

Production Line TV: Labor and Process in Factual Television Production

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ABSTRACT: Despite calls to reject Harry Braverman's labor process theory as deterministic and unsuitable for studying cultural work, continuing rationalization of media production warrants re-examining his arguments. This article investigates the reorganization of UK unscripted factual television production from linear to multi-linear workflow and its consequences for worker experience. Based on semi-structured interviews with self-shooting Producer-Directors and Edit Producers—practitioners at opposite ends of the production process—we analyze how processual change affects different work roles and production stages. We identify parallels with Braverman's observations: the separation of conception from execution transfers creative control to management, stricter division of labor fragments production teams, and workers become replaceable components rather than essential specialists. Our findings demonstrate the persistent validity of Braverman's claims about alienation and exploitation, albeit with differences in nature and scale. While cultural production retains specificity—particularly, the integration of mental and manual labor and relatively high skill requirements—the general principles Braverman outlined materialize in distinct ways in this context. Crucially, these effects are not challenged but heightened by contemporary flexible employment conditions. We argue for the value of studying labor processes in cultural production while accounting for industry- and genre-specific particularities and workers' subjective responses to structural conditions.

Introduction

The critical attitude towards labor process theory in cultural production scholarship builds on two main factors. Firstly, Braverman's approach does not account for the specificity of cultural production that distinguishes it from other forms of work, especially for those workers directly involved in the production of media texts (see Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Hesmondhalgh 2019). Compared to the manual, repetitive and low-skilled labor that Braverman discusses, media production requires higher skilled and specialized labor, is project-based and collaborative, often involves a certain degree of autonomy and attachment while lacking Braverman's distinction between manual and mental labor. Secondly, media workers operate in a flexible post-Fordist employment context with different features and pressures compared to the Fordist labor market Braverman based his claims on. Nevertheless, as we describe in

the first section of this article, there are sufficient similarities between recent changes in media production and Braverman's observations about the transformation of the labor process to suggest a re-examination of Braverman's arguments in a cultural industries context.

We focus on the production of unscripted factual television programming in the UK and investigate the consequences of recent reorganization of the production process and its related changes in the division of labor and occupational roles for the experience of work. We follow a genre-specific approach to production research, as genre shapes the specifics of production processes, values and conditions (see Alacovska 2016; Bruun 2011). Rooted in documentary, unscripted factual television as a broadcasting category refers to productions filmed on location rather than in a studio, which depict people, settings

and events in their real-life context. This means that, while planned and prepared to some degree, the action filmed does not follow a script with written dialogue. Our investigation does not include the production of unscripted factual entertainment formats such as set-based talent, game or reality shows.

Our argument is based on the joint analysis of two interview studies with practitioners involved in the production of unscripted factual programming in the British television industry. These included workers at the beginning and the end of the production process, namely, self-shooting Producer-Directors (PD), who capture raw footage on location, and Edit Producers (EP), who edit the footage into the final program. This approach enabled us to examine the impact of reorganization on different work roles and in different production stages. We conducted anonymized semi-structured interviews in 2022–2023 with twelve mid-career freelance workers (seven PDs, five EPs) with 20–30 years of industry experience. Gender and ethnic demographics reflected typical UK television workforce composition (Ofcom 2023; CDN 2023)¹. Due to their substantial professional experience, respondents were able to draw on a rich and diverse body of experience in their reflection on industry trends and conditions.

Based on this interview data, we explore the impact of industrial transformations respondents have witnessed. In the first section of this article, we provide a short introduction to recent shifts in the British television industry and describe the organizational transformation of the production process for unscripted factual television programs from linear to multi-linear production that emerged from our data. We highlight parallels in this transformation with Braverman's observations about scientific management and resultant shifts in the division of labor. In the second part of the article, we analyze the consequences of this processual change for PDs and EPs. We show how the economically motivated reorganization of the production process, firstly, reduces

worker control and autonomy, and secondly, creates a disconnect between production departments. In the final section of the article, we explore the implications of these findings for television workers in relation to Braverman's claims about alienation, exploitation and deskilling. These include a tendency for standardization over specialization in terms of skills and a heightened risk of alienation and exploitation that adds further pressure in an already highly competitive and insecure labor market.

The Reorganization of Factual TV Production

Harry Braverman's influential work *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) addresses the conditions of work under capitalism with a focus on the organization of labor processes. A central argument in his book concerns the consequences of Taylor's "scientific management", which standardized production and altered the division of labor, which—aided by technology—standardized production and altered the division of labor to increase production output while keeping production costs down. The objective behind this management strategy is purely economic and aimed at maximizing efficiency in production and increasing what Marx termed "surplus value" (2000). The strategy involves the reorganization of the production process, separating conception from execution and dividing labor processes into routine tasks that require less skill. As a result, control over the production process shifts from workers to management, giving management greater opportunity to dictate the pace and organization of work (Cuneo 1976).

According to Braverman, such scientific management leads to a degradation of work, characterized by alienation, exploitation and deskilling. These characteristics are also identified as typical features of media production in critical cultural labor scholarship (e.g. Banks 2007; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Grugulis & Stoyanova 2011), but there has been little focus on the role of labor processes in this context. In our analysis we investigate the impact of managerial reorganization of production processes in factual television production to understand whether and how it may contribute to alienating and exploitative conditions.

¹ While gender and ethnicity matter for their everyday experience of work, these characteristics were less influential in respondents' perception and evaluation of production process, which we focus on here. Instead, occupational role and extent of industry experience emerged as explanatory factors for their assessment of industry change.

While Braverman largely concentrated on “blue collar” industrial labor in his writing, he also observed a trend toward rationalization among higher skilled “white collar” occupations—which are typical for media work—predicting similar outcomes for such labor in the future (Jonna & Foster 2016). Production systems have developed further and changed since Braverman’s writing in the 1970s with a shift toward flexible, team-based work structures aimed at increasing worker involvement and participation. Critical voices argue that these attempts to humanize scientific management have largely been unsuccessful and claim that post-Fordist “flexible specialization” is an expression of the same capitalist objectives and leads to a similar degradation of labor as identified by Braverman (Previtali & Fagiani 2015; Sonn et al. 2019). This flexibilization of labor has become a dominant feature of media industries alongside marketization and commodification (Hesmondhalgh 2019). Against this context, we can observe a dramatic transformation of the British television industry and television production since the late 1980s that forms the background of ongoing efforts to rationalize television production.

Industry Transformation

One of the key changes in British television was the emergence of an independent production sector, triggered by the creation of Channel 4 as a broadcaster-publisher (Darlow 2004) competing with established broadcasters BBC and ITV and supported by the 1990 Broadcasting Act (Barnett & Curry 1994). Channel 4 had a unique set-up: it would be publicly owned but funded by commercial revenue, produce no in-house content, and function as a publisher relying on programming initially provided by ITV franchises (its first broadcast programme, *Countdown*, was made by Yorkshire TV) and the nascent independent TV production companies, often formed by ex-staffers from the BBC and ITV. Prior to this, union strength had protected jobs and demarcated skills through a “closed shop.” Political efforts to reduce union power in broadcasting, epitomized by Thatcher’s criticism of “restrictive practices” and the 1990 Broadcasting Act, fundamentally reshaped industrial relations. A bitter industrial

dispute at TVam in 1988 proved to be a turning point, resulting in significant job losses and setting the scene for what Campling (1995) believes became a political rather than economic strategy to reduce union power through the Act.

The Act, inspired by the neoliberal Peacock Report, enforced 25% of commissions to independent companies. This shift toward independent production was accompanied by a reorganization of the television labor market as broadcasters reduced permanent staff positions. Technological change also resulted in an end to demarcation despite industrial action at both the BBC and ITV franchises throughout the 1990s. By the late 1990s ITV had shed nearly half their staff, and freelance employment in the BBC had risen to 60% (Ursell 2000). Into the 2000s the independent production companies and then the “super-indies” began to dominate the sector and productions now relied on a pool of non-unionized, mostly freelance workers employed on a short-term basis, who carry much of the risk and insecurity of the sector (Ursell 2000; Percival & Hesmondhalgh 2014; Zoellner & Lee 2020).

Alongside this growth of independent production companies, the number of television channels and, most recently, digital platforms and streamers expanded significantly, all now competing for the same revenue and market share. The growing demand for content increased production activity, but economic pressure and competition alongside the high risk and high production costs typical for media industries (Hesmondhalgh 2019) motivated attempts to rationalize the production process to reduce costs and increase profit. Most prominently, workers are now mainly hired on project-by-project basis, and production budgets started and continue to fall (Ursell 2000; Ursell 2003; Miller et al. 2022). This flexible employment system differs from the Fordist structures Braverman discusses. Nevertheless, we agree with Previtali and Fagiani, who argue that deskilling and degradation of labor in contemporary capitalism remain relevant as the flexibilization and casualization of labor present a continuation—and even intensification—of cost rationalization as a managerial objective (2015, 81).

These industry-wide developments also affect the working conditions and managerial priorities

in unscripted factual production. They provide the context for the reorganization of labor processes and responsibilities that emerged from our data and form the focus of this article. This processual reorganization was further facilitated by shifts in programming form and content of this genre. Objectives to increase the profitability of program productions are visible in the changing textual preferences of broadcasters and distributors. In the case of British factual television programming, this can be seen in the shift from one-off/single documentaries to serialized and formatted factual programs and risk-averse commissioning (Zoellner 2009). This began in the 1990s with so-called “docu-soaps,” which were observational “fly-on-the-wall” documentary series, usually centered on the daily activities in a specific location and professional context, such as driving schools, vets’ practices or hospitals.

This setting made it easier to estimate and control costs and involved a certain level of narrative constraint or predictability, while serialization lowered costs per broadcast-minute. Subsequently, fully “formatted” factual programs began to appear where a template could be applied across a whole program, reducing unpredictability both in terms of production and narrative (Lee 2018). Since then, factual series have expanded into various forms and do not only cover real-life events but may also involve artificial situations and rules set by the production team, which offer greater control over content and thus more predictable budgeting (Lee 2018). Most factual programs could now be considered formatted to some degree, involving standardization of production processes and textual form.² The tendency towards formatting and serialization in factual programming was further encouraged by the expansion of the global format trade and the potential of

additional revenue through international sales to broadcasters and platforms (Chalaby 2011; Chalaby 2016).

Against the background of industry and genre transformation as outlined above, interviewees described a reorganization of the production process and shifts in occupational responsibilities over time, which we summarize as a change from linear to multi-linear production. In the remainder of this section, we explain this change in more detail in terms of process and division of labor based on our interview data and relate it to Braverman’s claims about the separation of conception and execution.

Multi-Linear Production

To reduce costs and standardize production, the workflow for unscripted factual programs shifted from linear to multi-linear structure, enabled by increased commissioning of formatted series. The linear “auteur” approach involved one production team with a Producer Director (PD) taking the creative lead in the shooting, then scripting and editing of a program across all production stages, from development to production to post-production. The new multi-linear system involves overlapping cycles of separate teams working parallel rather than subsequently on different production stages. Rather than taking a holistic approach based on a single (auteur) voice, programs are now produced in separate segments with only production management, usually represented by a Series Producer (SP), having an overview. As the example in Figure 1 illustrates, this system produces more volume in less time. While more workers are required for multi-linear production, they are employed on shorter contracts than the previous auteur model and are only involved in parts of the production. The linear model, on the other hand—despite also employing freelance labor—allowed the PD to shape the project from pre-production through to delivery.

In the multi-linear system workers are separated geographically and by production stage into three main categories: a production team based in the production office for pre-production, which includes production management and SP, a shooting team capturing footage on location including

² The changing industry terminology for this genre in British television reflects the broadening of the category and a softening of genre-related textual values (Zoellner, 2016). The classic program category of “documentary,” a genre associated with investigation, advocacy and social justice, was broadened to “specialist factual,” which stresses the informational and non-fictional nature of the programs in distinction to factual entertainment, and is now frequently included in the category of “unscripted TV,” which emphasizes the lack of script rather than the genre’s factual nature and also includes reality TV and game shows.

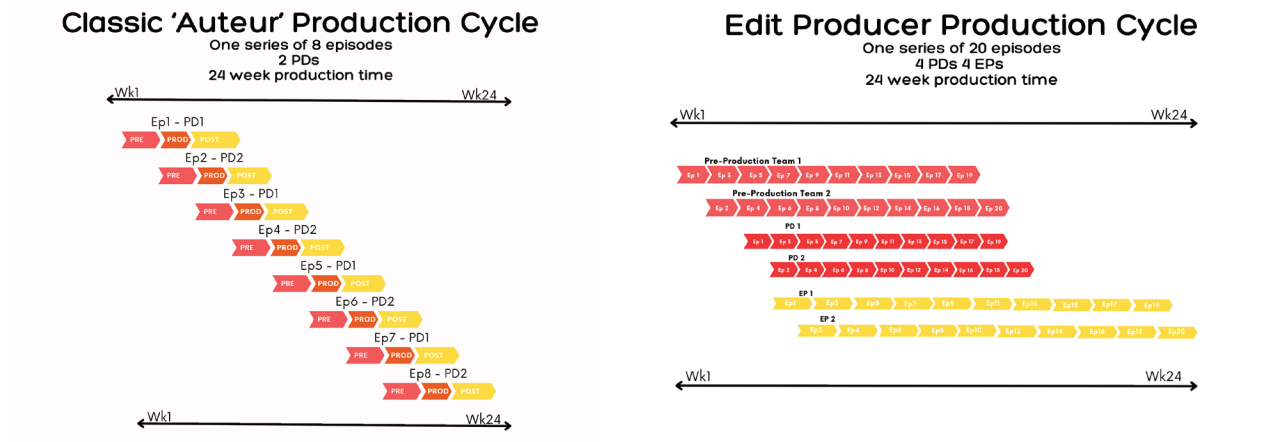


Figure 1: Linear and multi-linear production cycle

self-shooting PDs, and an editing team in the edit suite, often in a separate location, involving an Edit Producer (EP).

While not every factual production follows this structure, multi-linear production has become the dominant model in respondents' experience. In our research we investigate the impact of this reorganization on the work of PDs and EPs respectively. The restructuring of the production process into a multi-linear system follows principles that mirror Braverman's observations about scientific management, especially concerning the separation of conception from execution and its implications for the division of labor, occupational roles and creative control as we explain next.

Division of Labor and Occupational Roles

Beyond fragmenting production teams, rationalization reshapes occupational roles and the division of labor. In the linear auteur cycle, a Producer-Director or Director typically controlled the entire process for each episode: from conception and pre-production through filming with a camera and sound crew to editing with an Editor. Only on larger budget productions were these roles sometimes split. From the late 1990s, Digital Video Directors and self-shooting PDs began replacing crews and Directors, reducing both workforce and labor costs. Rather than hiring an expensive, skilled craft team of camera operator, sound recordist and director, productions increasingly relied on single individuals to do the same job. Sound recordists suffered most from this transition and are

now nearly completely absent from the production of this entire genre. The occupational convergence of the PD role requires multitasking, makes them solely responsible for the quality of the footage and increases their workload significantly. The introduction of new digital technology, for example, in the form of easy-to-operate, highly automated industry standard cameras, helped to reduce production costs further and enable companies to recruit workers with less technical skill and experience.

A Producer-Director supervising the whole production implies a longer production cycle, since editing can only start after filming has been completed. As broadcasters began to commission more high-volume productions, companies aimed to make production even more economical and to deliver programs in a shorter timeframe. The introduction of Edit Producers marked a second significant shift in occupational roles. It removed PDs from the editing process and editing could start while the program was still being filmed (see Figure 1). The EP, along with the Editor, was now the person entrusted with getting the program into shape for transmission. They would write the voice-over script, choose music and make editorial decisions on narrative structure and sync selection. Similarly to the shooting team, this change reduced the edit team in size and shifted workload and responsibility from a team to an individual. The PDs and EPs in our interview sample are part of the first generation of television workers, who transitioned from the old 'auteur' set up to the new

multi-team arrangement, adjusting their occupational skills and responsibilities in the process.

The stricter division of labor by production stage and the resulting fragmentation of production teams parallels Braverman's observations of capitalist efforts to rationalize production. Changes in occupational profile suggest an impact of this reorganization on skills and working conditions, which we explore further below. In addition, multi-linear production means that workers are only familiar with the program segments they are working on and are separated from the program as well as from most other members on the production team. This lack of insight concerning the program relates to Braverman's claims about the separation of conception from execution in scientific management.

Conception, Execution and Control

In the case of cultural production, conception refers to the development of a creative idea and execution to the realization of that idea by creating a cultural text or artifact. Where previously, in what Franklin (1999) called "holistic technologies," the Producer-Director led the program through the whole production process, each step is now broken down into separate steps carried out by a largely different set of workers in what Franklin terms "prescriptive technologies." As Franklin states, "[w]ith holistic technologies, the worker is in control; with prescriptive technologies, the worker is under control" (1999, 11). This means that neither PD nor EP are (usu-

ally) involved in the conception stage, that is, the pre-production phase, during which program topic, angle and contributors are determined and researched (see Figure 2, step 1). The PD leads the first stage of execution (filming), and the EP leads the second stage of execution (post-production) (Figure 2, steps 2 and 3).

Executive management, usually in the form of a SP and/or Production Manager (PM), oversees the whole process, and there is generally little interaction between the different departments according to interviewees. This separation of the creative conceptualization of a program idea from the practical realization of this idea transfers control to the managerial level and reduces the creative input and autonomy of workers, as we describe in further detail in the next section. This transfer of control confirms Braverman's claims about the impact of scientific management, which removes control over production from the worker and thus reduces artisanal craftspeople to replaceable employees.

However, unlike Braverman's observations, cultural production cannot be easily divided into "mental" and "manual" work that correspond to conception and execution respectively. In fact, mental and manual work remain largely integrated in the execution stages of cultural production involving a variety of tasks ranging from mundane, unskilled work (organizing permits, booking accommodation, moving kit, traveling, logging rushes, completing paperwork) to activities that require significant professional experience and skill (composing shots,

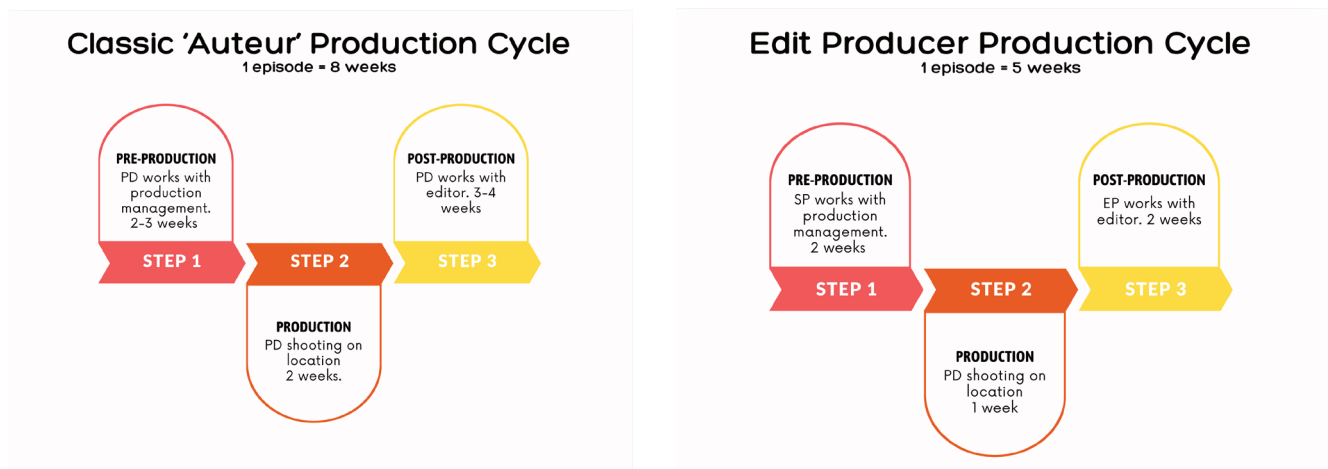


Figure 2: Separation of conception from execution by production stage

interviewing contributors, writing scripts, editing music), most of which include both a physical and intellectual aspect.

The transfer of control over conception to management, perhaps ironically, also increases the hierarchical structure in production. While in the previous system decisions and approval could be made by one manager, a fast-paced multi-linear process involving a bigger production team overall and more simultaneous production activity tends to require more complex approval processes (see Figure 3). All interviewees worked for independent production companies on programs commissioned by broadcasters such as the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and other networks and platforms. The executive management that respondents interact with includes Executive Producers and CEOs at company level and, perhaps more importantly, Series Producers and Production Managers at program level (job titles may vary). Crucially, in this production system executives at independent companies are subjected to creative control by commissioning editors at broadcasters (Zoellner, 2022), adding another layer to the hierarchical structure. Overall, more extensive quality control from management is notable, as now several managers, ranging from SP at the production company to Commissioning Editor at a television channel or platform, tend to give feedback on scripts and edits at different stages of the production. Displaying a critical attitude to this standardization of both content and production process, some EPs used the term “sausage factory” for this form of production—echoing former ITV

executive David Liddiment’s critique of TV formats as “factory television” (Chalaby 2016, 11).

Our discussion of changes in production process and occupational profiles highlights parallels between managerial strategies in contemporary cultural production and Braverman’s Fordist production context. Strategies are motivated by capitalist goals of profit maximization and focus on the rationalization of process, in particular the reduction of labor costs and production time. We see similarities in the separation of conception from execution and the related transfer of control to management alongside a stricter division of labor fragmenting project teams by production stage. We also identified limitations to the application of Braverman’s thesis to cultural production, in particular, his distinction between mental and manual labor. In the remainder of this article, we explore the consequences of the processual and occupational changes we have discussed so far. We focus on two areas where respondents experienced a notable impact, that is, creative autonomy and inter-departmental relations. We then address the implications of this impact for alienation, exploitation and deskilling to investigate whether and to what extent Braverman’s arguments about the results of scientific management are applicable in factual television production.

Consequences of Multi-Linear Production

Having established structural transformation, we now examine its impact on workers’ daily experience. Drawing on our interview data, we discuss the impact in relation to two characteristics of media

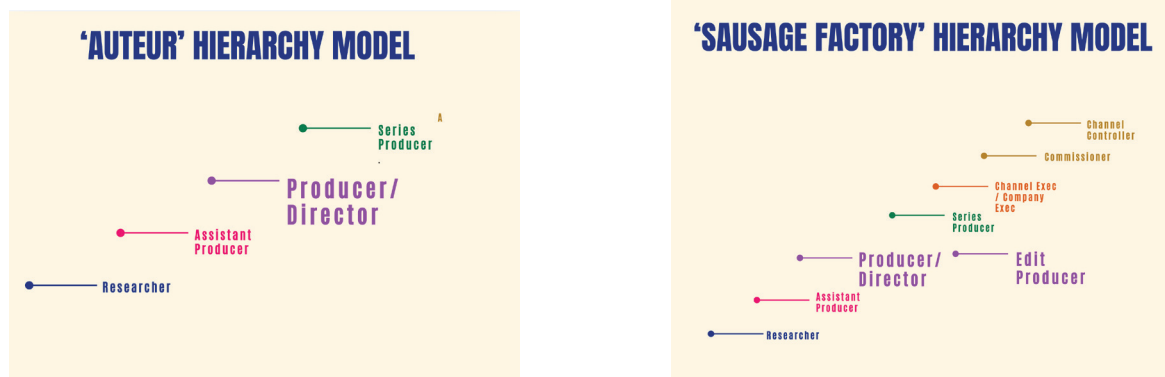


Figure 3: Hierarchical structure in linear and multi-linear production cycles

work that are widely associated with the specificity of media work. That is, firstly, the comparatively high level of freedom and control, and secondly, the collaborative nature of media production. Focusing on these aspects considers the specificity of cultural production and thus demonstrates the value of studying process in cultural production contexts.

Creative Autonomy

A central argument for the specificity of cultural labor is the relatively high degree of autonomy available for some (but not all) workers, which relates to what Ryan (1992) describes as “loose control” in the creation stage of cultural production. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) further specify the types of autonomy particular to cultural production and helpfully distinguish between workplace and creative autonomy. Workplace autonomy refers to the degree of self-determination of an individual or a group of workers in the organization of work tasks. Creative autonomy, on the other hand, concerns the degree to which work tasks and decisions related to art, knowledge or culture can be carried out independent from other influences (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011, 40).

While creative autonomy is a key characteristic of media work in general, it has a particular relevance in unscripted factual programs, which focus on and are shaped by real-life developments. Although an initial script idea and potential storylines are created during the pre-production stage based on research about program contributors and content, these pre-conceived ideas may differ from the final program as production teams need to respond to unknown or unanticipated conditions and developments during filming. This means that creative decisions about storylines, locations and protagonists are required throughout the production process and often on short notice. In this genre, conception, to use Braverman's terms, needs to be flexible and respond and adapt to developments arising during execution, that is, the filming and editing stages. In other words, factual TV production requires the interaction between conception and execution. However, the rationalization of the production process toward a multi-linear production model with greater managerial control, on the one hand, and attempts at standardization such as

formatting, on the other, reduce the opportunity for such creative adaptation. This development mirrors Braverman's claims of reduced worker autonomy and increased managerial control due to the separation of conception and execution.

As highlighted above, in multi-linear television production only program executives have complete oversight and knowledge of the whole series while the different practitioners working on location and in the edit are only familiar with and informed about the storylines they are working on. This situation increases top-down creative decision-making and reduces opportunities to shape the creative evolution of the program. At the same time, workers expressed concern about the extent to which executives are aware of program specifics and whether they consider such detail in their creative vision and decisions. This includes, for example, knowledge about what is being filmed, where and why, or the quality and range of footage that is available for editing. All interviewees perceived management as reliant on preconceived program ideas and less open towards amending them: “I think a lot of times, the story is decided, before it's even made. The commissioner has it in her head, and we have to go along with this narrative” (EP1).

Respondents called for more involvement in creative conceptualization and decision-making, saying, for example, that “Producer-Directors should be working with the Series Producer and the executives to steer the productions creatively and narratively” (PD4). Top-down managerial control further manifests in excessive micro-management and interpersonal tensions that have been reported as typical for TV work (van Raalte et al. 2023; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011). Interviewees expressed frustration at a prescriptive approach to execution, which “exhausts” and “demoralizes people” and often leads to overspending that undermines the supposed efficiency of a rationalized workflow (EP1). Workers reported how their attempts to diverge from this approach were often rebutted with the justification that viewers needed more explanation, or in industry parlance, “hand-holding,” rather than executives admitting that the real reason for their rejection was the deviation from their creative vision: “How many times have you heard the phrase hand-holding? So, then you go in

and you're writing explicitly the narrative they want. And it becomes the narrative they've had in their head, before it even got shot" (EP2).

Producer-Directors are in a contradictory position when it comes to autonomy. As multiskilled single shooters, PDs often work alone. While this creates challenging working conditions and can be an isolating experience, as we discuss in the next section, several respondents appreciate the freedom and control that working alone provides on location. PDs value the autonomy of working alone, which allows them complete control over timing and quality standards (PD1). One respondent noted:

I love the autonomy, I don't like too many bosses on location, who can maybe mess with things sometimes, because sometimes it can be more difficult to manage other people in those scenarios, if they aren't experienced enough (PD3).

On the other hand, the pressure of occupational convergence and having to do several work roles single-handedly and often simultaneously set unachievable objectives, because "if you're constantly fighting to manage too many things solo, there is only so much you can do, and you cannot deliver to the same standard" (PD3). PDs often face situations where, due to context challenges and time, they are unable to fully exercise their creative and technical skills:

The thing that made me not able to do more wasn't a lack of skills, it was a lack of support or time or dodgy gear. Almost every job I've done, I haven't felt like I was working at full capacity nailing it, and I was having to let stuff slide, but almost never has that been, because I didn't know any better. There are active choices I've had to make, where I've gone: 'Yeah, I would love to be doing that. But we don't have the time to do that, because my kit is breaking', and I have to, bottom line, have sound and have picture (PD3).

Such context challenges come into conflict with the textual expectations by management, and managerial ignorance of on-the-ground developments can lead to idealized or even unrealistic expectations of what television workers should deliver in their respective role, contrary to what "unscripted"

programming as a genre requires. While program content still reflects real-life developments, television workers in this genre find themselves increasingly in a position of having to fit execution to conception. EPs describe how during a shoot "the reality isn't what they thought it was, what the program has been sold on, or what the story is supposed to be. But you have to then make it" (EP1). As a result, workers frequently find themselves trying to fit their work around the creative vision of others with less opportunity for input and less recognition of their contribution.

The experience of their role-specific skills being constrained or not valued was common among interviewees. As a result of occupational convergence and smaller teams working in a tight timeframe, they also felt their time was often wasted on low-skilled tasks rather than on what their specific skill set was:

If you could cut down the logging³ time that would give you more time to be creative. But you know what will happen? They will just use it to cut down the overall production time. There's never a sense of, 'let's give them more time to think and write beautifully'—it's more, 'let's just shrink the whole process down and make more money' (EP3).

Our findings indicate that the shift in creative control because of multi-linear production increases managerial oversight and reduces the autonomy of PDs and EPs. Workers feel that production-specific circumstances are not recognized or considered in executive creative decision-making. This practice encourages feelings of making less of a contribution, of one's skills not being valued, and it can lead to creative frustration.

Inter-Departmental Collaboration

Beyond managerial tensions and reduced creative autonomy, the procedural transformation especially affects inter-departmental relations. Like many forms of media production, making television programs is a project-based collaborative process, in which creative authorship is shared between a team of workers. The shift towards multi-linear production creates chal-

³ Logging refers to the viewing and organizing of the raw footage before selecting the clips to be included in the edited program.

lenges for this collaboration. Producing different episodes at the same time with multiple shooters and editors working in parallel but separately creates a stricter division between the different departments and a fragmentation of the overall production team. Following industry convention, we distinguish here roughly between the production team, location crew and edit team, as explained above. The different production departments are separated not only by their activities but also spatially between production office, shooting location and edit suite.

Although interaction is frequent, it is often limited to a small circle of co-workers and is predominantly mediated through emails, texts, chat messages and phone calls rather than face-to-face. Most prominently, respondents complained about a lack of knowledge in other departments concerning their own work role and processes. This can be attributed to the increased fragmentation of production teams and lack of inter-departmental experience and training. As a result, interviewees felt that colleagues in other departments did not sufficiently understand the activities, process and requirements of respondents' work roles and consequently provided insufficient support, thus impeding successful collaboration. Respondents felt that changes in the division of labor combined with freelance contracts contribute to a decline of collaboration and responsibility in the production process: "There's also a sense that no-one has ownership, because we're all hired to do our own little bit, and it doesn't connect with anyone else's—I remember when we were staff at the BBC, it was all interconnected and we all talked, and it made much more sense" (EP1).

For PDs, this especially concerns the collaboration with the team in the production office, who research and organize shooting days. They consider it the production team's job to "support the people who are out on the road."⁴ That is their most important job, and it happens less and less" (PD2). This perceived lack of support concerns, firstly, practical organizational tasks, including irrelevant or insufficient information about location or contributors, which PDs depend on to prepare their shooting days.

Secondly, PDs complain about a lack of visual thinking among production staff and an overdependency on preconceived storylines in the preparatory notes with little consideration of how the story could be told in images.

For EPs, material delivered by PDs has the biggest impact on their work. EPs depend on the footage shot on location to do their job and the quality of those rushes directly affects the quality of the edited program an EP can create. One EP, who used to work as a self-shooter, compared editing to making a cake and shooters as the people providing the ingredients: "So now I'm sitting in an edit suite, and I haven't got flour, I haven't got sugar, I can't make this cake, and I've got to think about how I make a different cake. Or I might make a biscuit. I normally make biscuits now, because I never get the cake" (EP5).

EPs directly attributed such shortcomings to the division of labor and lack of inter-departmental experience:

I think, that's the downside of this whole splitting-the-roles thing, that now you have a whole generation of PDs out there, who don't know how to put a sequence together, because they've never sat in an edit and had to put it together. And it's not their fault, and it's not our fault. It's just the way the system has gone (EP4).

At the same time, PDs are concerned that the footage they create is judged without consideration of the context developments they experience on location:

When they look at those rushes, it comes down to the person who shot them, and they won't be being told you are managing a lot of things, they won't be being told the person with you was really junior, they won't be told, you know, one of your contributors decided to walk out midway through the day and so you're just at that point trying to get them to stay there. They won't be told you were doing all that stuff, they will just be watching the rushes and going: 'Did they get it or did they not? Did they get it well, or did they not' (PD3)?

The lack of inter-departmental knowledge concerning the range of activities involved also results

⁴ This industry expression refers to the filming period, during which shooters travel to a range of filming locations, usually by car, and stay in local accommodation.

in organizational problems in the planning of production processes, especially concerning filming and editing schedules, and contributes to excessively long working days, especially for Producer-Directors. The intense work schedules and long workdays in British television production have been widely evidenced in recent years, usually attributed to flexible and insecure employment (Ross 2009; Ursell 2006; Blair 2001). Swords et al. (2022), for example, report an average of ten hours per day for British television workers, which corresponds to the minimum 10–12-hour workdays reported by respondents. Working on location in unscripted factual program production tends to involve especially long hours for various reasons. Filming involves setting-up and packing-up time as well as responding to events on location, which may require delays or changes to the schedule. Workdays also include travel to, from and between locations and at the end of the day, there is paperwork, backing-up footage and preparation for the next day. Yet, PDs felt that production team members, who plan shoots, rarely allocate sufficient time—if any—for all these activities:

No time is given to prep, and no time is ever given to notes, and you always have to do them, and it's never built into your day. Your schedule starts when you start shooting and it ends when you're finished shooting, and often they are like 12/14 hour days and then you're kind of like, I also have to get there, guys, and I also have to do an hour or two hours' worth of notes or call all my contributors, or prep for the next day, and none of that time is given (PD3).

This lack of consideration in scheduling and planning concerning the “silent work that’s done” (PD1) makes PDs feel undervalued and their efforts underappreciated. This demonstrates the outcome-driven nature of production where “[the production team] just expect that the rushes will get wrangled⁵ and the notes will get written by the magic fairies” (PD4). These experiences confirm van Raalte et al.’s observations of poor communication and time management in British TV production involving “impossible schedules,” last minute changes and

unrealistic expectations (2023, 7). Similarly, EPs feel ignored about challenging working conditions, especially concerning deadline pressures. One respondent mentioned that although executives might express some understanding about working conditions and claim to understand pressure such as time constraints, “they still want what they want” (EP4).

PDs claim that they have reported back to production teams about the challenges they experience and the necessary changes to scheduling but usually without much effect: “And that stuff [wrangling, notes, preparation] that happens in the evening is the part that, no matter how many times you tell the production management teams, they don’t realize that you’re doing that” (PD1). This experience shows a persistent problem in inter-departmental communication and listening despite greater industry awareness of the need for such feedback processes—expressed, for example, in the Freelance Charter. The Charter was published in August 2021 by the Coalition for Change (a collaboration between broadcasters, independent production companies and industry bodies) and aims to improve the working practices of freelancers built on the principle of collective responsibility. It highlights the responsibility of productions to ask about worker requirements, to enable workers to “speak up” and to respond to worker feedback (Coalition for Change, 2021). In most cases, however, respondents confirmed van Raalte et al.’s finding that whistleblower schemes and employer guidance are insufficient in addressing the “systemic risks” of their workplace (2023, 14).

Consequently, respondents feel misunderstood or ignored when critiquing production support and clarifying their requirements. As a result, they call for more inter-departmental exchange to improve collaboration and bridge the division of labor. In other words, PDs want production office staff to gain location experience and EPs want PDs to learn about editing requirements to “see what happens and seeing how things work” (EP5). Those interviewees who have experience in working roles across different departments stress the value of inter-departmental knowledge for better collaboration and conditions, as they better understand the requirements and the constraints that workers face in their respective roles.

5 Wrangling refers to the backing up of the footage shot on the day.

For example, a PD who also works as Series Producer (SP) takes great care when working in this role to provide the shooting team with the best support, including planning realistic schedules with shorter shooting days, offering time off in lieu and allocating additional time for additional tasks after the shoot (PD1). An EP who also works as a PD stressed how they understand the challenges shooters encounter on location and consequently take care to give feedback to and mentor early career PDs about requirements from an edit perspective (EP2).

However, such effort and consideration between departments are not typical. Instead, workers often feel they are not being listened to when they explain their requirements or give feedback about their experience at work. This feeling can contribute to a sense of isolation and lack of sociality in media workplaces, which has been linked to a flexible and casualized labor market and is considered a contributing factor to alienation in cultural work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). This is heightened especially for PDs, who largely work alone because of occupational convergence, while EPs experienced an increased sense of isolation due to working from home (during and after Covid-19 lockdowns) or being confined to an edit suite. Respondents described how being “on the road” during filming can be extremely isolating: “I did a series, which took me to France, and I did 40,000 miles in five months and just driving six hours a day on top of your working day. It’s crazy when you’re on your own” (PD2). Such solitary work presents a health and safety risk “not having someone to watch your back, or seeing what’s behind you, when you’re walking backwards, or just driving the car after a long day” (PD2), which adds to the challenges of long working days discussed above.

Our findings show how processual change has led to a stricter departmental division and a reduction in inter-departmental knowledge of processes and work roles, which in turn can lead to problems in the planning and organization of production and encourage exploitative conditions including longer working hours, unsafe conditions and unnecessary work tasks. In addition, inter-departmental challenges lead to feelings of isolation and exclusion. Workers perceive their work roles as insufficiently understood and

undervalued, adding to the effects of constrained creative autonomy outlined in the previous section.

Implications For Exploitation, Deskilling And Alienation

These workplace experiences reveal deeper connections to Braverman’s theoretical framework. In this section we consider to what extent our findings validate or contradict Braverman’s claims. We argue that the reorganization of the factual TV production process, motivated by cost rationalization and labor productivity, has similar effects on exploitation, skill and alienation as have been claimed by Braverman, but they differ in form and extent due to the specific characteristics of media work.

Exploitation

The experiences and conditions described in the preceding section confirm the exploitative practices that have been widely reported as typical for cultural production under capitalism in general and in television production in particular. Reports surveying workers in the British TV industry have frequently highlighted poor conditions in the sector including long hours, low pay, impact on mental and physical health and workplace bullying (van Raalte et al., 2021; Swords et al., 2022; Evans & Green, 2017). Such exploitative practices in television production have been largely explained by the flexibilization and casualization of labor and the related pressures of financial insecurity, reputation-based recruitment, networking and permanent job hunting (e.g. Ursell, 2000; Ross, 2009). The “huge reservoir” of labor in the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, 19) combined with the constant risk of unemployment create pressures like Braverman’s “reserve army” of laborers.

Our findings show how creative micromanagement and problems in inter-departmental collaboration further increase the potential for exploitative practices. As established workers in the industry, working predominantly in a professional context at independent production companies, respondents do not feel pressure to work for free or very low pay as is a widespread experience on entry level in the cultural industries (Siebert & Wilson, 2013). They

felt reasonably secure in finding work, but all suffered from excessive working hours and poor work-life balance typical for the TV industry. As described above, excessive demands and lack of support by other production departments because of departmental fragmentation as well as unrealistic expectations by management because of the separation of conception and execution contribute to these conditions. We, therefore, argue that processual change, aiming for cost rationalization and standardization, combined with the pressure of flexible employment increases the potential for exploitation in media production.

Deskilling

Like Braverman we also observe the impact of process reorganization on labor skills. However, rather than a shift towards unskilled labor, skill demands in television production remain high. In fact, multiskilling and being able to work across a range of production roles are presented as a necessity to be employable in the contemporary television labor market (Ward et al., 2000). However, as explained above, multiskilling carries its own challenges as became visible especially in the case of self-shooting PDs, who frequently find themselves unable to fully exercise their skills within a given time frame or location context. We further highlighted how the increase of managerial control and micromanagement in relation to creative decision making and program conception can negatively affect workers' ability to fully apply their skills in the execution phase, which is exacerbated in productions with high degrees of textual standardization and formatting.

Overall, the shift to multi-linear production makes the production process less dependent on individuals, making them replaceable components rather than essential specialists, which echoes Braverman's observations about the erosion of specialization and craft. We highlighted a decline in skill related to knowledge and understanding of the overall production process, that is, the activities and occupational roles involved in the different parts of the process. This decline is not solely because of processual change but, like exploitative conditions, facilitated by the impact of the flexibilization of the British television labor market, which transformed

the industry from permanent employment and comprehensive in-house training at broadcasters to the predominance of insecure short-term and freelance labor, who are responsible for their own training as we described above. Recent reports of skills shortages in the British television sector (Ozimek, 2021; BFI, 2022) highlight the impact of both the multiskilling demands of the industry and the individualization and commodification of training and call for significant and continued industry investment in skills.

While we see some evidence of deskilling, cultural production generally requires skilled workers and we see rising demand for multiskilled workers as crew sizes are reduced, suggesting that Braverman's deskilling argument requires adaptation when it comes to cultural production. The changes in the labor process in factual TV production contribute to a shift in skills expectation, which tends towards multiskilling, and in skill execution, which workers can experience as constrained or limited. Most importantly, we have seen a decline of skills and knowledge in relation to other production departments and occupational roles, and evidence of a growing devaluation of specialist skills. As in the case of exploitation, these developments are exacerbated by the temporary nature of flexible employment.

Alienation

Braverman further argues that exploitation and the prominence of repetitive, unskilled work because of the reorganization of labor processes leads to alienation in the workplace. While our findings confirm a similar relationship between alienation and the reorganization of the production process, the reasons for this differ. We argue that reorganization negatively affects characteristics that are specific to cultural production and that are usually associated with low levels of alienation, namely, attachment and creative autonomy. Our understanding of alienation builds on Braverman's Marxist perception of alienation being the result of objective structural conditions. In our case, this includes the reduction of creative control and an inter-departmental disconnect due to processual change and separation of conception and execution in factual TV production. At the same time, we agree with Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011)

and recognize that workers have a subjective response to these conditions.

A high degree of attachment to work, both in terms of process and product (in our case television programs), and therefore, a comparatively low level of alienation has been identified as a central characteristic of cultural work (Lee, 2012; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011; Ross, 2009). In other words, workers care about what they do, which makes them highly motivated. Our research confirmed these claims and showed that this attachment can be diminished by constraints of creative autonomy and the experience of exploitation and deskilling. As we described above, increased top-down control and micromanagement combined with inter-departmental tensions in a multi-linear production system led to experiences of powerlessness, isolation and creative frustration, which correspond to forms of alienation identified in cultural labor (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). The separation of PDs and EPs in the reorganized execution (Figure 2) can reduce attachment to the final text. On the one hand, PDs care about how the contributors, whom they have established relationships with, are represented, but they have little or no power over how this representation is put together and are usually not involved in this process. EPs, on the other hand, may feel less emotional attachment to the “product,” as they lack deep relationships with contributors.

Although diminished, respondents do experience and value autonomy in and attachment to their work. Our interviews confirmed claims that relatively high attachment and low alienation in cultural labor can in turn facilitate exploitation (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). In our study, participants expressed feeling “complicit” by rising to production challenges and “delivering” high-quality content despite extremely short timeframes and insufficient financial and labor resources, because success implies that resources will remain insufficient and may be squeezed even further. The successful completion of an underfunded and understaffed production relies on substantial self-exploitation including unpaid overtime, which can be explained by participants’ attachment to their work:

[O]n a program, you will do everything you can to deliver it, because you care, like you really want

to do it. Personally, you want to do a good job. You don’t want to send crap rushes to the edit, and then go: ‘Well, you didn’t give me enough time, I’m really sorry I didn’t get everything.’ So instead, you stay late, and you do five hours extra or you don’t overnight or whatever, because you also have invested in the project, so you don’t want the project to do badly. (PD3)

This quote further demonstrates that despite the alienating consequences of processual reorganization highlighted above (especially the limited control over the creative process and creative decision-making) interviewees still feel a sense of ownership, even authorship, towards the programs they create. In the case of unscripted factual program production, this includes a feeling of responsibility towards the contributors and subject matter represented in the program, which can be exploited by productions. Respondents “want the contributors to be able to author their own story” (EP1), and they will work extra hard to “do them justice” (PD3) in the program.

Overall, our results confirm Braverman’s claims that rationalization of labor and reorganization of process can lead to alienation and reduced attachment to work due to constraints of creative autonomy and inter-departmental disconnect. They further showed how reorganization and rationalization can contribute to exploitation, poor working conditions and negatively affect the development and application of skills, adding to the pressures of a competitive, flexible labor market. All interviewees attributed economic conditions, especially budget reductions, as the reason behind the transformation of their television labor including the shift to multi-linear production and multiskilled self-shooters. Having witnessed the continuing decline in the funding for factual productions during their years in the industry may explain a sense of resignation, a feeling of “that’s just how it is,” among respondents. They have no expectation that the funding of the sector will improve in any way or at any point. However, they feel that change is possible and desirable when it comes to inter-departmental communication and experience, and the planning/organization of a production. To this end, we can observe efforts at resistance and activism in the British television industry.

Resistance

While, in contrast to Braverman, class struggle was not the focus of our study, we want to briefly address workers' attempts to respond to (and ideally improve) the challenging conditions they experience. Unions such as BECTU (formed from the merger of ACTT, BETA and ABS) enjoyed great strength through the 1970s and most of the 1980s. However, the 1990s Broadcasting Act and industrial disputes weakened union power at broadcasters BBC and ITV and created a largely de-unionized sector. BECTU has remained the main union for television workers, but with the change to a largely disparate freelance workforce its power to influence working conditions is limited.

Reduced union power has not silenced the debate about poor working conditions in the TV industry and over the last two decades non-union activism emerged to raise greater awareness and promote industry change. There is growing critical debate of conditions in industry and public discourse that is in stark contrast to celebratory discourses about creative work typical for the early 2000s (Banks, 2007). The conditions of freelance TV workers in the UK, for example, gained wider media attention during the Covid-19 pandemic, which highlighted especially the financial insecurity of their work in news discourse. Today, several groups and organizations are dedicated to spotlighting and tackling exploitative working conditions in the British television industry.

These include established industry organizations, which represent, advise and support TV workers, for example, the Unscripted TV Union, a branch of BECTU, which represents over 40,000 workers in industry negotiations over pay and conditions (UTVU, 2024). Other examples are the Film and TV Charity, which is committed to improving mental health and diversity and inclusion in the TV sector (Film and TV Charity, 2024), and the pan-industry group Coalition for Change, which is dedicated to improving working conditions for freelancers (Coalition for Change, 2024). However, many TV workers are not members of these organizations for various reasons, which may include a lack of awareness, membership costs, individualization of labor struggle, or a general lack of faith in the value of these organizations.

In addition, more informal and non-traditional groups have taken up resisting exploitation. Several grassroots organizations and campaigns have evolved, which were founded by members of the television workforce and are often dedicated to specific members of the labor market. For example, Viva La PD evolved from a grassroots Facebook group to represent over 1,200 PDs and EPs (Directors UK, 2024) in the struggle for better pay and contracts. We Are Doc Women is dedicated to achieving gender parity and better support for parents and carers (We Are Doc Women, 2024), and the Women's Camera Collective Manchester provides peer-to-peer support and equipment to locally based women and non-binary adults (Women's Camera Collective, 2024). TV Watercooler evolved from an online pay and conditions discussion board to a dedicated website supporting freelance workers with advice on pay rates, employment rights and companies to avoid (TV Watercooler, 2024).

TV Watercooler achieved one of the rare successes of industrial grassroots activism in the British TV industry that highlights the value of online networks for workplace politics. In January 2005, inspired by anonymous reports of workplace abuse and exploitation appearing on the website they had set up, the group launched an online campaign and petition called TV Workers' Rights Advocacy Programme ("TV WRAP") asking the government to enforce industry employment rights. Applying John Kelly's mobilization theory, Percival and Lee (2022) have detailed how the non-unionized campaign successfully mobilized freelance workers through online "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), allowing workers to mobilize across horizontal networks without bureaucratic constraints. The campaign gained significant media coverage, caused companies to change policies and sparked a Department of Trade and Industry investigation into the TV industry, which led to new guidelines being issued. Industry publication *Broadcast* found 16% of workers believed it had changed their job for the better (Percival & Hesmondhalgh 2014).

Groups and organizations like these—campaigning for better working conditions, providing peer support and advice, and offering important spaces

for community support in a fragmented and individualized labor market—face significant barriers to be effective. Sustainability of their activities presents the biggest challenge due to a lack of resources, especially time and money, to fund their work. Group activities including campaigning, advising and maintaining an online presence usually depend on member volunteers, which is hard to reconcile with the long working days in the industry and the need to earn a living, while reduced membership has made funding a concern for paid union labor and activities. Another challenge concerns the coordination and communication with a fragmented and overworked workforce, who in the case of PDs are out on a range of locations and in the case of EPs, confined to edit suites, a fragmentation that is heightened by the reorganized division of labor and the resulting inter-departmental disconnect we have discussed in this article. Each production involves collaboration with different people at different sites and often for different companies, lacking mechanisms for effective labor organization. As McRobbie commented, “[m]aybe there can be no workplace politics when there is no workplace” (2002, 522). The fragmentation of the work force is not only spatial and temporal in nature but also concerns ethical attitudes, as Percival and Hesmondhalgh’s (2014) investigation of TV workers’ views of unpaid work revealed. Nevertheless, Percival and Lee’s (2022) analysis of the TV WRAP campaign suggests, on a more hopeful note, that the use of online and digital technology as well as networked media campaigns and anonymized contributions could provide an alternative model of resistance from direct workplace industrial action.

For now, considering the number of campaigns and initiatives, there is limited evidence for significant positive industry change as a result. Industry reports and academic research about working conditions fail to note significant improvements, calling instead for a more active approach from industry to manage the risk factors involved in the organizational and leadership culture of television production (van Raalte et al., 2023, 14). In a concerning development, shortly before the time of writing a marked downturn in factual unscripted TV production across the UK occurred due to a reduction in the BBC license fee

settlement and an advertising downturn in the commercial sector. This resulted in a BECTU survey in July 2024 detailing 57% of the workforce in unscripted TV were currently out of work, and 53% said they were planning to leave the industry (BECTU, 2024). In response to this, the industry adopted a mantra of “Survive to 25” (Sweeney, 2024)—the hope is that production will pick up in 2025 and freelancers do whatever is needed to stay in the industry until then. At the time of writing in Spring 2025, this is not yet evident. Overall, we see repeated campaigning activity but no significant industry change, and there is little evidence to support Standing’s predictions of a radicalization and rise of media workers as part of the “Precariat” (2011). Further investigation of activist efforts would be valuable to better understand the barriers to effectiveness and sustainability of efforts to resist and improve contemporary conditions in the media industries.

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to investigate how applicable Braverman’s argument is when studying industry change in a cultural context and a flexible labor market. We confirmed capitalist motivations for the reorganization of process and the separation of conception and execution and found that these changes create additional challenges and constraints that, combined with the pressures of flexible and short-term employment, can increase the potential for alienation and exploitation. This impact is not as severe as described by Braverman, which can be ascribed to the characteristics of media work, including especially a comparatively high level of creative autonomy and the combination of what Braverman calls “mental” and “manual” work tasks during execution. Nevertheless, our research confirms the reduction of creative autonomy and attachment because of the separation of conception and execution in multi-linear production. It further revealed the influence of genre specifics on the process and conditions of media work.

Although the degree to which structural conditions are experienced as alienating is subjective, as expectations, experiences and circumstance differ from one person to the next, recent research among

British television workers confirms our findings of worker discontent and complaints about current conditions (e.g. van Raalte et al., 2023; Swords et al., 2022). Although not discussed in detail here, our research further revealed not only an impact on labor conditions and experience but also indicated negative consequences for the quality of cultural texts created in this system, confirming concerns about the negative impact of marketization/commercialization and commodification of cultural production in general (e.g. Ryan, 1992; Keat, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2019) and in factual production specifically (Lee, 2018; Zoellner, 2022). There are additional influential factors that contribute to the dynamics we have described here including technology and training. While we have briefly signposted these issues in our article, further investigation of the way in which digital technology and skills training (or lack thereof) facilitate managerial control or contribute to its effects is needed.

Overall, our research demonstrates the value of reflecting on Braverman's claims in a cultural production context similarly to other—arguably rare—applications in the cultural sector such as Leslie and Rantisi's (2019) analysis of the *Cirque du Soleil*, which demonstrates deskilling and loss of autonomy as a result of corporatization and standardization, or Yoon's (2019) study of the Korean animation industry, which highlights how corporate strategies can control creative labor in similar ways used to control industrial labor. Our attempt to apply Braverman's thesis to media production demonstrates the consistency and significance of capitalist efforts to rationalize production and shows the value of studying process and process change in cultural production. To do so productively, we propose an approach that relates the labor process to the subjective experience of workers and considers industry- and genre-specific particularities. Such an approach acknowledges the specificity of cultural production in the study of the labor processes and allows for more nuanced findings that recognize the contradictory and complex nature of media production. We further argue that, while Braverman's distinction between manual and mental labor does not apply in cultural production, his emphasis on the separation of conception and

execution as managerial strategy remains relevant and deserves investigation. Its implications for autonomy and control are particularly relevant in cultural production, as the potential for creative freedom and self-expression is considered a central motivator for seeking out this kind of work (Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Finally, cultural production differs from the work context of Braverman's Fordist factory system when it comes to the result of this labor. Although there are elements of standardization of both work procedures and cultural product, it does not involve the repeat production of identical goods but requires new creative conceptualization for each production. We, therefore, suggest expanding the scope of research and considering the impact of the labor process not only on labor but also on its products, the resulting cultural text, against the context of industry and genre trends. As this study demonstrates, understanding the reorganization of creative labor under capitalism requires examining not only market structures but the granular processes through which autonomy is constrained and exploitation enabled.

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