



Screen Industries
Growth Network

THE CURRENCY OF GRATITUDE

CARE IN THE TV INDUSTRY

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About SIGN

The Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) is a unique, business-facing initiative supporting the TV, film and games industries in Yorkshire and the Humber. SIGN aims to make this region the UK's centre for digital creativity, and a model of diverse and inclusive activity. In order to do this, SIGN connects companies, support agencies and universities through a programme of training, business development, research and evaluation.

SIGN is a £6.4M project, starting in Summer 2020, and funded by Research England, the University of York, and its partners. The University of York leads the initiative, working with Screen Yorkshire and eight other Yorkshire universities. An extensive network of collaboration ensures that SIGN is equipped to deliver maximum impact across the region.

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INTRODUCTION

“Anybody who’s doing a job like this is lucky to have it and they know it.”

(Ex-BBC, now freelance Executive Producer)

“I guess you always have to feel grateful that you’re a) being paid,
b) got a job.”

(Freelance Producer / Director)

Why would anyone feel grateful for a job? They might need a job to function. They might want a certain kind of job because it’s suited to their skills, training and preferences. But once in a job, if a person continues to do that job, to complete their tasks, should they feel grateful for their continued employment? And if they do feel grateful, what are the conditions that cause that gratitude and what are the results of that gratitude? Does gratitude contradict the idea of a fair and diverse industry, in its potential to entrench inequalities – after all, if a worker is grateful for their position, what will they withstand to keep their job?

This project aims to understand the potential for gratitude to entrench inequalities. The television production industry is characterised by its barriers to entry and freelance precarity, meaning admittance is restricted, while career trajectories are both multifaceted and poorly understood. This lack of understanding allows the actuality of the work to be obscured; workers might not know what is expected of them. This is where gratitude – for entry, for inclusion – can reside, and this project aims to illuminate the pitfalls of feeling gratitude for one’s job.

In addition, there is current interest in working conditions, catalysed and amplified by the changes to work brought by the Covid-19 lockdowns. In the re-calibration of work through flexible working, working from home, job-sharing and part-time work there is the potential for progressive change. If a worker feels too grateful for their job in the first place, how might they take advantage of these possibilities, let alone ask for them?

This project addresses gratitude using case studies of two television production companies understood reputationally to be places of good practice. Using the idea of gratitude as a starting point for workers and managers to discuss their work practices, interviews were undertaken to understand how gratitude operates throughout the levels of television work. It was found that workers are not only grateful for their jobs, but they are also grateful not to be abused while at work. The potential for abuse fuels a persistent context of “what if”. It is therefore incumbent on employers to maintain good practice, which they have scant incentive to do in a highly competitive marketplace where budgets from broadcasters have declined in real terms and continue to do so.

The feeling and currency of gratitude at work has great potential to be punitive but can be ameliorated by responsible employers. In the case of the television industry, it is up to broadcasters to understand that the conditions they impose through budgetary constraints have a very real effect on the people making their programmes.

RESEARCH SUMMARY AND CONTEXT

In considering care and gratitude, can recommendations for good practice be made?

The research reported here continues work that examines the limitations of the current equality, diversity and inequality (EDI)-led focus on care and intervenes by addressing instead the feeling of working in TV (Aust 2021; Aust 2020; Eikhof and York 2015; Malik and Nwonka 2021), in this case the occurrence of gratitude. It was funded by the Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) at the University of York, which was set up to locate and record best practice in the UK screen industries.

Without an address to the fundamental lived experience of working in TV, there can be scant progression towards parity that EDI policy aims for. The focus on gratitude illuminates barriers to care and EDI and identifies the ways in which inequalities are maintained. Understanding gratitude as a conceptual barrier to ameliorating punitive practices allows us to subsequently identify how gratitude can be eradicated and replaced by adequate practices of care.

I argue that limitations continue to exist for reasons yet not concluded, but are evidenced by the sheer number of schemes, initiatives, programmes etc that are in place to address them. Without eradicating these limitations, “good” practice – that which accounts for issues encompassed within the concern for care, expressed by EDI – cannot occur.

By addressing the feeling and lived experience of working in TV through a discussion of gratitude, this project finds that television workers adhere to working practices that are detrimental to them because their experiences are understood comparatively. That is to say, there is so much poor practice in the form of excessive working hours, discrimination, poor conditions and precarity that any working environment that is deemed as ‘better’ is accepted as “lucky”.

“...you’re supposed to feel grateful, whenever you are offered a job [...] maybe it’s working for another company, working with a certain presenter [...] to feel grateful that you are being paid. Even if you’re working 20 hours a day [and] your pay is going down [...] you’re supposed to be grateful that you’ve got that opportunity.”

(Freelance Director)

Considerations of care are very current in television industry discourse. It is obvious that care is central to good practice: to care about oneself and others is to care about the consequences of actions, which is to understand living as “selves in-relation” (Kittay 2011). In a highly atomised, individuated, freelance industry such as television production, however, how can an understanding that we exist in-relation to others be put into practice?

Care, and what it might mean in practice, has recently been foregrounded as industry attention has turned to issues of EDI and for the purpose of this project, care is asserted

as being practised through EDI concerns . Current debate, and the decades of lower profile activism preceding it, illustrates the failure of care practice in British television production. What, then, are the barriers to care?

In TV, care = EDI

The actuality of “caring practice” is ill-defined by the television industry itself. The catchall of EDI, with its multiple concerns around parity and adequacy of working conditions, is employed both by the industry and for the purposes of this report. The address to care in the context of EDI has a longer history than the contemporary debates. For example, in 1992 Women in Film and TV was established expressly to fight for gender equality (Ursell 2004). More recently, consideration of care has been expressed in investigations such as the BBC’s Respect At Work (BBC 2013), the Corporation’s related self-examination in the wake of the Savile Scandal (2016) and the ongoing, industry-wide monitoring of the gender pay gap (BBC 2017-). The difficulties of negotiating private caring responsibilities while working in TV have been highlighted by satellite bodies such as Raising Films (Dent 2017; Dent and Almenoar 2019) and thinktanks concerned with the wider creative industries (Bakhshi, Freeman and Higgs 2013; Carey, Crowley, Dudley, Sheldon and Giles 2017; O’Brien, Brook and Taylor 2018). Mental health of film and television workers has been shown to be in crisis (Wilkes, Carey and Florisson 2020), and deleterious working hours highlighted (Evans and Green 2017; SMTJ 2021). The specifics of diversity have been addressed by The Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity (Henry and Ryder 2021), the Film and TV Charity (FTVC) (Malik and Nwonka 2021) and Ofcom (2021). The major broadcasters all declare diversity and inclusion to be at the heart of their workplace cultures, as seen on their websites (Channel 4 2021b; BBC 2021; ITV 2021; Myers 2021).

Publicity of these problems has prompted recent work led by industry workers. This has included: an anti-bullying campaign led by the Producer Meriel Beale (Bowler 10 November 2020); the call for production / editorial pay parity, led by Production Managers Jamie Stratton and Josh Carpenter (Goldbart 14 July 2021); the Freelancer’s Charter from the cross-industry group the Coalition for Change was produced with the stated aim of ‘promoting equal opportunities for production operatives’ (2021, 1). Deaf and Disabled in TV and Viva la PD both worked with Bournemouth University to produce, respectively, the Disability by Design: Representation in TV (Van Raalte 2021) and State of Play (Wallis 2021) reports, the latter of which focused on management practices. The Share My Telly Job (SMTJ), Telly Mums Network and the University of Nottingham report, Locked Down and Locked Out, highlighted the specific experiences of mothers working in TV during the Covid-19 lockdown (Wreyford 2021). Raising Films addressed the broader barriers for parents and carers (October 2021). While the roots of this work are historical, it was all catalysed by online, collective activism after the lockdown induced television production collapse in March 2020.

In illuminating these varying issues, the work above and this project recognise the different and continuing limitations within the industry that mitigate caring practices, whether through the practices of making TV (budgets, working hours) or the demographic inequalities of television workers.

The additional, immediate relevance of an address to feeling in its attempt to understand conceptual barriers to progression can be seen as the industry gathers in online spaces, sharing stories that accumulate into a bank of qualitative data. Because these stories are so many there is no reason to doubt their validity. Care is taken to retain anonymity of the

posters sharing their experiences and not to name companies or individuals cited in the posts. Instagram / Twitter handles include (but are not limited to): @shitmenintvhavesaidtome, @britcrewstories, @sexismonsetuk, @unscriptedisbroken, @burntoutPM and @blackintv. In these stories of harassment, bullying and punitive overwork, the common line is recollections of potential replacement. People recall understanding, if not told explicitly, that they should feel grateful for their inclusion in the industry. Concurrently with this activism, and generated from within the industry, are digital tools developed to address poor practice: Television's long-hours culture is the focus of SMTJ's The Time Project, a time-tracking app designed to gather data on the punitive long-hours culture of TV production (supported by SIGN, Bectu, Sara Putt Associates and Directors UK (DUK)) (SMTJ 2021). The Call It app (supported by FTVC, Sara Putt Associates and DUK) aims to collate incidences of sexual harassment on set, looking to report back to senior managers about the reality of what is happening on their productions (Kale 30 September 2021). The industry is collectivising, reporting and the next stage is to hold employers to account, thereby addressing the historic lack of accountability that EDI work points to.

The role of gratitude is, therefore, important to understand. It is a driving emotional currency within these practices and a conceptual demand on workers – particularly those marginalised by the industry – who are told to be grateful for admittance to the sector. The discussion of gratitude is found here to illuminate barriers to care and EDI and identifies the ways in which inequalities are maintained. Understanding gratitude as a conceptual barrier to ameliorating punitive practices allows us to subsequently identify how gratitude can be eradicated and replaced by adequate practices of care.

METHODOLOGY

This research involved two case studies of small, well established television production companies. The companies were chosen because they were understood reputationally as "good places to work".

This itself is difficult to define, so additional criteria were used:

- They had anecdotal reputations as good places to work.
- They made declarative statements regarding caring practices on their websites, specifically using words such as "happy", "together" or citing specific EDI employee programmes designed to advance marginalised workers in their careers. These declarative statements were considered recognitional and intentional, as well as being active indications of care practices.
- They had women prominent in their management teams and would therefore be more likely to be involved in progressive practices such as job-sharing, part-time work owing to the likelihood of having to make accommodations around childcare (which remains highly gendered (Dent 2020)).
- They were both companies with returning formats (long-running, formatted series that are cheaper and less risky to produce) that ensured a steady income stream, lessening the inherent precarity of production companies which function on a commission-by-commission basis.

The companies were approached directly, and after agreement was met introductions to the study and an invitation to individuals to take part were disseminated by managing directors. Interviewees then self-selected based on the invitation or were found after colleagues who had taken part subsequently contacted them. People in a variety of jobs, from editorial, production management and crew were deliberately selected to bring a variety of views across creative, management and location areas of the businesses. A variety of grades were interviewed, from company founders to production assistants. Staff, freelancers, and long-term returning freelancers (those who considered the companies their 'homes') were interviewed.

At the first production company, nine interviews took place and at the second, eight interviews took place. To contextualise the findings, an additional eleven interviews were conducted with industry workers unconnected with the case study companies, but again across the spectrum of grades. These interviewees were either invited through my personal network or contacted me after hearing about the project. All interviews were undertaken on the promise of anonymity. They were analysed using close reading and the quotes used in this report are exemplary of themes that have emerged by accumulation. Quotes used are not verbatim as repetition and identifying slang or colloquialisms have been deleted, but they retain the meaning intended by the speaker.

Interviews focused on the lived experiences of subjects; on that basis, examinations of HR policies or contracts were not made. In this way, there is a deliberate attempt to articulate the feeling of being in TV, as opposed to the working practices regulated by HR, which are

always peculiar to specific companies because there is no industry-wide regulation.

Interviewees, although understanding the focus of the study as being on how gratitude affected their working lives, had largely not considered it as a driver for their experiences. However, once they started considering their working lives through the prism of gratitude, patterns began appearing around value and clarity. Value in this context refers to monetary value in terms of wages and what people valued in their work. Clarity occurred when people understood the companies as 'better' and the reasons why that could be. These reasons are laid out below.

FINDINGS

1. Gratitude for working conditions is comparative and workers are driven by potential encounters with abuse

The methodology for this study deliberately sought case study production companies that had good reputations as places of work, a rationale adhering to SIGN's aim of identifying best practice in the screen industries. What is revealed in this case is that television workers make continual comparative judgements as to the comfort of their workplace based on the idea of how bad it might be. As workers move from project to project, experiencing varying levels of rates, hours, appreciation, and feedback, they become grateful for what should be a basic standard of work: regular hours, rates that meet expectations and communication with their senior team members. Often, they are grateful for not being abused. This suggests a base level of employment practice that is not high enough and reiterates the argument of an historic failure of EDI agendas that has not affected adequate change.

An example of this is below, when the interviewee drew a comparison of being bullied during a previous project, saying:

"I'm not a silent person [but I'd] be silent for an hour. And then I'd want to say stuff again, because this was stuff that I'd shot. [...] And then there were also decisions being made, which I didn't agree with. So then I'd start to speak again. And then the putting down would start again. And so then I would wait until I knew that I was going to start crying. And then I would go into the toilet and stop myself crying and then come back in. [...] he never even looked at me. None of this stuff was directed at me when he was shouting, it was directed at the screen."

(Freelance Producer / Director)

This bullying was contrasted with the levels of communication received at a case study company, where she said:

"...very soon after I started, when I'd been there long enough to have met everybody and had done some work [the MD] took me aside and just said to me to, 'tell me a bit about yourself. [...] tell me what you're doing, I've heard that, you know, that you're getting on really well.' And that, [...] was just like, oh my god, I couldn't believe that the head of the company had just sat me down and showed such interest in me. And as far as I can see, he does it with everybody. [...] it's about communication between the different ranks, so that [everyone is] made to feel like they are this amazing integral part of the operation [...] it's this cross communication up and down the hierarchy where everybody is recognised and acknowledged and praised."

(Freelance Producer / Director)

The emphases are on communication and integration into the company and the collapsing of hierarchy as validating – elements missing from other working experiences. Further comparisons highlight that television workers are happiest in their jobs when they feel integrated, through the act of communication, into the company they are working for:

“You know that you’ve got that support from people up the food chain, [they] want you to do well and want the programme to do well, but at the same time don’t want it to be at your own expense. They don’t want to see you being on the floor crying and emotional wreck. [...] they’re very fair. [The founders are] very approachable. They’re very fair, they listen.”

(Freelance Series Producer)

“Everybody talks to everybody... [They] see themselves as humans first and TV makers afterwards but there’s an awful lot of people that I’ve worked with that don’t see round that way.”

(Freelance crew)

The long hours culture of television is also addressed as a point of difference, with an interviewee making the link between the unusual (for TV) way people left the office and linking it to the management culture:

“[On] my first day at X, everybody packed up and left at, you know, half past five, six o’clock and like, wow, work life balance. [...] you know, everybody’s got a life that that works there. There are a lot of people who have families, there’s lots of people who have young children, they can’t be working till eight or nine o’clock every night. And if you are, then you get asked why, someone will come over and say ‘why are you still here? Is this something we can help you with?’”

(Freelance Production Coordinator)

There is, then, a real appreciation – a gratitude – for the ways in which these companies do NOT operate, itself suggestive of the levels of poor practice in the television industry.

Recommendation 1: Standardise and regulate working hours and rates, for example through the use of industry rates cards.

2. The familial has consequences

“X is absolutely a family [...] everybody talks about it as a family”

(Freelance Producer / Director)

“...it feels like a family. And I’d say that in a nice way. And I say I mean a family is what a family is like you have a family. [...] It’s complicated. It’s complex. You have all these different characters. But I think that if someone comes into that family who doesn’t look or live their life in a way that people can immediately understand, they’re probably not going to get by, which is a real shame, because that’s fucking bullshit.”

(Freelance Assistant Producer)

Many of the interviewees in this project described the case study companies as being like a family. This spoke to the longevity of many freelancers, who returned to work for the companies year after year, itself indicative of a working practice that employees enjoyed. What longevity also presents, however, in the precarity context of the freelance system, is a measure of assimilation which is in turn preventative of diversity. For example, the practice of recruiting from a small pool of people was highlighted when an interviewee commented on a recruitment method for junior staff, saying “someone will turn up and we’ll be like,

Who's this girl? It's someone's goddaughter always ." (Freelance Producer / Director).

The nepotism at play here is a practice preventative of diversity. Assimilation is chronically damaging, as expressed by another interviewee (not anybody's goddaughter) when she said, "I've spent half of my life in telly worrying about what people think of me and the industry feeds that."

(Freelance Producer / Director).

The fact of nepotism and the current of assimilation is acknowledged. Meanwhile, the company remains considered as "good", which appears contradictory. One of the MDs explained:

"...we don't hire anybody that you wouldn't want to spend time with. And that as a policy has served us really, really remarkably well. I mean, the best thing about our company and the success we've had is that we have accumulated a really great group of people. [...] I think we've always, always tried to hire the best people available to us, and to treat them properly."

(Founder and Managing Director)

Indeed, the group of people interviewed about this company all praised it in different ways, saying that "they allow holidays in the middle of a contract – unheard of!" (Freelance Producer / Director); "I feel comfortable, and I don't feel worry, or stress very often [...] that is something I really value." (Freelance Producer / Director) and that they "don't do long hours, do pay well", (Freelance Producer / Director). These are highly prized practices in an industry that has no regulatory incentive to allow holidays, to limit hours work or to maintain a high level of wages. It can be viewed as a balance; holidays, fair working hours and pay "cancel out" the nepotism and assimilative demands.

The question then becomes whether if among this good practice, should there be an additional responsibility borne by production companies to address EDI through recruitment? An MD went on to say:

"Now, if the industry really wanted to solve this problem, it needs to completely readdress the way that we bring people in in the first place, and pay people properly and give them some sort of security. And if you did that, within five or six years, you'd certainly be having a much more diverse good cross-section of people who were properly available and qualified to do the jobs. And [...in...] 10 years, you'd have made a huge dent in it and 15 years you would've sorted it. [...] I find it really depressing that the industry at its most senior levels [which should] have some people with a bit more wisdom, can't actually see, apparently can't address what seems to be seen not that difficult a problem if you really intended to solve it.

Interviewer: What would you do?

I'd restructure, so that we can give people programme budgets that enable them [and make it a] condition of commissioning that you take people on and you give them continuity of employment and mentoring, and all those things. But we're in a situation where our programme budgets, if we are lucky, cover the things you absolutely have to do. There's no 3% for training, or 5%, for tiding people over, they get paid on the first day in production, and they stop being paid [at the end of filming]. I think if the head of ITV and head of Channel Four, and the head of the BBC and head of etc, if they all got together and said, 'How are we going to solve this?', actually you would have solved it by four o'clock."

(Founder and Managing Director)

What this Managing Director is pointing to is the potential for smaller production companies to recruit, train and retain junior staff, thereby attending to the failure to address diversity and easing the burden of precarity. This, as is said, needs to come from additional budgetary lines in commissioning tariffs. In this finding, a consideration of gratitude also points out the structural underpinnings of the discriminatory practice. Managers understand that recruitment practices are preventative of diversity and that retention of diverse staff because of a failure to pay properly and train staff is a huge problem.

Recommendation 2: A budgetary facility at point of commissioning for independent production companies to recruit, train and retain staff at junior levels.

3. Care is good practice

The ways in which employers can make their workers feel happy in their jobs and thereby evade the requirement for gratitude are: that employees are paid reasonable rates, are not made to work punitive hours and are not abused. These are not unreasonable conditions, yet they feel unusual because the base level of practice is so low. 'Good' practice, currently, can be qualified as 'as good as it can be'. What, then, can employers do to improve practice within the acknowledged budgetary constraints? Unfortunately, it seems impossible to withstand the time pressures placed upon production companies by broadcasters, who often truncate lead times by being indecisive:

"...the pressure from broadcasters, who make their mind up too late. [...] then they want it too soon, and then not paying enough for it. And are all nervous about what their boss might think of the finished product. And so often changing things at the last minute, I am sure we put people under pressure that I don't feel comfortable about."

(Founder and Managing Director)

This suggests the commissioning process does not allow for good practice because of its rapidity and the pressures are passed on to freelancers. This is mitigated at a production company level:

"...we have very clear policies around how we check in with people, whistleblowing policies, and how we manage, what we deem to be an acceptable working day. I think the policies that we have in place and the working practices are good, but they're not infallible. But I do think we've got a real culture of openness, so that if there is ever a complaint, and we really encourage teams as well to look out for one another."

(Founder and Managing Director)

This process of mitigation is reiterated by another worker, who makes the connection between care, capability and experience, and the pressure on production companies to make promises to broadcasters they subsequently cannot keep without sacrificing good practice:

"They don't leave you to sink or swim. [...] it's about care. And also understanding what making the programme involves so they don't make unreasonable demands. Because I think they know what they're doing. Whereas in other places I have worked, perhaps they have over-promised to the broadcasters"

(Freelance Production Coordinator)

Good practice – care – is found to be incumbent on knowledge: both of what production entails and the subsequent adequate organisation of it, and what can be reasonably expected of staff working on any production. In a further address to good practice as that of communication and knowledge:

“...we accept that often people, they’re grateful for their job in the first place. And so therefore, [they are] not necessarily the best ones to speak up, we are always encouraging their colleagues to be looking out for them and to speak up on one another’s behalf.”

(Founder and Managing Director)

This research finding acknowledges the pressures placed upon production companies by the commissioning process and the efforts made to institute a practice of care that places communication, knowledge and trust as central to what constitutes ‘good’. It finds that employers can only instigate good practice within their immediate setting because precarity underscores every stage of the independent television production workflow.

Recommendation 3: Increased lead times from commissioners to avoid excessive and unnecessary pressures caused by a lack of time placed on production companies.

CONCLUSION

As per SIGN's stated aim, this research was conducted as part of its mission to locate best practice in the television industry. An address to gratitude catalyses comparative discussions that reveal a permanent state of precarity and the possibility of abuse as workers move project-to-project. They are persistently aware of the possibilities of worse working conditions, and that the quality of feeling "good" at work settings extends beyond base-level pay and hours concerns. In other words, there is more to best practice than mere inclusion.

A discussion of gratitude also illuminates an awareness of that which is relatively unspoken in EDI work on how to improve the industry: the lack of budgetary allowances from the broadcasters to the production companies to activate practices of care, and the frustration felt by production companies that they are being placed under pressure to solve problems which the broadcasters could, if they were motivated to do so, resolve themselves.

This disconnect between the broadcasters and production companies is preventative of understanding the production ecology as made up of actors who are 'selves in-relation'. This is beneficial to the broadcasters because they can claim no knowledge of the pressures their prevarication places upon the productions they commission. The aspects of good practice discussed here – communication and knowledge - are aspects of care practice that mitigate this disconnect. As the industry evolves into somewhere that integrates caring practices as standard, broadcasters need to take responsibility for good ethical practice across their supply chains by ensuring lines of communication that maintain knowledge of on-the-ground working practices.

These case studies illuminate the ways in which care can be activated despite the pressures of restricted budgets and subsequent truncated schedules, but it argues that the pressures should be lessened with additional money for productions to function with a practice that eliminates the constant possibility of "worse".

The research suggests the following should be included in the development of a regulated duty of care for workers in TV:

1. Standardised and regulated working hours and rates.
2. A budgetary allowance for the recruitment, development, and retention of new entrants.
3. Lead times for commissions to be increased and regulated to prevent punitive working hours being passed on to workers.

Television production is a communication industry. Employers and broadcasters can start to improve practice across the industry – not just in pockets of it – by working to understand the lived experiences of their employees through a practice of feedback and regular communication. Then, the endemic poor practices of bullying, long-hours and pay inequalities, accepted because of gratitude for inclusion, can start to be eradicated.

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