Equity, Diversity and Inclusion:

Class Inequalities within the British Documentary Film Industry

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Abstract

While there is a considerable amount of scholarship and grey literature about social exclusions within the UK cultural industries, the sociology of cultural labour has paid little attention to documentary filmmaking as a relatively elitist occupation that is maintained by systemic inequalities. Based on semi-structured interviews with several independent documentary filmmakers about their own labouring subjectivities, and qualitative analysis of relevant academic literature and cultural policies, this article critically explores how class inequalities are understood, reproduced, negotiated or resisted within contemporary British documentary filmmaking. The research findings demonstrate that documentarians from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to face significant obstacles in the filmmaking sector than their privileged counterparts. While the majority of respondents are aware of structural disadvantages, champion more inclusive forms of creativity and are committed to improving discriminatory working conditions, a small number of participants believe that the social relations of documentary film production are meritocratic, can be characterised by their celebration of neoliberal values and a willingness to defend the industry's hitherto employment practices. The article concludes with a series of recommendations for creative organisations, government and policymakers.

Keywords: documentary film, cultural work, class, equity, diversity, inclusion

Introduction: equity, diversity and inclusion in the creative industries

In the past decade, there has been much debate about how best to reform obstacles to bettering equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the UK's creative, cultural and media industries. After many years of political quietism, professional duplicity, talk about meritocracy and openness (Florida 2002), an increasing number of cultural practitioners, professional bodies, parliamentary committees and scholars have started to express assorted concerns about the homogeneity of the workforce in the cultural economy and to suggest possible fixes. For example, following eighteen months of collaborative research between the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Creative Diversity and several academics from King's College London and the University of Edinburgh, Co-Chair, Chi Onwurah MP, stated: 'For too long the UK's creative industries have been dominated by a narrow subset of the UK population – a subset that does not represent our country as a whole' (Wreyford et al. 2021: 6). Based on an extensive review of literature and EDI interventions alongside numerous evidence submissions from experts across the UK's creative sector and a series of roundtables, the resulting report, *Creative Majority*, recommends five 'guiding principles' with which to improve 'practices in recruiting, developing and retaining a diverse creative sector' (2021: 14-5), about which more later.

Likewise, the Social Mobility Commission (2021a) recently launched a socio-economic diversity and inclusion toolkit that has been endorsed by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)[1], the British Film Institute (BFI), the Creative Industries Federation (CIF), UK Music, among others.[2] Drawing on 2017-19 Labour Force Survey data and in-depth interviews with several prominent UK cultural organisations, the report makes for sobering reading. Unsurprisingly, the workforce is mostly White (86 percent), male (64 percent) and from high socio-economic family backgrounds (52 percent) (2021: 7, 23-24). Whereas seven percent of the general UK population attend fee-paying

independent schools and less than one percent study at Oxbridge, 29 percent of the creative industries workforce attended an independent school and four percent went to the two oldest and most prestigious universities in the UK (Ibid.: 18). Additionally, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to be able to finance the usual entry route into the cultural industries given the sector's excessive reliance on unpaid interns and precariously employed freelancers. Access opportunities are further compounded by the fact that over a half of the UK's cultural industries are based in London and the South East (Ibid.: 7, 17), where the combined cost of housing and living is significantly higher.

Echoing the above findings, the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) has published several research papers in recent months that further highlight class-based disadvantage in the cultural employment sector. Though it does not have the same legal status as other individual characteristics that are protected by the 2010 Equality Act, *Getting In and Getting On* nevertheless observes that the question of social class reflect widespread policy and public concerns over the socio-economic composition of the creative occupations vis-a-vis other professions (Carey et al. 2020: 6-7). And indeed, despite various efforts in recent years to improve regional participation, social inclusivity and retraining opportunities (for example, Bazalgette 2017; Creative Industries Council 2016 and 2019; DCMS 2018; Publishers Association 2017), the paper concludes that just 16 percent of employment in creative roles are from working-class backgrounds compared to 21 percent in any professional occupation and 29 percent across all occupations (Carey et al. 2020: 9). A subsequent report found that, for the UK's creative workforce to be as socio-economically diverse as the rest of the economy, there would be need to be 250,000 more working-class people employed in the sector (Carey et al. 2021: 8-9).

Research has also highlighted how the likelihood of working-class people obtaining secure work in creative occupations is further undermined due to the sector's overreliance on

freelancers. According to Easton and Beckett (2021: 1), though self-employment has grown across the whole economy over the last two decades (up from 12 percent in 2000 to 16 percent in 2020), freelancers made up 32 percent of the creative workforce between October 2019 to September 2020. And whilst some people doubtless prefer a flexible work-life balance, equally, there are growing concerns that the rise in casual and precarious jobs are weakening key employment rights, including normal working hours, statutory holiday, sick, paternity and redundancy pay, affordable pension schemes and protection from unfair dismissal (Banks 2017; Forkert 2013; Gill and Pratt 2008; Hesmondhalgh 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; McRobbie 2016; Ross 2009; Standing 2011; Trades Union Congress 2017). Of course, COVID has further exposed the 'structural fragility' of the ecologies and economies of the cultural industries (Henry et al. 2021: 4; see also, Ali et al. 2022; Siepel et al. 2021; Walmsey et al. 2022). Apart from damaging the career resilience for all cultural workers, the pandemic has been especially injurious for creative freelancers from socially disadvantaged groups (for example, working class, women and BME) in terms of worsening job security and financial stability.

There are numerous other UK academic studies and a range of grey literature which similarly demonstrate how socio-economic impediments (such as intersectional pay gaps, poor remuneration and unpaid internships, the exclusionary nature of knowledge sharing, developing social networks and personal contacts) continue to obstruct people from underrepresented backgrounds accessing jobs in the cultural economy or experiencing intergenerational social mobility.[3] And though many of the findings and recommendations are generalisable across a range of creative industries, the remainder of this article will focus on structural inequalities within British documentary film production in relation to social class (a multifaceted concept about which there are many differing views and classificatory systems). Specifically, we critically analyse and categorise several interviews with

documentary filmmakers according to how they articulate their own experiences of, or observations about, the social relations of documentary film production apropos class disadvantages.

As well as contributing to wider scholarly and public debates about the importance of class for understanding occupational inequalities within the creative industries, we seek to build on a growing body of literature that is expressly concerned with recent political-economic transformations of the UK independent television and film industries apropos the impact on so-called 'indie' filmmakers and their working conditions. Seminal research includes Richard Paterson's extensive analyses of the UK independent television production sector, including a farsighted investigation of the proliferation of a freelance workforce, short-term contracts and concomitant anxieties about 'uncertainty' during the 1990s (2001),[4] and two related essays (2010, 2017) that focus on the 'entrepreneurial aspirations' of independent production company owners and the ascendency of occupational individualism throughout the same period. More recently, Paterson and several other colleagues conducted a major survey of the independence, scale and economic sustainability of the UK television production sector in light of an increasingly globalised television environment due to transnational mergers and acquisitions (Doyle et al. 2021). Apart from investigating shifts in ownership and the growth of 'super-indies' (aptly referred to as 'from minnows to sharks'), the study also considers the implications for commissions from domestic broadcasters, television content and media policy.

Similarly, David Lee has published several important studies that trace the changing work practices and challenges of UK audio-visual cultural production. For example, drawing on sociological theories of network analysis and interview data from a qualitative study of 20 freelancers, Lee argues that conventional recruitment processes are increasingly bypassed in favour of informal networks and personal recommendations (2011). Consequently, 'getting

on' in the television industry favours individuals (who already belong to social elites) with 'high levels of cultural capital' and the resources to invest in 'after-hours' networking. As well as having both exclusionary and discriminatory effects, Lee observes that successful freelancers are often complicit in 'disavowing the importance (or even existence) of such forms of inequity' (2011: 55). The profession's widespread belief in meritocracy further complicates matters insofar as it functions as a source of legitimacy. Lee also demonstrates how the precariousness nature of creative labour within the television sector tends to unfairly disadvantage more 'ordinary' cultural workers insofar as they face higher levels of risk and self-exploitation if they want to succeed and achieve a sense of professional 'self-realisation' (2012). Elsewhere, Zoellner and Lee (2020: 254) argue that the relentless pressures to secure paid work 'privilege media workers who can afford or have the support structures for such lifestyles'. While Lee's (2018) longitudinal research offers unrivalled insights into both the key debates and lived experiences of UK television production workers, some of which we shall return to when we analyse our own empirical findings.

A contemporary political economy of UK independent documentary production

Before examining the interview data, it is important to consider a brief outline of the sector's political economy vis-à-vis questions of organisation and finance since the 1980s. This said, documentary film has a much longer history that dates to Robert Flaherty's *Moana* (1926), which John Grierson famously described as having 'documentary value' (Winston 2001: 8). Grierson's own contribution to documentary film needs little rehearsal here. Suffice to say that he is widely considered to be the pioneer of the inter-war British documentary movement, starting with the production of *Drifters* (1929); the setting up of a film unit at the Empire Marketing Board (1929), later transferred to the General Post Office (1933); and the publication of his ground-breaking essay 'First Principles of Documentary' (1932) where he

first portrayed documentary film as 'the creative treatment of actuality' (Hardy 1966: 13; see also, Lovell and Hillier 1972: 9-61). Under Grierson's leadership, and with the unstinting support of Stephen Tallents (who was Secretary of the EMB, then Public Relations Officer for the GPO), there emerged a group of talented filmmakers who produced a cannon of socially purposeful documentary films that have since been described as 'Britain's outstanding contribution to the film' (see Aitken 1998; Barnouw 1993; Higson 1996a; Hood 1983).

Though the mainstream UK film industry struggled to compete with Hollywood, had to contend with declining cinema audiences and tended towards a domestic monopoly (Dickinson 1983), post-war social documentary cum social realist drama continued to flourish under the auspices of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) and Independent Television (ITV), so-called British New Wave and Free Cinema, the British Film Institute's Experimental Film Fund (reorganised as the BFI Production Board), the National Film Theatre and the watchful eye of the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (see Cooke 2003; Corner 1996; Garnett 2016; Hill 1986; Higson 1996b; Lovell and Hillier 1972; Shubik 1975), among others. Coupled with growing access to post-sixteen educational training and workplace apprenticeships, these media ecologies provided the next generation of aspiring filmmakers with vital resources and opportunities. It was during this period that debates about the Scylla of media commercialism and the Charybdis of state paternalism also began to enter wider public discourse and policy debates (Williams 1962). And indeed, the development of the co-operative independent film and video movement notwithstanding (Dickinson 1999; Harvey 1996; Blanchard and Harvey 1983), much of the UK's audio-visual content was produced largely in-house by the BBC, ITV and the vertically integrated film companies, like Associated British Pictures and the Rank Organisation.

This all changed with the creation of the commercially-funded, publicly-owned Channel 4 in 1982 (Brown 2007; Puttnam 2016: 67-77). Initially, there was a proliferation of small independent producers due to the broadcaster's statutory obligation to commissioning and purchasing innovative programmes out-of-house (Doyle et al. 2021: 53-59; Harvey 1986: 243-5). However, Channel 4's unique funding model was a double-edged sword insofar as it was required to both complement the existing public service channels and embrace the entrepreneurial values of Thatcherism. And though it is certainly true that the early years of the Channel introduced a refreshing viewing alternative to the sometimes more cautious and paternalistic fare offered by the BBC-ITV duopoly, arguably, this public-private tension was to fundamentally transform the industry's working conditions for the worst, in part because of the difficulties independent producers faced if they underestimated their costs and overspent on their budgets, but also because many of the new independents had no experience of trade unions or were antagonistic to them (Harvey 2000: 94; Hood and Tabary-Peterssen 1997: 62-3; Lambert 1982: 152-63). Consequently, it became increasingly common for audio-visual workers to be employed on a freelance basis, with poorer wages, paid leave entitlement and pension schemes.

The New Right's penchant for free market enterprise and cultural populism (see Gamble 1988; McGuigan 1996) was further strengthened via the 1990 Broadcasting Act. Besides signalling a cumulative shift away from public service obligations towards neoliberal deregulation, the Act required the BBC and ITV to commission 25 percent of their programmes from independent production companies. But instead of seeing a growth in small independent producers, larger companies, such as Thames and Granada, and independents whose executives had previously worked in ITV, were the main beneficiaries. Hood and Tabary-Peterssen even suggest that 'sweetheart deals' had been agreed behind closed doors previously (1997: 79). Inevitably, the smaller independents collapsed or morphed into larger

businesses through mergers and takeovers, which has resulted in the emergence of a few 'fat-cat Indies' dominating the market by the 2000s, particularly in Scotland and Wales (Williams 2009: 180-3). Even Channel 4 has veered towards working with fewer, larger production companies over the last twenty years, despite its introduction of an Indie Growth Fund to provide seed funding for small and medium-sized production companies in 2014, prompting acclaimed film producer, David Puttnam, to recently lament the consolidation of the independent sector and the growing tendency for the largest companies to end up as subsidiaries of major US media groups (2016: 70-3).

Additionally, both the 1990 Broadcasting Act and the 2003 Communications Act drastically altered the genre-based quotas required of ITV franchise holders, which has effected a significant reduction in ITV's spending on documentary programming (Kilborn 1996: 143-6). Previously, the network was obligated to schedule so many hours of factual programmes a year but the regulatory shift away from genre-based quotas has allowed ITV to focus on the financial success of its drama and entertainment broadcasting, which tend to attract mass television audiences. Though they continue to invest in high-quality feature documentaries and big-budget nature or history documentaries, even the BBC and Channel 4 have succumbed to the new commercial imperatives, evident in the former's intensification of aggressive scheduling and American-style reality programmes (Corner 1997: 17-8) and the closure of the latter's Independent Film and Video department in 2004. Furthermore, according to a recent survey of 200 UK feature documentary directors and producers, only 14.5 percent and 3.5 percent of respondents received funding from the BBC and Channel 4/Film Four in 2019 (Presence et al. 2020: 39). And though documentary accounted for the largest proportion of films shot in the UK for the years 2017-19, at 21 percent, the genre accounted for just one per cent of the total film production budget over the same period (BFI 2020: 168; see also, BFI 2021a: 10; O'Sullivan 2017).

Faced with deteriorating budgets, commissioning opportunities and work conditions, the documentary film industry has been forced to once again reinvent itself and to adopt a hodgepodge model of documentary financing. Increasing numbers of independent filmmakers have turned to charitable foundations, social change organisations and private investors (Whickers 2020: 25). The internet and social media have proved especially lucrative for some producers, both in terms of crowdsourcing and distribution (Sørensen 2012) The proliferation of on-demand internet providers (for example, Netflix and Amazon Prime), international documentary film festivals (for example, Sheffield, London Open City), specialist independent cinemas and distributors (BRITDOC, Picturehouse, DocHouse and DogWoof), has provided much-needed additional support, venues and publicity for UK documentary makers. And issues of accessibility and eligibility notwithstanding (Newsinger and Presence 2018; Presence et al. 2020: 41), larger independent documentary companies have also benefited from the Film Tax Relief (FTR), which provided £595 million (or 78 percent) of the total budget to the UK film industry in 2018/19 (BFI 2020: 185).

Having said this, personal funds are by far the most likely source of funding for documentary film production. The aforementioned survey of UK feature documentary producers and directors claims that 44 percent of respondents mentioned that they had to rely on their own finances as the main funding source, while 63 percent of them earned from as little as nothing to just 25 percent of their income producing films. The majority (76 percent) of participants were freelancers juggling multiple short-term contracts (Presence et al. 2020: 30-38). Similarly, the most recent Whickers Cost of Docs report states that, of the 146 documentary makers surveyed, 38 percent were living off their savings, 21 percent were being supported by family and friends, only 21 percent could pay themselves a wage from their production fund and a whopping 56 percent were having to freelance on other projects to make ends meet (Whickers 2020: 17). More than half of respondents for both surveys also

indicated that they performed multiple roles (such as director, producer, editor or writer) on their projects due to underfunding. Consequently, many documentary makers feel overworked, underpaid and unable to take regular holidays. Ironically, the Whickers inquiry suggests that many independents even struggle to find time to put in for funding due to the average application taking 14 working days to complete (Ibid.: 29). Meanwhile, most production costs (for example, research and development, pitching, travel, location fees, crew, kit and studio hire, publicity) continue to rise.

In other words, despite its time-honoured commitment to representing socially disadvantaged groups and catering for minority viewing interests in terms of content diversity, UK documentary filmmaking has a far more checkered history when it comes to the availability of public funding, access to production networks and workforce EDI more generally. Notwithstanding the pioneering efforts of Ruby Grierson, Marion Grierson, Mary Field, Evelyn Spice, Sarah Erulkar, Jill Craigie, Budge Copper, Kay Mander, Lorenza Mazzetti, Betty Box, Horace Ové, Lloyd Reckford and Lionel Ngakane, among others, the aforementioned interwar and postwar years were very much of their time insofar as the majority of filmmakers (fiction and documentary alike) were white middle-class men. Indeed, it's a criticism that persists to this day. For example, 'A Future for Public Service Television' inquiry recently noted that UK television 'does not look like the audience it is supposed to serve' insofar as 'it is disproportionately white, male, over-35, London-based and privately educated' (Puttnam 2016: 109); Puttnam also claims that questions of underrepresentation and stereotyping are inextricably intertwined with the lack of diverse employment in television. In short, though social realism in British film and television ought not be characterised as an 'unbroken tradition' (Hill 2000), it's fair to say that there is a fundamental contradiction between documentary's continuing symbolic role in shaping public discourse

that is socially purposeful vis-à-vis the potential impact of limited diversity and representation within the industry itself.

Methods and data analysis

This article draws on qualitative methods to better understand how the abovementioned underfunding has intensified the marketization of the UK documentary film industry and exacerbated structural inequalities across the sector. As well as reviewing the relevant literature, we examine data from semi-structured in-depth interviews with thirty professional documentary filmmakers. The length of the meetings was anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours and they were conducted between June 2017 and September 2018. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at various locations, such as workplaces, coffee shops and cinema bars. Most of the discussions took place in London, partly for reasons of convenience in terms of the interviewers' own geographical proximity, but also because this is where the greatest number of documentary independents are located, as already discussed. All the research participants oversee their own production companies, although many of them have a second career or job to make ends meet. Likewise, though they employ other filmmakers on casual contracts, the interviewees often multitask as directors, producers, editors, sound engineers, and so forth, to keep down production costs.

Following previous studies of cultural work (O'Brien 2018; O'Brien et al. 2016), and given our relatively small sample size, we use the simplified three-class version of the UK government's *National Statistics Socio-economic Classification* (NS-SEC) to characterise each of the interviewees in terms of their class origins (see Table 1).[5] All interviewees were thus asked about their familial upbringings and classified according to one of two categories: those from *privileged* backgrounds were judged to have parents who typically work(ed) in professional, managerial or intermediate occupations (NS-SEC 1–2 and 3-5); *upwardly*

mobile filmmakers, on the other hand, tend to come from working-class families insofar as their parents work(ed) in routine and manual jobs or who have never worked or are long-term unemployed (NS-SEC 6-8). As well as measuring the structure of socio-economic positions in the UK and being a useful research tool for policy analysts (ONS 2010: 3), this method of classification is additionally salient considering the Labour Force Survey's (LFS) decision to start collecting data on parental occupational background since 2014 in an effort to better inform social mobility research and the class pay gap (see Friedman and Laurison 2020: 240, 318). Indeed, both the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Social Mobility Commission (2019 and 2021b; see also, Friedman et al. 2017a) recommend the three-class definition as 'the best for surveys that measure parental occupation retrospectively' and 'the most accurate one available to assess socio-economic background with UK data'.[6] And the NS-SEC generally has been widely used and adapted by governments, think tanks and academics internationally.

Table 1: NS-SEC Eight-, Five- and Three- Class Versions[7]		
Eight Classes	Five Classes	Three Classes
1. Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations 1.1 Large employers and higher managerial and administrative occupations 1.2 Higher professional occupations 2. Lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations	1. Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations	1. Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations
3. Intermediate occupations	2. Intermediate occupations	2. Intermediate occupations
4. Small employers and own account workers	3. Small employers and own account workers	
5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations	4. Lower supervisory and technical occupations	
6. Semi-routine occupations	5. Semi-routine and routine occupations	3. Routine and manual occupations (working class)
7. Routine occupations		
8. Never worked and long-term unemployed	*Never worked and long-term unemployed	*Never worked and long-term unemployed

Of course, the NS-SEC schema is not without its shortcomings and limitations. Just as it replaced the long-established Registrar General's Social Class (SC) and Socio-Economic Groups (SEG) in 2001 due to growing concerns that the old socio-economic classifications no longer accurately reflected modern society, it has since been argued that the NS-SEC preoccupation with studying employment and class undermines intersectional analyses of the relationship between class, gender, race and ethnicity (Savage 2015: 40). And there is a long-running academic debate, best encapsulated by the work of Erik Olin Wright and his critics (1989), that draws on differing Marxist and Weberian ideas about social classes, with the former insisting that people should be classed according to the social (rather than technical) relations of economic production (see Marshall et al. 1993). More recently, sociological studies of social stratification have become increasingly interested in 'cultural markers' of class. Drawing on the pioneering work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, there are several major UK studies that critically explore the importance of 'cultural capital' for better understanding class processes and hierarchies (for example, Bennett et al. 2009; Savage et al. 2013). Bourdieusian-influenced analyses are specially numerous across a range of cultural labour studies, and though our own research does not make explicit use of Bourdieu's ideas, we broadly accept that social and cultural capital are useful concepts for making sense of occupational inequalities, class privilege and intergenerational social mobility.[8]

Finally, while the interviewers aimed to solicit the views and experiences of the respondents apropos the question of how social inequalities are reproduced or resisted in documentary film production, participants were encouraged to talk freely and the interviewers were careful not to give the impression that there was a right answer. Meetings were thus dialogical and guided by an open narrative approach (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), which allowed the researchers to sensitively investigate the filmmakers' thoughts about a range of interconnected topics. Interviews were digitally recorded and coded with the use of

NVivo software. The coding process combined deductive (guided by the researchers) and inductive (guided by the participants) passages in the transcriptions (Saldaña 2009). And though the analytical categories altered over the course of the data analysis, several key themes emerged from the data analysis that reinforce some of the ideas outlined in the literature review, viz: the social relations of documentary film production, the interviewees' own experiences of or observations about class inequalities, the precarious nature of funding and freelancing, internships and unpaid work, social mobility and meritocracy, training opportunities and career development, personal struggles and achievements, among others. Interestingly, most participants demonstrated a reflexive understanding of their own positionality apropos debates and initiatives concerning EDI and unfair work conditions in the UK's creative, cultural and media industries. However, the extent of their criticisms and enthusiasm for improving the industry's hitherto employment practices varied according to the participants' own social capital and whether they identified with or opposed the industry's entrepreneurial spirit and the idea of meritocracy.

Precarity and class inequalities

Class privilege is a significant advantage for people who decide to pursue a career in an industry that is characterised by notoriously difficult and precarious working conditions. Most workers are on short-term, intermittent contracts that do not provide the usual employee perks, such as remunerated annual leave, sick pay or a deferred pension. Recurrent themes among interviewees (for example, Susanne, Jasper and Anna) were a sense that the profession's systemic inequities create a 'prejudicial', 'insecure', 'depressing', 'cutthroat' and 'exploitative' work environment that requires filmmakers to make unreasonable 'sacrifices' just to persevere, let alone succeed. One interlocutor (Dana) likened the number of hours filmmakers typically work per week to disappearing 'down a bloody rabbit hole',

which leaves little time for anything else. Such observations accord with those made in cognate studies (for example, Banks 2017; Forkert 2013; Gill and Pratt 2008; Hesmondhalgh 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; McRobbie 2016; Ross 2009; Standing 2011), which also demonstrate that much cultural work tends to be project-based, highly casualised and without the abovementioned core benefits.

Naturally, most participants were critical of the shortage of available funding for documentary filmmaking (see Presence et al. 2020; BFI 2020 and 2021a; O'Sullivan 2017; Whickers 2020). Indeed, one respondent (Nick) described the profession as a complete 'lottery' in terms of who gets financial backing from public bodies and private investors. When discussing the issue of insufficient funding, several interviewees also considered why low pay is one of the main obstacles to documentary filmmaking. Career newcomers are particularly vulnerable to exploitative working conditions, one of which is the expectation that they must accept 'rubbish wages while working their way up in the industry' (Finn). This might explain why the median gross salaries for related media occupations are usually below or not much higher than the UK average. According to the 2021 ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) data, whilst Arts Officers, Producers and Directors (Standard Occupation Code (SOC) 3416) earned £37,372, Photographers, Audio-Visual and Broadcasting Equipment Operatators (SOC 3417) averaged just £24,684 per year. However, because ASHE is based on a 1% sample of jobs taken from HM Revenue and Customs' Pay As You Earn (PAYE) records, the survey fails to capture the earnings of the self-employed, which make up a large percentage of the sector's workforce and tend to have lower earnings, prompting Mark Banks (2017: 122-23) to note that such professionals 'are doing less well than is proposed by ASHE-based estimates'.

What is more, nearly all the interviewees reported that unpaid internships are still commonplace and a major hindrance to improving EDI within the profession. This is

especially problematic in the context of London, which remains the main centre for film production in the UK.

> People are expected to become unpaid interns in one of the most expensive places to live in the world. So, what does that mean? It means either you're incredibly confident and you're willing to get into huge debt, or you've got wealthy friends or parents who are going to support you while you spend six months, a year … however long it is, getting no money (Luke).

Another interviewee who manages his own independent production company was even more forthright about the sector's reliance on and misuse of unpaid interns:

> Independent production companies are taking people but not paying them, essentially giving them pocket money. They might not even pay them for transport to get to the office. They say: 'You should be honoured to have us helping you'. I just think that it's so exploitative (Leo).

Following on from this, most participants acknowledged that the sector's living and working conditions favour workers with independent financial means or those who are prepared to take on a burden of debt. In fact, many of the interviewees themselves admitted to subsidising their filmmaking through other sources of employment and personal funds. For instance, Susanne worked as a full-time solicitor and was a documentary director-cum-producer in her spare time, mainly at weekends or during periods of annual leave. Though her corporate job allowed her to finance her documentary filmmaking career, she eventually resigned and used her savings to create an independent film production company. Sam and

Finn worked as freelance directors of photography for various projects that allowed them to fund their documentaries. Emily made films with income that she earned working in advertising and by selling filmmaking equipment. Ben and his business partner taught and made corporate films to support their production company. Other interviewees took out bank loans or remortgaged their homes. Matthew financed his work using multiple credit cards, which caused him to incur massive debts because his films were unsuccessful. Similarly, Leo cautioned that self-financing is 'a risky business' and 'wouldn't recommend it to anyone'.

The interview data also demonstrates how limited public funding, and the consequent financial difficulties that entails, can exacerbate class inequalities in UK independent documentary production. Two contrasting examples illustrate this point. Freddie was privately educated and after studying for an undergraduate degree in the arts, his parents funded him to be taught filmmaking as a postgraduate student. Because his family were able to support him financially, he was also able to undertake various stints of unpaid work experience in London. In other words, Freddie had the necessary backing with which to focus entirely on his filmmaking career. And indeed, he made his first feature documentary film for the BBC just three years after graduating and has since become a successful filmmaker.

> I was very lucky. When I lived in London, I was able to live there for free … and it gave me the ability to pick and choose the kind of jobs that I wanted to do. I got into the industry because I went to the film school and then I did a lot of work (Freddie).

Alice, on the other hand, grew up in a big family of working-class immigrants who lived on a London council estate. She left school with no qualifications and became a cleaner. After becoming a single mum on a low income, Alice received welfare benefits for more than a decade. Then, in her mid-thirties, she decided to return to education to study film. Alice

described her experience of studying for a film degree as 'shocking'. Everyone on the film course but her were from comfortable middle-class backgrounds.

> It was a different world for me … very middle class. There were students [who] could afford to live in London because their parents were paying their rent. I was in a council house and getting benefits that kind of helped with my rent… It's amazing! I met people in their thirties whose parents were paying their rent for them. It was like whoa! It was a massive shock to me (Alice).

Throughout the interview, Alice made similar observations that emphasise the socio-economic difficulties and injustices working-class filmmakers are likely to encounter. Equally, she also provides a ray of hope insofar as she is a (albeit rare) example of someone who has since gone onto become an important representative for both working-class academics and filmmakers. Although precariously employed in various jobs (mainly teaching in higher education) after graduating and completing a doctorate, Alice has made several critical documentaries about political and social issues that were funded by small grants and which have been distributed via alternative channels, such as small festivals, seminars and independent bookshops.

Several other studies have usefully highlighted how material inequalities between cultural workers impact on the choices available to them while pursuing their careers. In a detailed study of television workers and actors, Friedman and Laurison (2020: 87-107) show how having access to economic capital (usually inherited or gifted by parents) afforded both material and psychological advantages (specially in their early careers), such as coping with the cost of living (particularly in London), having more time to focus on building their careers and being insulated from the usual risks associated with precarious employment.

Their field research also demonstrates that people who have the 'Bank of Mum and Dad' (ibid.: 90, 100) at their disposal 'tend to progress quickest and furthest', for example, starting with 'running' jobs, eventually moving to producing or a researcher position, then to series producer or director, and, ultimately, taking up a commissioning role.

Conversely, those from working-class backgrounds and without any financial patronage are less likely to be able to resist unreasonable working demands and risk being labelled 'difficult' if they rock the boat too much. And just as Lee (2018: 114-26) noted that a significant number of his participants had left television production when he reinterviewed them ten years after his original study, several of our own interviewees observed that filmmakers without economic support are often forced to abandon their hopes of pursuing this creative pathway for more secure and better remunerated occupations. Whilst Lee observed various reasons for the high levels of industry exodus (including a growing dissatisfaction with the relentless dumbing down of documentary content and the erosion of public service media values), interestingly, he reported several instances of emotional and psychological burnout due to the long hours work culture and the ephemeral nature of freelance work (ibid.: 118). And though he acknowledges that structural inequalities cannot fully account for the negative impact of workers' mental and physical well-being, equally, Lee maintains that class, race and gender were contributing factors for many of his interviewees (see also, Zoeller and Lee 2020).

Gatekeeping and networking

Another common issue that emerged across the interviews was the extent to which EDI in UK independent documentary production is further curtailed by organisational gatekeepers. Several filmmakers characterised the sector as a 'closed shop' (Finn), controlled by an influential group of workers who make the major decisions about funding and employment

opportunities. Furthermore, there were some suggestions that this 'self-selecting club of people' (Alex) belong to a 'small social stratum' (Leo) or a 'media class' (Sam). In noting how gatekeepers tend to come from relatively privileged backgrounds, Dana also observed 'that all these people in powerful positions' typically 'went to universities together' and are predisposed to socialising with like individuals. Another interviewee portrayed the gatekeepers in a comparable fashion:

> I think it's a very small circle of friends with similar backgrounds ... They're meeting in coffee bars and restaurants in London, and there is a whole social media around it. Quite often they are people who run larger independent production companies and they end up becoming commissioning editors at broadcasters like the BBC or Channel 4. And their friends and colleagues in the independent sector have a fast-track approach to getting commissions, basically, pick up the phone and speak to someone (Sam).

The theme of deep-seated class exclusions across the socio-economic relations of documentary film production were also repeated throughout the interviews. Some respondents insisted that the informality of social networks within the sector reproduces a middle-classness that is prevalent in filmmaking and unfairly discriminates against those who do not have the necessary social capital. This is doubly problematic given there are so few official hiring practices in the industry and job opportunities often depend on the extent to which one can invest resources in forms of 'network sociality' (Lee 2018; McRobbie 2016; Wittel 2001) that combine work and play (for example, taking people out for lunch, self-promotion on social media, leveraging family contacts, attending training events and conferences). To not do so risks being further marginalised, socially and professionally.

Hence 'the main thing about any part of the film industry' is that 'you keep meeting people all the time' and 'are always expanding your network ... it's the most important thing that you should do really' (Ben). Another interviewee put it thus:

> If you're not a part of a network, or you don't have easy access to a network, then it is extremely difficult, much harder to get into filmmaking … The most valuable thing that you can offer to someone is an easy entry to a network (Jack).

Predictably, several research participants affirmed that socially disadvantaged filmmakers were less likely to know people within the industry when starting out. Again, two very different experiences help to underline the problem. Ben was fortunate enough to be able to afford to study film production at the National Film and Television School where he met his film production company partner to-be. They started their independent production company soon after graduating and found that the contacts they made during those two years of studying to be invaluable in terms of them getting a foot in the door. Though she enjoyed a middle-class childhood and has been a highly successful filmmaker, Dana was not in a position to attend a film school due to her being a single mum and living in near poverty throughout her early adult years. Consequently, when she did begin to show an interest in making documentary films in her thirties, Dana found that she struggled to make the necessary professional contacts: 'I wasn't doing anything for a long time because I just didn't know anybody. I didn't have a group of peers from film school who could support each other'.

Previous studies similarly emphasise the crucial role played by informal networks in the creative labour market and the exclusionary nature of its networked economy. For example, Grugulis and Stoyanova (2012: 1314) maintain that social and cultural capital are

the main determining mechanisms in terms of employment opportunities within the UK film and television industry. Likewise, Friedman and Laurison (2020: 187) argue that embodied cultural capital ('widely valued tastes, categories of judgement and bodily self-representation') allows workers from privileged social backgrounds to gain considerable advantages in elite occupations, including jobs in the television sector. And Lee (2018: 138-41) also demonstrates how networking is an instrument of power that privileges those who already have high levels of social and cultural capital. In other words, this network sociality tends to favour those from middle- and upper-class backgrounds who have the 'right' education, personality and cultural attributes (or what Bourdieu refers to as forms of 'symbolic domination'). More specifically, most interviewees described natural confidence, soft personal skills, being a good communicator and having 'the right tone' as key qualities for 'getting on' in the television industry (see also, Nwonka 2015), all 'intangible assets' that are largely socially determined and help reproduce the predominantly middle-class class structures of the film industry. Lee thus concludes that this focus on cultural capital fosters employment practices that are often nepotistic, opaque and exclude individuals from poorer, working-class backgrounds.

Our interviewee data also suggests that network sociality involves filmmakers having to comply with middle-class norms and ideals. For example, some respondents stated that the filmmakers were expected to speak and dress in a certain way, to adapt their body language and cultural tastes, or demonstrate character traits such as erudition, gregariousness, ambition and resilience. However, some filmmakers struggled or refused to meet these expectations. Alice is from a solidly working-class background and opposes the idea that to get work she must be superficially friendly: 'Just give me the job, don't expect me to … go for a coffee with you or to be really nice to you, if I don't particularly like you'. Lily said that she felt deeply uncomfortable socialising and partying with many of her colleagues, which became a

fundamental drawback for her professional advancement: 'I don't like drinking with them, and that stopped my career'. Nick claimed that whereas working-class colleagues tend to be 'easy-going and honest', the difficulty with many of his middle-class associates is that they are less transparent and not as easy to read. Dylan referred explicitly to the profession's use of hegemonic 'bourgeois codes' as a means of embedding and reproducing class privileges in the film industry (albeit implicitly so as to avoid accusations of discrimination and elitism). He even used a Bourdieusian vocabulary to describe the aforementioned as a form of symbolic violence:

> The institutions where I work are unable to accommodate people who come from seriously lower social backgrounds. And it's reciprocal because working-class students can't accommodate to bourgeois codes. I constantly see this in film schools, which I find brutal and violent … especially if unprivileged people … do not behave as is expected of them. And it's the same in the workplace.

Concerns that documentary filmmakers must show themselves to be culturally and socially adept to those in positions of influence were also expressed by senior contemporaries, such as a former head of documentaries at a major UK television channel:

> When you're sitting across the table from a commissioning editor who is going to invest money in a television or film project, they're looking at you as an individual, they're looking to see whether they trust you, whether you can deliver, whether you know what it is you're trying to do and if this a good idea. But I'm convinced that it's not just whether it's a good idea or not. It's also a question of 'is the right person to be doing this'? And if you don't look right, or you don't sound right, that's a

disadvantage in the current system. Yes, exactly, how you look, how you talk, the accent you have, your experience, how much education you've had … All those things count … they're unconscious biases (Alex).

Questions of confidence, accessibility and social class were other recurring themes. Juliet commented that it was hardly surprising that people from 'ordinary backgrounds' found the industry 'completely alien' due to its 'middle-classness'. Having noted how many working-class people are not even able to imagine themselves in a filmmaking career, Fin questioned (rhetorically), 'How do we get kids from Rotherham, who don't know about the industry, working in the film profession? One's got talent, but that's not enough if it's not seen as a potential career by your teachers, parents or yourself.' Likewise, Thomas remarked how, 'Colleagues who have been privately educated are so confident in terms of how to approach people or network. But I was never taught that in school. I think there is a lack of confidence generally among working-class people'. Relatedly, just as Paul Willis (1977) observed how working-class 'lads' perceive school to be a middle-class institution, which is why they end up failing and getting working-class jobs, several respondents felt that widely held social attitudes about occupational stratification are partly to blame for self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy among many working-class people who aspire to be filmmakers. When starting out, Dana thought that filmmaking was 'something that's so remote, that it wasn't even a possibility'; others stated that, despite enjoying relatively successful careers, they still don't feel a deep sense of professional belonging or achievement.

The ups and downs of meritocracy

One final (even if minor) theme that emerged from the interviews was a belief that the democratisation of documentary film production is best served by the industry's meritocratic

nature and upward social mobility. A small number of research participants maintained that the film sector's EDI initiatives had improved considerably in recent years, making some of the abovementioned concerns about class and other structural inequalities a thing of the past. Indeed, they claimed that the number of working-class filmmakers had increased significantly and that documentarians from socially disadvantaged backgrounds can succeed in their careers if they are skilled and hardworking. For example, George argued that 'the film industry is more egalitarian than most other businesses' and that the sector's employment practices are 'healthier for filmmaking because individuals can find a way through the system according to their talent'. Others agreed that, although the sector could do more to improve its EDI performance and general working conditions, filmmakers who persevere, are committed and have good ideas will eventually get the professional recognition and openings they deserve.

> There are opportunities for people, but they have to be persistent, get into production companies or go and make their own films. That's what makes documentaries so democratic: you can go and get your own camera and film something, get access to something, and then you can turn it into television or good films … You have to be really passionate, and you have to sacrifice quite a lot, you know, your time and your energy to do it. But it's possible (Freddie).

Jasper claimed that, 'There is a kind of democratisation in documentaries where people get valued for the ideas and skills that they bring. And if somebody who is working class has good ideas, I think they would be embraced'. He also suggested that this 'democratisation' process had resulted in the emergence of a fair and inclusive working environment. The question of democratisation came up in another of the interviews, only this time it was

framed in the context of how technological innovations have supposedly made filmmaking more obtainable for increasing numbers of people who might not have considered it previously.

> People are breaking through, people can see role models, which is really good ... they know that people are trying to get into film who might not even have tried before. And it's more accessible because everyone can film something on an iPhone. If you have a really good idea or a story, you can make it happen (Emily).

Interestingly, those interviewees who believe that the industry is meritocratic also tend to be the ones who are among the most privileged within the sector based on their socio-economic backgrounds, educational opportunities, longstanding familial support and eventual professional status. Notwithstanding the occasional admission of guilt about how their good fortune may have gifted them an unfair advantage in terms of life opportunities, the respondents in question were more likely to downplay or justify their privileges. For example, some implied that they could use their positions of influence and social capital to help level the playing field, to mentor colleagues who talented but underprivileged, or standardise the profession's working conditions and pay. Although some are unquestionably well intentioned, as with previous studies concerning meritocracy, arguably, some of the interviewees' explanations can also be understood as discursive strategies, that are used to legitimise creeping individualism and careerism (Friedman and Laurison 2020), to validate existing privilege and entitlement (Taylor and O'Brien 2017), or to understate existing social and economic inequalities (Littler 2018). To put it another way, some of the respondents are guilty of what Michael Sandel has referred to as 'meritocratic hubris' (2021).

Conclusion

The research findings indicate that socially disadvantaged workers are more likely to encounter obstacles working in UK independent documentary production than their privileged counterparts. When asked about working conditions in the film sector, most research participants were unanimous in the view that the financial constraints and precarity of employment were key factors when considering barriers to improving EDI within the filmmaking sector. Moreover, their critical accounts suggested systemic discrimination against working-class workers. Some participants claimed that the industry's gatekeepers abuse their power, which results in the maldistribution of resources. The informality of professional relations and networks within the sector was another way in which, according to some interviewees, bourgeois codes and cultural tastes are hegemonic. Conversely, a small number of participants emphasised the importance of meritocracy and argued that talent, dedication and hard work would yield professional recognition and success. Those respondents were likely to be the most rewarded by the sector because they already hold influential positions and managerial roles.

Although the current study was undertaken before COVID, the pandemic's impact on the social class composition of cultural labour in the film sector is worth considering, albeit as a concluding observation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pandemic significantly impacted cultural sectors because their jobs were particularly at risk (Henry et al. 2021; Ali et al. 2022; Sargent 2021). Data from the Creative Radar survey data suggests that 17 per cent of film and television companies reduced the number of permanent employees and 79 per cent of companies reduced the number of freelancers that they usually collaborate with (Siepel et al. 2021: 8-10). COVID put additional financial pressure on film production companies that were already in a state of significant economic instability. For example, the health and safety measures taken during the pandemic increased the cost of film production, particularly in the independent film sector where expenses raised between 10-20 per cent (Alma Economics

2022: 5). Additionally, the pandemic disproportionately affected socially disadvantaged individuals in terms of further increasing precarity, financial insecurity and discriminatory work practices (Ali et al. 2022; Walmsey et al. 2022). Using the Labour Force Survey data, a major study of COVID's impact on the UK cultural industries concluded that underrepresented workers were more likely to have left their jobs in 2020 than colleagues from more privileged backgrounds (Walmsey et al. 2022: 41).

Though its long-term effects have yet to be fully understood, the pandemic presents an opportunity to reflect on social inequalities and ways to widen the access to and participation in the creative sectors for underrepresented individuals. The most urgent requisite for making the documentary profession more equitable and diverse is the improvement of working conditions, something that could be done by various means, including decasualisation of the workforce and increasing the amount of public funding available for films. The need for independent film funding growth could be met by changing the policy of Film Tax Relief distribution, which would increase the relief for lower-budget independent films (Alma Economics 2022: 44-45). Also, the financial support provided by various national and regional funding bodies (for example, the BFI) could target filmmakers from working-class backgrounds and offer accessible instruments to gain those funds. While the UK Government's Film and TV Production Restart Scheme and the Culture Recovery Funding protected many companies and prevented their closure during the pandemic, the money distribution revealed that policymakers know little about how cultural organisations operate or how to best target their financial resources to support filmmaking businesses (Walmsey et al. 2022: 63). The diversity policies that implement institutional initiatives such as ring-fenced funding schemes, quotas and targets, need to make better use of evidence-based research to inform decisions.

The pandemic has also demonstrated that networks and collaborations are crucial for supporting cultural industries in uncertain times (Ibid.). Documentarians from working-class backgrounds would benefit greatly from the creation of new inclusive spaces. For instance, some research participants advocated for various networking events and distribution openings, which would provide accessible routes into film careers. Mentorship programmes could also assist the careers of working-class filmmakers. Indeed, several of our interviewees described their experience of mentoring young filmmakers as positive initiatives. And there was some demand for rethinking how the film profession is conceived and accompanying suggestions that this could be addressed by creating a range of education and training opportunities. For example, inclusive education programmes aimed at finding trainees from socially disadvantaged backgrounds might help improve working-class people's confidence, alter their perceptions about filmmaking as a possible career, thereby encouraging them to try shooting a documentary film. Though only exploratory suggestions, the above-mentioned proposals would almost certainly help to create better organisational structures for ensuring a more diverse workforce in the audiovisual sector.

Finally, one might add to this list of (top-down) recommendations the importance of building (bottom-up) organised labour and mobilising collective solidarities with which to resist exploitative work conditions in the creative industries (Percival and Lee 2022; Percival and Hesmondhalgh 2014; Saundry et al. 2007). Doing so might also advance what Mark Banks rightly identifies as the cause of 'creative justice', that is to say, 'to raise consciousness of *in*justice and to help connect the creative economy – and the cultural work it contains – to some normative principles that might make work more progressive and equalitarian, as well as fairer and more just' (2017: 9). However, this need not necessarily involve a return to a highly centralised work regime based on the pre-entry closed shop (as was the case with the Association of Cinemograph, Television and Allied Technicians) and

national bargaining of yesteryear (see McKinlay 2009). Rather, such a strategy might explore how to build both unionised and grassroots workplace activism and political education, improving mechanisms for workers to better network across the film and television industries, and to (re)socialise what are otherwise highly individualised and isolated relations of production. In short, here lies another possible solution to some of the aforementioned inequalities and injustices.

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NOTES.

[1] The department changed its name in 2017 to include digital in the name to reflect its evolving remit. Before, it was the Department for Culture Media and Sport (although the DCMS acronym remains).
[2] The toolkit can be found here: https://socialmobilityworks.org/toolkit/creative-industries-measurement/
[3] For example, Alacovska 2022; Ashton 2015; Brook et al. 2018; Brook et al. 2020a; Brook et al. 2020b; Brook et al. 2023; Bull and Scharff 2017; Eikhof and Warhurst 2013; Friedman and Laurison 2020; Friedman et al. 2017b; Grugulis and Stoyanova 2012; Lee 2011; Lee 2018; Millward et al. 2017; McRobbie 2016; O'Brien et al. 2016; Oakley and O'Brien 2016; Oakley et al. 2017; Percival and Hesmondhalgh 2014; Randle et al. 2015.
[4] The article used data from the the BFI 'Television Industry Tracking Study', a longitudinal sudy of more than 450 creative workers in television carried out between1994-1998.
[5] There is an extensive body of sociological literature that explains and critically evaluates the emergence of the NS-SEC in 2001 following a lengthy review process undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Council

(ESRC). The most comprehensive accounts of the key debates (and the importance of John Goldthorpe's pioneering research concerning socio-economic classifications in the early 1970s) include Rose and Pevalin (2003) and Rose and O'Reilly (1997, 1998).

[6]https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/youngpeopleinthelabourmarketbysocioeconomicbackgrounduk/2014to2021 It should also be noted that recent research by the Social Mobility Commission defines an individual's social background according to the occupation their highest earning parent belongs to.

[7]https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/thenationalstatisticssocioeconomicclassificationnssecrebasedonsoc2010#analytic-classes-and-operational-categories

[8] Chapter 10 of Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison's *The Class Ceiling* (2020: 185-208) usefully outlines how their own research utilises NS-SEC through a Bourdieusian theoretical lens.