sign_ Screen Industries Growth Network

YORKSHIRE'S FILM FESTIVAL PROGRAMMERS

Working conditions, skills, and the relationship to the region's screen industries

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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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1. INTRODUCTION

The project aim was to uncover the experiences of Yorkshire's film festival programmers, examining the barriers and challenges they face to entering and maintaining a career in the sector, and the skills and training required to nurture the next generation of programmers. The project outputs are designed to impact industry, festival, and academic understanding of the cultural, industrial, and economic importance of the role of the programmer to Yorkshire's wider filmmaking community and screen industries.

Project objectives:

- To interview former and current programmers at Sheffield DocFest, Aesthetica Short Film Festival, and Leeds International Film Festival.
- To produce an impact narrative documentary for dissemination at festivals and colleges/universities.
- To publish a project report to advance understanding of the skills required to work as a film festival programmer and the barriers facing such workers.
- To publish two academic journal articles that explore the role of the programmer as a cultural and industrial intermediary that is instrumental to the wider growth of Yorkshire's filmmakers and screen industries.

The project commenced in March 2022. Recruitment of interview participants was carried out in the spring and early summer of 2022, parallel to the recruitment of a research assistant (RA). Recruitment of the RA was delayed due to internal Human Resources processes that had to be followed. The research assistant was hired on a six-month fixed-term contract at 0.2 FTE and was recruited to assist in filming and editing the video interviews. Throughout the project, there has been continued UCU industrial action, which has further disrupted the project timeline. As such, the project has fallen behind the anticipated schedule.

Recording of interviews commenced in the late spring and early summer of 2022 and continued through to early 2023. Editing and transcription work was carried out in 2023. Twelve interviews were recorded with present and former programmers from Sheffield DocFest, Aesthetica Short Film Festival, and Leeds International Film Festival. In addition, programmers were interviewed who worked at festivals across the UK and internationally, including at the London Film Festival, the Edinburgh Film Festival, the Sundance Film Festival, and the Tribeca Film Festival. Of the twelve interviews, six were recorded on camera and a further six were audio recordings only. Three participants fully withdrew from the project following the recording of their interview. The filmed interviews have been packaged into a series of short documentary videos titled *Experiences of Film Festival Programmers*.

Each interview was between 60 to 70 minutes in length. The recordings were subsequently transcribed by a casual researcher hired for the project. The interviews were semi-structured, with interviewees encouraged to tell their own story about how they became a programmer, how they have progressed

in the role, and their experiences of work. The interviews were broken down into five core themes: 1) routes into programming and barriers; 2) identity and defining a programmer; 3) skills and training needs; 4) precarity; 5) anticipating the future. The transcripts were thematically analysed according to these themes. Transcript analysis was used as the basis for the editing of the documentary videos and for the written outputs.

2. FINDINGS

2.1 Emergent findings

The analysis and post-production stage has revealed the following emergent findings:

Routes into programming and barriers

Most of the interview participants were unaware of programming as a job prior to taking up the role. Initial entry into the role was often through informal word-of-mouth conversations or through volunteering opportunities at festivals. Interview participants suggested that there is a lack of transparency about the availability of programming jobs and a lack of formal hiring procedures. Participants also acknowledged that a key barrier to entry was the need for economic and social capital to support the precarious lifestyle that is associated with programming, particularly entry-level programming.

Identity and defining a programmer

Programming is a hierarchical role, starting with pre-selectors and assistant programmers, to associate programmers and heads of programming, through to festival directors. Those interviewed have worked across the full spectrum of roles and provided detailed accounts of the day-to-day working life of a programmer. However, the participants hesitated in defining the title of the role, with all of them often blurring the line between programming and curating. There was a general, if at times hesitant consensus, that programmers are gatekeepers, but opinion differed as to whether this was positive or negative. Those who advocated that it was positive suggested that being a gatekeeper allowed programmers to empower new voices and champion marginalised or overlooked communities, and potentially transform the life of a filmmaker by putting their film into contact with influential producers and distributors. Those who viewed gatekeeping as negative suggested that programmers could reinforce existing barriers and structural inequalities, whilst also working as part of an exploitative festival business model that extracted fees from independent filmmakers who were themselves in a precarious situation.

Film festival programming is a varied role. Many of the participants suggested that it remained a romanticised role and misunderstood. In discussing responsibilities, the participants outlined how film festival programming involved not only watching, discussing, rating, and writing about films, but also sourcing films from archives and distributors, developing contacts and tracing the development of films in the trade press in order to secure them for premiere status, developing cultural networks, marketing, event management, potentially line management and budget management, research and problem solving, arranging filmmaker introductions, and hosting Q&As. Some programmers even undertake informal filmmaker mentoring to help steer the development of a film so that it might appeal to a particular festival programme.

Skills and training needs

Programming is a highly specialised role, requiring a range of skills, experience and knowledge. Programmers must have an in-depth knowledge of film history, and a passion for cinema; they need excellent administrative skills; they must

have an understanding of distribution and exhibition; they have to be able to communicate with distributors, producers, filmmakers, audiences, and the wider festival team; and they have to be able to write about the films they watch to those varied stakeholders. Most of the interview participants noted that they have never received formalised training, however, instead learning "on the job". Most had been to university, with a number having completed education through to doctoral level. The most relevant degrees studied were in film, media, English, or cultural studies, and some had undertaken postgraduate courses in film distribution and exhibition. Some of the programmers had developed their skills through staging their own festivals or screening events. However, it was generally acknowledged that there is still a lack of formal training available for freelance programmers or those wanting to become programmers. Training that is offered by organisation like the British Film Institute (BFI) or Independent Cinema Office (ICO) often focused more on cinema programmers rather than film festival programmers, with the interviewees emphasising that the two roles and working environments are very different.

Precarity and working conditions

Most programmers are freelance and defined legally as self-employed, rather than as workers or employees of a festival. They work short, fixed term, casualised roles for a set fee. Many programmers often do not have a formalised contract, instead relying on verbal agreements. The short-term nature of the work is primarily because festivals occur briefly once a year, with programming work only required during the run-up to a festival. Interview participants said they were often required to negotiate their own pay. However, there is a lack of transparency about pay across the profession, with programmers unaware of what other programmers are being paid, potentially leading to people undervaluing their labour value. Most of the participants agreed that they were precarious workers, though with some acknowledging that this was a lifestyle they had chosen in order to obtain a sense of freedom over their working lives. All of the participants reported that programmers worked extreme hours, with work often seeping into personal lives, blurring the boundary between work and leisure. The number of hours worked was not always fully remunerated. Some of the participants described conditions of a festival "crunch culture", in which excessive working hours were condensed into a few days or weeks before a festival programme had to be complete. The impact of the short-term nature of the work, and the lack of guarantee of future work, has impacted on the well-being of some of the participants. It was suggested that the precarious lifestyle of programming prohibits a more diverse and representative working pool, with a need for a secure, wealthy background in order to survive in the role.

Anticipating the future

Most of the participants indicated that there is a need for greater collaboration between festivals, with the potential to pool labour resources between festivals in a given region, thereby reducing the precarious working conditions faced by freelance programmers. There were also suggestions for the need to increase training opportunities that are open to all, as well as training for freelance programmers and permanent festival administrators on freelance pay and contracts. Some of the participants suggested that there was also need for greater collaboration between universities and festivals to deliver training, development, and support. Participants also indicated a need to break down barriers to entry into programming by creating a more inclusive festival environment and by promoting and making visible the role of the programmer. Some of the participants indicated a need for greater support communities and

networking opportunities for all freelance programmers so as to empower them as a working group. There was also an indication that programmers would benefit from greater unionisation, whether through closer links with unions like BECTU, or a new workers' association, which could allow for national collective bargaining agreements. An exemplar of good practice was the agreement between BECTU and the Edinburgh International Film Festival covering freelance, casual, voluntary, and short-term workers.

2.2 Dissemination

A package of documentary films totalling 60 minutes and titled *Experiences of Film Festival Programmers* has been produced with the aim of making them available open access online as an educational resource. Consent has been given by the interview participants.

Work on written journal outputs is underway. An extended project report of 50,000 words has been drafted, with the intention of publishing this open access. Two academic journal articles will be written and published.

Internal impact funding is being sought from Sheffield Hallam University to aid the dissemination stage of the research project. Impact funding will be used to disseminate the research at festivals and appropriate academic conferences. Conferences to be considered include the inaugural conference of The Cinematic Precarity Research Network in December 2023, the annual BAFTSS conference in April 2024 at the University of Sussex, and the 'Media Industries' conference at King's College London in April 2024.

3. CONCLUSION

The conditions and experiences reported by the interview participants were not isolated to one festival, but symptomatic of the wider festival circuit in the UK and internationally. Participants were encouraged to tell their story about how they became a programmer and, importantly, their experiences of programming, the importance of the role to film festivals and the wider film and screen industries, and the future needs of film festival programmers. Film festival programming is a highly specialised, yet potentially misunderstood and undervalued role. Programmers are vital to the quality and success of a festival; they are integral to a festival's ability to connect with regional audiences and communities; they are of importance in boosting the local economy through the programme they co-create; and they are significant to regional screen industries and filmmakers, acting as a mediating force to national and international commissioners, executives and distributors, thereby potentially transforming filmmaking careers. Film festival programmers are a fundamental ingredient to the film festival and screen industry ecology by tracing, selecting, marketing, and curating films, which ultimately can make them a financial success. But programmers are also a vital ingredient in enhancing the cultural well-being of a region, benefiting, educating, entertaining, and empowering local communities, particularly when programmers are given the power to curate inclusive, representative, and democratic festival programmes.

This project to date has succeeded in meeting its core objectives: film festival programmers that have worked at Yorkshire's biggest festivals have been interviewed, as well as programmers from beyond the region, allowing a narrative to emerge about the conditions, experiences, and challenges they face; a sixty-minute package of films has been produced, edited into a series of mini-documentaries to emphasise the individual narratives of film festival programmers; and dissemination work is underway to ensure the wider impact of the research, to include an extended project report, journal articles, conference papers, and screenings. The project has also indicated the scope for further research on the topic of film festival programmers and the potential for wider national impact, particularly through possible collaboration with organisations like the BFI, ICO, This Way Up, and film festivals.

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