsh market realities
23 was necessary to a sense of self as autonomous and enterprising. Precarious employment,
24 even when combined with satisfying work, does not signify the possibility of a boundaryless
25 career. All freelancers faced an insecure existence characterised by long hours and self-
26 exploitation, irrespective of craft, reputation or seniority. To understand the career, we must
27 track individuals and networks over projects, time and space. Television production careers
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3 are not boundaryless but mosaics: composed of fragments employment in organisations and
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5 projects and defined by social networks, their overall pattern only discernible post-hoc.
6
7

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10
11 We thank the numerous television personnel for offering their time and opinions in the
12 interviews
13
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18
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3 **Table 1: Boundaryless and mosaic careers compared**
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9 **Boundaryless Careers**
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12 Decontextualised, neo classical (free market) economic assumptions of fragmented labour
13 markets.
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18 Individuals ‘free’ agents and unrestrained and ‘nomadic’, largely unrestricted.
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21 Individuals therefore pursue unrestrained career progress.
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24 Importance of networks underplayed.
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30 **Mosaic Careers**
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33 Contextualised, neo-bureaucratic organizing of fragmented labour markets.
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37 Individual agency, but constrained by institutions and marked by inequalities; role of power
38 and control.
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42 Careers piecemeal and characterised by fragmentation and uncertainty.
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46 Social capital crucial, importance of networks
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