Commissioning and Independent Television Production:
Power, Risk, and Creativity

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Project development—the initial stage of television production—establishes the aesthetic and narrative parameters for the final on-screen representations. This article explores this important yet largely under-researched phase of production by investigating the structures and processes of project development in the British television industry with a focus on the conditions for the independent production sector in a broadcaster–publisher system. Its arguments are based on findings of an ethnographic production study in independent production companies in the United Kingdom, which are contextualized by statistical industry data and correlated to published research undertaken across the last two decades to assess changes and continuities over time. The article analyses the cultural and economic power relations between independent producers and commissioning editors and how they affect development practices. It evaluates the implications for creative autonomy and diversity, and shows how the existence of preferred suppliers and the demand-led nature of commissioning constrain producer creativity, leading to fewer opportunities for independent producers and a more homogenous television output.

Keywords: media production research, television, independent production, project development/commissioning, culture commerce, creative autonomy

Most of us have a rough idea how television programs are made. Making-of programs, backstage documentaries, and interviews with creatives in front and behind the camera offer audiences glimpses of how the content they see has been created. However, as Caldwell (2008) illustrates pointedly in his study of the U.S. television and film industry, these are carefully manicured self-representations by media organizations that support their brand identity and take care to present a positive image. Beyond such sanctioned communication, few accounts are made public about how program ideas come into being and why they take their particular forms. We may encounter individual "war stories" about how challenging it was to get a project off the ground—ultimately, reaffirming myths of perseverance and creative merit—or hear of "creative differences" as the vague reason for changes in the staffing of key creative roles, but most parts of the processes and decisions involved in the development from idea to production are opaque and

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secretive, not least owed to the intense creative and economic competition of the industry.[1] We can observe and study the resulting representations on screen, but we will not learn what ideas did not get made and why. Ultimately, program development in film and television[2] is a story of failures and retries, which—as so often in life—are rarely discussed openly. Yet, this initial phase of television and film production determines the content and the form of the resulting productions. It is marked by creative restrictions, negotiations, and adjustments that are determined by the complex interplay of diverse objectives. This raises the question of where the power of creative decision making lies and what shapes these decisions. What kind of content is selected or rejected, and for what reasons?

Studying this stage of production can help us identify structural challenges and their implications for content developers and understand better why certain content does or does not reach our screens. Critical research of such nature tends to encounter specific methodological challenges (see Lee & Zoellner, 2019) not least because of the secretive and intangible nature of television production in general and project development in particular. It is further hindered by the skeptical attitude among media practitioners toward production research, which increases challenges for researchers in gaining access to development processes and negotiations. Existing academic research on development and commissioning is sparse, and the majority of production studies tends to focus on subsequent production and distribution processes. Most literature dedicated to idea and project development comprises "how-to" handbooks for media practitioners rather than critical investigations of this process. This article draws attention to the importance of this production stage that sets the parameters for production decisions and on-screen representations. It explores the systemic features of the commissioning culture in British television and their creative constraints with a focus on the perspective of independent production companies, which pitch their projects to broadcasters, networks, studios, and digital platforms to obtain funding that will enable them to put their idea on screen. Linking structural characteristics of the industry to everyday experiences of production, I investigate the relationship between independent producers[3] and the commissioning editors at media organizations that fund and distribute television programs. Based on ethnographic production research and macro-level industry data, I discuss the cultural and economic power relations between producers and commissioners and the resulting practices in television development. Specifically, I show how the existence of preferred suppliers and the demand-led nature of commissioning constrain producer creativity and result in fewer opportunities for independent producers and a more homogenous television output.

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[1] On an individual level, nondisclosure clauses in contracts and fear of negative consequences (e.g., concerning employment) further command restraint among production staff to share their experiences of production.

[2] By *project development* I refer here to the phase in TV and film production between conception of an idea and securing a production by confirming funding in the form of binding production contracts. Further development may occur after this point, but this article is concerned with the part of this process when production is still an uncertainty.

[3] My use of the term *producer* in this article is inclusive, referring to the main creative personnel in production companies who are involved in program development. This may include writers, directors, and executive producers, as well as researchers and on-screen talent, for example.

Understanding Television Production

This article contributes to a growing body of work that researches media production processes and structures. Historically, less attention has been paid to how media are produced compared with what media texts say and how they are used by audiences. Understanding the institutions behind media production, the people working in media, and the practices and structures they are working within helps us understand why media representations take their particular forms and what determines the choice of media content offered to audiences. Research studying the production of television mainly originated in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Rooted in sociology and drawing on ethnographic methods, early studies were interested in the relationship of structure and agency in a capitalist system and the implications for the resulting text. Most attention was paid to the production of news and how it shapes the representation of reality (e.g., Gans, 1979; Schlesinger, 1978). The investigation of other television genres focused initially on the production of individual factual programs or series (e.g., Dornfeld, 1998; Elliott, 1972; Silverstone, 1985) and later expanded to the investigation of specific professional roles, including program producers, across different genres (e.g., Gitlin, 1983; Tunstall, 1993).

Over the last two decades, academic interest in media industries and cultural production has sharply increased, leading to a diversification of production research across a variety of subject matters (including different industries, genres, and occupations), methods, and theoretical approaches, visible, for example, in collections such as Mayer, Banks, and Conor (2015), Paterson, Lee, Saha, and Zoellner (2016a), and Deuze and Prenger (2019).[4] This renewed scholarly attention was prompted, first, by the expansion and evolution of the media industries, including television, which has been facilitated by increased investment and supported by technological developments. Second, researchers raised questions about how political economic shifts rooted in neoliberal ideology have affected the media industries. Far from being the only influence, neoliberal thinking is nevertheless an important driver of recent changes in the media industries. Its promotion of market principle and individual responsibility and the rejection of state intervention are the rationales behind the shifts in media policy that enabled marketization, privatization, and deregulation of cultural industries and services (see Hesmondhalgh, 2019).[5] In the case of the British television industry, these developments led to the multiplication of commercial television channels and platforms, the consolidation of the independent production sector, and increased competition for funding and audiences. These industrial changes intensified existing concerns over the influence of commercialization and commodification on television production and representation. This article investigates such concerns by exploring two prevalent themes of media production analysis: the relationship between culture and commerce in production practice and the reality of independent production.

Concerns over the impact of commercial, industrialized mass media production on the nature of media texts date back a century to the Frankfurt School's critique of the *culture industry*. Since then,

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[4] For an overview of the changes and consistencies in media production research, see Paterson, Lee, Saha, and Zoellner (2016b).

[5] *Neoliberalism* is admittedly a broad term, its meaning debated and related practices varied, but it is a useful umbrella term for the political economic shifts I refer to. My understanding of the term in this article is informed by the work of authors such as Crouch (2011), Davies (2016), and Harvey (2005).

researchers studying the media industries and media production have been interested in the relationship between varied cultural and creative objectives and primarily financial economic goals. Interest in this relationship stems from the potential conflicts and contradictions arising from these different goals that may constrain producers and impair the quality of media texts (see Ryan, 1992). In public service broadcasting (PSB) systems such as the United Kingdom, this debate extends to concerns over the impact of commodification on (and the potential erosion of) public service values whose commitment to genre diversity and providing content for all members of the public including minority groups infers the production of programming that is commercially unattractive. Debates about independence in the media industries are based on similar concerns. Rooted in the belief that media texts have noneconomic value and are more than just commercial products, the concept of independent media has been highly influential for the development of media systems across sociopolitical, industrial, formal, and rhetorical dimensions (Bennett, 2015b). Across these dimensions, the notion of independence functions as a "utopian ideal" that stems from Western ideals of individual and political freedom. For media production, this implies freedom from state influence, monopoly power, market forces, and fear of prosecution (Bennett, 2015b) and the question of how the realities and practicalities of television production affect this ideal. In the case of British television, these different conceptualizations of freedoms inspired first the formation of the BBC, then the establishment of the ITV network, and more recently the foundation of Channel 4 and the independent production sector (Bennett, 2015a), which I focus on in this article.

Ultimately, analyses of both commercialization and independence in TV production are concerned with the effects of structural conditions on the creative autonomy of television producers. This article applies such concerns to the British television industry and discusses the conditions for independent television production with a focus on the impact of commercial imperatives on creative freedom. Like the majority of production research that aims to get inside information about production processes and experiences, my arguments are based on ethnographic research. Data were collected in independent production companies between 2008 and 2010 using participant observation and semistructured interviews. This research explored the impact of the changing television production ecology on the project development of documentaries and factual programs (Zoellner, 2010). Following a wave of expansion since the 1990s, the 2000s saw increased consolidation of the independent sector alongside greater competition and sinking revenues for television broadcasters and distributors in a multichannel–multiplatform environment—both enabled by neoliberal deregulation. The resulting concerns about the impact of commercialization and marketization on the production conditions and the cultural output of the television industries prompted my interest in independent producers and the commissioning culture in which they operate. Since then, these developments have further intensified, leading to even greater concentration of the independent sector through the emergence of multinational production companies and yet more competition for broadcasters due to the rise of streaming platforms.[6]

To assess changes and continuities over time, I connect my observations to other—admittedly scarce—research looking at television commissioning, commercialism, and independent production at different points in time. This includes Preston's earlier interview studies with British independent producers

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[6] See Lee (2018) for a detailed account of the transformations of the independent television sector in the United Kingdom, including changes in policy and industry structure that have resulted in an industry in which "creative innovation is now secondary to profit" (p. 210).

(2002) and commissioning editors at UK broadcasters (2003), Bennett, Strange, Kerr, and Medrado's (2012) study of independent factual production and public service in the United Kingdom (Bennett, 2015a), and more recent work such as McElroy and Noonan's (2019) multimodal study of British drama production, Lee's (2018) study of independent television production in the United Kingdom, and Andersen's (2020) ethnographic study of evaluative practices at Danish broadcasters.[7] Despite the temporal distance between these works, a striking consistency is revealed in the comparison of their findings. To contextualize my arguments, I further draw on longitudinal statistical data about the independent production sector and commissioning trends published by the British television regulator Ofcom and the Producers' Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT).

The Independent Television Production Sector in the United Kingdom

Great Britain has a well-developed independent production sector that plays an essential part in the creation of audiovisual programming. Independent production companies "have become the main means for delivering audiovisual content to broadcasters, in both commercial and public-service (PSB) environments" (Lee, 2018, p. 1). The emergence and development of the contemporary independent sector have been actively supported by British media policy with the intention to promote cultural diversity and to open up the production system to new voices (Ofcom, 2015, p. 22). The basic idea comprises that independents develop and produce program content while broadcasters and distributors provide the funding and means of reaching an audience. Key regulations in British media law demand therefore, first, that at least 25% of PSBs' programming must be produced by independent producers. Second, under the so-called Terms of Trade, independent producers retain the international broadcasting rights, allowing them to seek additional revenue from their commissions. And, to qualify as an independent producer, a company must not be linked to a UK broadcaster through ownership of more than 25% (Ofcom, 2015).[8]

The role and importance of the traditional PSB networks for the continued existence of the independent production sector cannot be underestimated. Despite challenging economic and political conditions, including falling advertising revenues and governmental cuts to public funding of broadcasters (Ofcom, 2019, p. 7), the channel networks of the BBC, Channel 4, ITV, and Channel 5 remain the most important funders and distributers of first-run programming produced in the United Kingdom (Ofcom, 2019). They also operate as broadcaster–publishers that commission part or, in the case of Channel 4, all of their first-run content to external producers. Independent producers in the United Kingdom receive the majority of their commissions from these networks. In 2018, for example, commissions from these four networks accounted for 80% of all UK television commissions with a total value of over £1.2bn, with BBC and Channel 4 showing the highest proportion spend (PACT, 2019, p. 16). Commercial non-PSB channels also commission programming but to a much lesser extent. New digital platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, which

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[7] Although this article focuses on the British television industry, many of the principles and practices described are typical for Western publisher–broadcaster systems, especially in dual systems of commercial and public service TV networks as my comparative research in UK and German production cultures suggests (see Zoellner, 2010).

[8] See Lee (2018) for an overview of the history and regulation of the independent television production sector in the United Kingdom.

initially relied on acquisitions only, have now expanded into commissioning first-run, original programs. Their investment in production is considerable, and they are slowly becoming more important for international primary commissions of British independent production companies (PACT, 2019, p. 24), but their output in hours presents, as yet, only a fraction compared with the British PSB channels, and most of their programs are produced in the United States (Ofcom, 2019, p. 47).

Although overall programming spend has remained roughly the same in proportion, the programming spend on first-run UK programming is consistently declining with a reported overall 5% decline at the four PSB networks between 2016 and 2018 (Ofcom, 2019, p. 49). This affects some genres more than others, with reported reductions in children's and drama production compared with an increase for entertainment genres (Ofcom, 2018, p. 44). In response, independents seek additional funding from third parties, for example, in the form of coproductions, especially in drama (Ofcom, 2019, p. 54).

According to legislation, production companies are independent from the organizations that fund and distribute their content, and regulatory support exists to ensure certain levels of production activities as described above. Figures of programming spend and broadcast hours commissioned to independent companies paint a positive picture. However, the financial dependency on broadcasters for income, the uncertainty of success, and the intense competition within the sector place a significant amount of economic pressure on independents, especially in the development stage of production. My investigation of the producer experiences in development, as described below, challenges the positive economic discourse that celebrates the independent production sector as commercial success based on growth and revenue and instead highlights the problematic consequences of economic pressure for independent creativity and program diversity.

Cultural and Economic Power in the Commissioning System

Project development for independent producers begins with the conception of a program idea, including initial thoughts on, for instance, genre and format, storyline and characterization, and location, as well as on-screen and off-screen talent. After further research and with their idea written up in proposal form, possibly including initial artwork or footage, independents then approach potential funders and distributors to pitch their program. Outcomes compose (1) rejection, (2) acceptance and negotiation of budget and production contract, or (3) requests for further development and modification. This general process is roughly the same for all productions (see Figure 1), although there are important differences in the details/elements of this process depending, for example, on genre and distribution form.
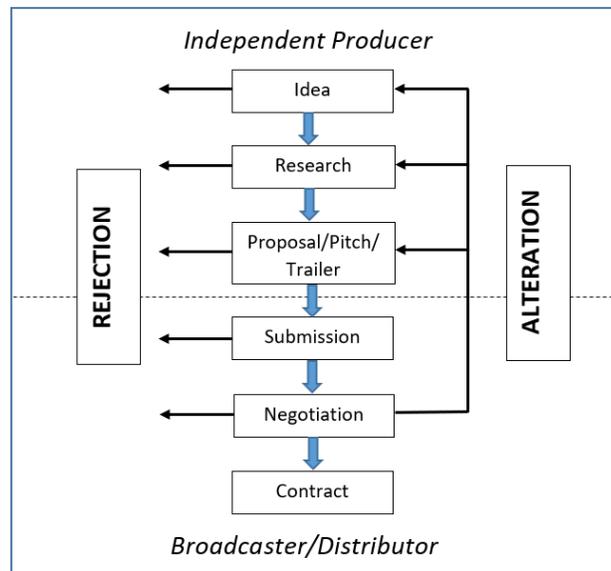
Figure 1. Development and commissioning process in TV production.

This editorial process holds substantial cultural power as it offers the opportunity to select specific content for mass media representation and, therefore, to provide a public platform for voices behind and in front of the camera. In principle, this power of selection lies with the independent producers, but within the broadcaster–publisher system it is transferred, to some extent, to the broadcasters as they make the final decision about which ideas get funded. Only if a commissioning editor agrees to production and a contract is signed, specifying budget and timescale, will a program idea turn into reality. Independents are consequently submitted to significant economic dependency, as these funds present their main income. This dependency reduces their cultural power and shifts editorial control to the commissioning editors, making them powerful gatekeepers. The latter do not only make selections from ideas suggested by independents and demand alterations of the proposed programs, they are also able to determine editorial preferences, which serve as guiding principles for independents' development activities, as I discuss in more detail below.

The broadcasters' economic power is further increased by the fact that development work is generally "spec work." All development activities are "speculative" in the sense that they are generally funded by the independents themselves,[9] and these costs can only be recouped if a production contract is signed. Development of a program idea can take a very long time—between a couple of months and several years—and the outcome is highly uncertain. The process may involve approaching multiple funding sources and modification of and further research for the project. Independent production companies, therefore, develop a number of projects at the same time. Only very few of these are successful in gaining a commission, and most program suggestions are rejected. In his study of idea development for the Danish

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[9] In some cases, a small budget for project development either from broadcasters or other funding agencies, such as the British screen agencies or the European Creative Europe program, may be available especially for genres that are costly and lengthy to produce, such as drama.

channel DR3, Andersen (2020) reports that only 2% of the proposals submitted in the research period were instantly commissioned (p. 2). British producers operate in a larger market with a greater number of competitors. The producers I interviewed suggested various figures for the ratio between success and failure, but all implied a strikingly low probability for obtaining a commission. In the production of factual programs, for instance, producers estimated failure–success ratios of 50:1, 70:1, and even 100:1, and these were commercially successful production companies that were well established in the industry.

The resulting uncertainty concerning income and workflow makes it difficult to predict production activities or finances in the long term. Genres with shorter production schedules such as factual programming are particularly affected, as producers described a risk of "running out of work" within 12 months. This confirms the results in Preston's (2002) earlier interview-based study of the British independent television sector that describe how

> very few interviewees felt that they could make any assumption about their company's finances more than six months into the future—even companies which had existed for a decade or more with steadily increased revenues, or those with a returning series commissioned for some years to come. (p. 3)

Over a decade later, Bennett's (2015a) research highlights how this financial insecurity and economic dependency of the independent production sector continues to persist.

An economic power imbalance exists not only between independents and broadcasters, but also within the independent production sector itself. Since its establishment and fast expansion in the 1980s and '90s, facilitated significantly by the establishment of Channel 4, the independent sector has experienced an accelerated process of consolidation. Mergers and acquisitions, enabled by the deregulation of British media policy, led to so-called "super-indies" and then to multinational conglomerates also referred to as "mega-indies." In his detailed discussion of the role of policy in the political-economic shifts in the independent sector, Lee (2018) argues that "the structure of independent production underwent radical transition, from a largely 'cottage industry' scenario . . . to an industry that is generally dominated by a handful of large companies, selling their intellectual property to global markets" (p. 57). Not least due to the international exploitation of intellectual property rights, the latter have greater economic resources at their disposal to sustain the drain of development work. Broadcasters tend to commission larger companies, as figures for 2018 show: Forty-three percent of the programming spent on external commissions went to companies with an annual turnover of over £70m (US$85m) and 23% went to companies with a turnover of £25m to £70m (US$30m to US$85m), whereas companies with a turnover of less than £1m (US$1.2m) received 5% and companies with a turnover between £1m and £5m (US$1.2m to US$6m) received 6% of the commissioning spend (PACT, 2019, p. 18). This preference for large companies reinforces the already existing economic inequalities of the independent sector.

Project development is a resource-intensive process, and the low success rate and high inequalities in economic power create an imbalance in cultural power, favoring broadcasters and large production conglomerates. This set-up creates particular practices in the television industry in the attempt to economize development activities and to manage the risk and uncertainty of the commissioning process. These

practices are shaped by the nature of independents' relationship with commissioning editors and the demand-driven character of the commissioning process, which I turn to in the following sections.

"Too Many Fish in the Pond": Relationship Building and "Preferred Suppliers"

The expansion of and competition within the independent sector does not only increase pressure on production companies, it also creates challenges for commissioning editors. They receive hundreds of program proposals every week to evaluate and follow up on while also overseeing ongoing productions. To manage this large number of submissions, commissioners tend to rely on "preferred suppliers" whose proposals will be considered with priority. Preferred suppliers are those production companies commissioning editors have a close personal relationship with and they are more likely to collaborate with based on previous collaboration and the companies' reputation. In 2003, Preston showed in her study of UK broadcasters that most of the interviewed commissioning editors had close, regular contact with five to 15 companies at most (p. 5). According to the editors, this allows for "deeper" creative relationships and "smoother" work relations with independents, but they also acknowledge the difficulty of keeping up regular close contact to a larger number of producers and companies (p. 5). Over 15 years later, McElroy and Noonan (2019) point out how, in the case of drama production, access to commissioning editors is "limited deliberately" and, although possible in theory, offers few opportunities for production companies without preestablished relationships, concentrating creative decision making in a few hands (p. 53). It demonstrates that this exclusive approach to collaboration remains a central tactic in idea development.

Not only is the number of companies each commissioning editor collaborates with fairly small, but the overall number of external production companies that broadcasters work with is also declining. In the last decade, the number of companies the big-four PSB networks have worked with has fallen by between at least 25% (BBC) and more than 50% (Channel 4; Ofcom, 2015, pp. 25–27). This reduction occurs partly because of consolidation of the independent sector and partly as a result of the reduced genre output of the networks (e.g., in children's and arts' programing). Between 2006 and 2014, the number of companies used fell significantly, especially in children's programing (from 70 to 16), arts and classical (from 48 to 8), education (from 24 to 0), and entertainment (from 119 to 58; Ofcom, 2015, p. 28).

Independent producers are highly aware of the small network of companies that commissioning editors rely on, and the sector is driven by intense competition for editors' attention as this executive producer described:

> I read somewhere recently that each commissioning editor has an average of only five to six companies, independent companies they work with. I don't know if that's true or not, but it means for me to get on the wavelength of a BBC arts commissioner I need to knock someone else off the list. Or I need to do something, so I need a breakthrough film to become an accepted arts provider. And it's just hard to get the opportunity, . . . how can I get over the hurdle? . . . History, arts, music, we'd love to make and we think we would make very well, but we're not yet on the list. (Executive Producer 2)

Aside from gaining a commission, it is becoming part of this pool that is a central objective of independents' project development activities because not "being on the list" makes commissioning success very unlikely. To increase their chances, independents seek, first, to establish and nurture personal relationships with individual commissioning editors and, second, to build a positive industry track record and reputation.

To build personal relationships with commissioning editors requires a continuous financial and personal investment over years that includes attendance at industry events, festivals, and sales markets whose "ritualized interaction" (Caldwell, 2008) facilitate networking and the pitching of ideas.[10] If contact has been established, direct frequent communication with editors is essential to establish a close relationship with these gatekeepers. In her study of television commissioners, Preston (2003) observes that

> programmes tend to be commissioned on the basis of conversations, over time, between commissioner and indie, rather than from the unsolicited proposals which have been the mainstay of some indies' practices. In the past these conversations led to a perception that decisions were taken in favoured clubs frequented by a broadcasting elite. (p. 5)

Having a direct personal relationship with a commissioning editor makes such "conversations" much more likely. It can even lead to a reversal in process as commissioning editors may approach their preferred independent collaborators with specific development requests, which in the words of Executive Producer 3 is "a whole easier proposition than sitting on the outside throwing ideas above the wall." The dependency on personal relationships also means that independents risk losing their advantageous position if "their" commissioning editor leaves their role. On the other hand, they may be able to continue this relationship if their contact moves to a similar role at the same or a different network.

The geographical concentration of commissioning editors in London presents an additional barrier for producers from outside the capital, which has implications for the diversity of program content. In the attempt to diversify the London-centric industry, the BBC moved parts of its commissioning and production activities to Salford in 2011; in 2019, Channel 4 opened its new national headquarter in Leeds and two smaller production hubs in Glasgow and Bristol. One of the objectives of these relocations is to decentralize creative decision making and make it easier for producers outside London to establish and maintain close relationships with commissioning editors with the intention to facilitate greater diversity on and off screen. Yet, as for now, producers still complain about the centralized nature of commissioning (and consequently production) power in the London area (e.g., Lee, 2018; McElroy & Noonan, 2019) as they did in my own study (Zoellner, 2010) and Preston's (2003) interviews 10 years earlier.

Alongside personal relationships, a production company's industry status and track record also determine the likelihood of a commission. Reputation is a crucial factor for commissioning success in the "trust-based, personal relationship-driven nature of the commissioning process" (Preston, 2002, p. 5). Ultimately, a production contract presents a large financial commitment with an uncertain outcome. Producers aim to instill in commissioning editors trust in their "financial and editorial integrity" and their

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[10] See Caldwell (2008) for a detailed discussion of such "trade rituals" in the film and television industry.

"ability to deliver" within time and budget constraints. Over time, successful collaboration with broadcasters allows independents to build a program portfolio and obtain a reputation regarding the quality of their work. On a public level, this can include mentions in industry rankings, for example, in the annual "Indie Report" of the British trade publication *Broadcast* or *Televisual*'s annual "Production 100" report. Positive media coverage about a company or its productions and nominations or awards for people or programs are also important public markers for industry reputation. On a personal level, commissioning editors' experiences with specific independent production companies and the exchange about these experiences with colleagues shape the informal reputation of the companies and people involved.

The reliance on informal networks, personal relationships, and reputational status to achieve commissioning success favors those production companies that are experienced, well established, and well resourced, whereas newcomers will find the relationship-driven nature of the industry a significant hurdle. The production companies I studied were well established in the television industry with a track record of successful broadcast commissions. But the producers I interviewed were highly aware of the inequality of the sector when it comes to commissioning and recalled clearly the challenges of being new to the industry:

> I remember the early days of us pitching stuff and never hearing a thing back. . . . You definitely have that sense that there is one set of rules if you're small and you haven't made anything, and there are ways of keeping smaller indies away from commissioning editors. And then once you proved yourself, suddenly it all becomes a lot easier. And they ask to see us, you know. (Executive Producer 2)

Large companies or those that are part of a company conglomerate are, therefore, in a particularly advantageous position. The smaller, less experienced, and less connected a company is, the harder it is to achieve commissioning success despite the persistent belief in the merit of a "good idea." As a result, the sense of dependency and lack of power experienced by many independent producers is heightened, which has an impact on their creative priorities and their professional identities.

"It's a Business": Demand-Led Development and Creative (Self-)Restriction

The power deficit, economic pressure, and high uncertainty of the development process turn independents into service providers for broadcasters: To increase the likelihood of a commission, they focus their development activities closely on the editorial preferences of commissioning editors rather than on their own. A key aspect of their development activities, therefore, concerns the research of broadcaster preferences on both an organizational and individual level. One head of development, for example, described his job as coming up with "ideas that commissioning editors want. Knowing what the commissioning editor wants and trying to second-guess what they want. . . . Essentially, we are selling to them, so we need to know what they want, and we have to do it effectively" (Head of Development 1). Knowing what editors want is all the more important as each will commission only a relatively small number of programs. In the case of genres that are expensive to produce (e.g., drama), this means only a handful of programs a year (McElroy & Noonan, 2019), but even in cheaper genres, figures are low compared with the number of companies competing for work.

On an institutional level, broadcasters support this practice by publishing guidance for independent producers and specifications for the kind of programs they seek for their channels with details about genre and subject matter. This may include technical details such as program duration, format, budget range, and target audience, but also more vague expectations concerning subject matter, narrative, and visual style. For example, all four main PSB networks—BBC (2020), Channel 4 (2020), ITV (2020), and Channel 5 (2020)—have dedicated commissioning websites aimed at independent producers. These contain names and contact details of relevant commissioning editors, commissioning briefs by genre (i.e., details about what kind of programs the editors are looking for including previous program examples, target audience, and FAQs),[11] and information on how to submit program proposals. For producers, studying these requirements goes hand in hand with following broadcast content and researching prior productions to identify formal characteristics and subject matters that have previously found the approval of the commissioning editors. In turn, commissioning editors expect producers to carry out this kind of research and to suggest only "suitable" program ideas. Researching and meeting broadcaster requirements are essential, if not the first, steps of development. Not doing so is perceived as a guarantee for failure:

> You make sure that all the proposals are written up nicely and are very targeted for what they want, because we've been to commissioning editors who are furious that they've wasted an hour with someone come pitching ideas that are clearly not relevant or appropriate for that strand, and they said, "You've been clearly not been watching my program." Nothing makes them more annoyed. I remember seeing [commissioning editor] at *One Life*[12] who's raging about the fact that someone came and pitched a history documentary to him. He said, "I don't do history, if you've ever watched *One Life*, you know, a story unfolding in front of your eyes, a contemporary story." (Executive Producer 1)

Aside from the television networks themselves, there are other intermediaries who offer information for producers, often on a subscription basis. *Broadcast* magazine's "Commissioner Index," for example, offers program requirements and pitch preferences for more than 440 UK, U.S. and SVoD commissioners, access to a program database of more than 16,000 shows, a weekly newsletter, and update e-mail alerts for a rate of £750+VAT for a single subscriber (BroadcastIntelligence, 2020).

In addition to these publicized requirements, it is the personal relationships with commissioning editors—as described above—that assist independent producers in their attempt to identify the individual evaluative regimes editors employ in their judgment of program proposals (Andersen, 2020). Personal relationships built over years allow producers to get to know editors' personal likes and dislikes, which affect the latter's decisions. In addition, direct communication with commissioning editors offers independents the opportunity to gain more institutional detail and context about broadcaster preferences. Commissioning

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[11] In the past, such descriptions would have been specific for individual broadcasting strands set in a specific slot within a linear television schedule. Time-shifted viewing has made scheduled program slots less important, and commissioning briefings now focus more broadly on genres and to a lesser degree on individual strands and schemes.

[12] *One Life* was a weekly BBC 1 documentary strand that aimed to reflect life in contemporary Britain focusing on human experience and emotion. It existed from 2003 to 2008.

editors also communicate their requirements in talks and meet-and-greet sessions at industry events and film festivals, but having a close and direct relationship with commissioning editors and being considered a "preferred supplier" presents a significant advantage in this context. It creates a short cut for testing program ideas and obtaining insider knowledge of broadcaster preferences and makes the consideration of program suggestions by commissioning staff much more likely.

As a result, program commissioning in the British television industry is predominantly demand-led rather than offer-led. Their perception of what topics editors may be interested in, combined with the broadcasters' published commissioning preferences, determines producers' decisions as to which ideas are selected for further research and which are discarded at the point of conception. Andersen (2020) similarly concludes that producers primarily develop their programs for individual commissioning editors rather than for the television audience, who—although being the ultimate target for the program—are much less important for the conception and shaping of a creative idea. This practice contradicts the original intention behind the establishment of the independent production sector that aimed to harness the diversity and originality of external producers through their program ideas. Instead, their creative ideas are shaped by the demands of a small number of broadcasters, which tend to be a fairly homogenous group, especially when class and ethnicity are concerned (Ofcom, 2017; Saha, 2012). Furthermore, these demands are largely not set by commissioning editors themselves; rather, they in turn are under pressure from the hierarchically higher-ranking program schedulers and controllers and their commercial aspirations concerning channel branding and audience reach. As Bignell and Lacey (2014) argue, for the production of British drama, it is precisely the outsourcing of production that has "shifted decision-making powers from programme-makers to schedulers and commissioners" (p. 10). Today, broadcasters compete for audience shares and revenues in an increasingly fragmented market including competition with a growing number of online platforms. In the case of commercial broadcasters, the multiplication of television providers and resulting audience fragmentation have led to a fall in advertising and subscription revenue, but even PSB channels need to produce substantial ratings to legitimize their existence in the face of conservative neoliberal political attacks, which—rooted in the trust in market trade and rejection of state intervention—call for the abolition of publicly funded media. In this economic climate, commissioning editors complain that they have little creative freedom in the determination of program requirements, but are under severe pressure to satisfy the commercial demands of their network by aiming primarily for high audience rankings (Preston, 2003). Andersen (2020) also observes how "gatekeeping editors are under pressure to make the 'right' decisions and choose the most suitable ideas, because failures can be expensive" (p. 13).

Demand-led commissioning limits the creative autonomy of independent producers as their development activities are determined by broadcaster and distributor priorities and preferences. Independents focus their development within set parameters and exclude all ideas that do not match from the start. New ideas are assessed in relation to broadcasting genre requirements, previously made programs, assumptions about audience preferences including sociocultural sensitivities, and the personal tastes of the relevant commissioning editor. For example, in my observation of project development meetings in independent companies, ideas for factual programs and documentaries are rejected on the basis of being "too dark," "too heavy," "doesn't rate," or "too risky/controversial/sensitive," or because they do not match editors' personal tastes. Such commercially induced creative self-restriction—or self-censorship even—raises concerns over the extent of innovation, diversity, experimentation, and risk taking in the

resulting productions. Elsewhere, I have described how demand-led commissioning reduces, for instance, the scope of factual and documentary programming with a risk-averse creative focus on repetition, formatting, serialization, and extraordinariness (Zoellner, 2009b). Critical voices within the industry continue to complain about the risk-averse narrowness of commissioning interests (e.g., Lee, 2018; McElroy & Noonan, 2019), and there is increased debate about the diversity of the production sector (and the creative limitations it brings) especially concerning race and gender, but also age and disability.

Compliance with broadcaster preferences carries the potential for creative tensions and frustration among independent producers. Responses to this setting are varied and contradictory. On the one hand, there is widespread acceptance of the structural status quo and its power imbalance based on the acceptance of corporate commercialism as a guiding principle of the industry. Independent production for television is, ultimately, a commercial enterprise and the precariousness of the sector a pressing motivator to conform. The producers I interviewed viewed it "first of all [as] a business" that should "serve business partners well," whereas their personal interests were secondary if not irrelevant. In this context, the sheer fact of producing broadcast content becomes more important than meeting individual creative aspirations. In many cases, producers consequently separate their professional from their personal preferences and employ a certain degree of detachment toward the programs they develop and produce (Zoellner, 2015). Bennett et al. (2012) highlight the influence of sector competition in this context and describe how increased consolidation and the emphasis on formats and international program sales heighten economic pressure, reduce creative freedoms, and weaken producers' belief in public service values.

On the other hand, "whilst the independent sector acknowledges that commissioners need to exercise editorial responsibility, there is disagreement over the extent to which this should occur, to whom, and at what stage in the production process" (Preston, 2003, p. 8). As I found in my study of factual program development (Zoellner, 2009a, 2015), the internalization of structural constraints is not conflict-free and informal critical counterdiscourses of consistent commercially constrained creativity emerge. They are shaped by producers' personal values, ambitions, and opinions, which in turn are informed by genre values and PSB principles. In the case of factual and documentary producers, for example, I have described how producers' conceptualizations of professionalism help to resolve the dilemma between commercial compliance (i.e., demand-led development) and critical self-reflexivity (i.e., perceptions of reduced quality concerning documentary genre values; see Zoellner, 2015). Such counterdiscourses claiming commercially constrained creativity were also expressed by the independent producers interviewed by Preston (2002), Bennett (2015a), and Lee (2018), illustrating the consistency of the barriers faced by producers. However, these critical views rarely prompt specific action, at least not during the development stage. Rather, I have observed a reinterpretation and even deterioration of traditional genre values and related ambitions among the studied producers, especially amid younger staff, which support rather than challenge the notion of providing a service for broadcasters in a market-driven economy. Lee (2018) similarly notes the replacement of public service values among factual producers by an emphasis on commercial success and individual self-actualization (p. 207).

Independent producers' compliance with broadcaster requirements in a demand-led commissioning culture remains unchallenged despite persistent informal counterdiscourses. This practice multiplies the effects of the structural centralization of creative decision making in the broadcaster–publisher system as

broadcasters set the parameters for independents' creativity. The resulting creative restrictions in a risk-averse commissioning climate lead to less program diversity in favor of serialized, formatted, and standardized content.

Conclusion

Although statistics about independent television production in the United Kingdom present an encouraging level of production activity and highlight the value of public service media and regulatory support, they fail to reveal the inequalities within the sector when it comes to gaining a production contract. To cope with their structural dependency in broadcast commissioning, independent producers form social relationships with commissioning editors and use their status and reputation to increase their power in the commissioning system. Combined with the economic pressures of independent production, these strategies favor large, experienced companies that are well established and well resourced. In this way, the commercial logic of the commissioning system facilitates both the growing consolidation of the sector (see Lee, 2018) and the concentration of cultural power, given that commissioning editors act as gatekeepers for screen content who make their creative choices based on the ideas of a select group of independent producers. The creative limitations of this system are heightened by the fact that most of the ideas suggested to editors are based on the creative demands and preferences published by the broadcasters themselves. And this matters because it diminishes audience choice.

The structural power imbalance of the system and resulting inequality in editorial contribution contradict the cultural intentions behind the creation of the independent production sector as television content is predominantly based on broadcaster specifications and editors' preferences. Although independents research and present their own program ideas, their choice of idea is shaped by broadcaster preferences. Those preferences are in turn determined by commercial targets and objectives in a competitive industry threatened by falling revenues, leading to caution and constraint concerning creative risk taking, experimentation, and diversity in program development. The current excitement over algorithm-informed commissioning based on the behavior of online users of subscription-based streaming platforms such as Netflix (Redvall, 2016) increases concerns about the influence of popularity as the main criterion for creative decisions. Although the expansion of television platforms, most recently in the form of online streaming services, suggests more opportunities for independent producers, these new players tend to be relatively limited in the diversity of cultural genres and formats they distribute and commission. Prioritizing audience appeal risks excluding niche audiences and minority tastes and interests. It exacerbates risk-averse editorial trends toward familiarity, standardization, and serialization at the expense of commercially less promising content, cultural diversity, and experimentation. This is not to deny the high-quality innovative programming also produced in this system, but to highlight dominant structural constraints and their textual implications.

Public service values and obligations can counter risk-averse commissioning tendencies to some degree. It is clear that public service media and regulatory support are essential for the independent production sector and for the production of diverse television genres. However, such protectionist intervention is less likely in the context of the current neoliberal economic climate in Great Britain, which has led to numerous cuts in cultural spending in the last decade and an invigorated attack on public service media. The fact that British public service networks commission the vast majority of original first-run content

and are (by obligation) the most important funders for independent production companies illustrates the value of interventions as market correctives. However, even with these networks, we can see a decline in genre diversity, programming spend, and the number of independent companies they collaborate with. Far from perfect, PSB networks nevertheless act as an important cultural and economic counterweight in a market-driven television industry, for example, through their remit obligations and production quotas, in contrast to the much less regulated commercial sector.

Although it is important to critically address what kind of television we can see on our screens, it is equally important to understand how these texts come into being. Program development is an important part of television production and studying it helps us understand current concerns about program diversity and innovation. My discussion of the British television commissioning culture demonstrates how principles such as preferred suppliers and demand-led commissioning reinforce the inequalities of the independent production sector, instill a commercial market logic of cultural production among producers, and limit the content and form of television representations. In relation to ongoing debates about television, this article therefore draws the following three conclusions: First, it reveals the restrictive, even damaging, influence of commercialization in the TV industry on the diversity of commissioned production companies and the creativity and diversity of program content. Second, it highlights the importance of public service broadcasting and policy support for strengthening the independent production sector and enabling opposition to homogenous commercial trends in television content. And third, it recognizes the contestation of commercial influences within the independent production sector and acknowledges the current and potential value of independent production in principle while emphasizing the limitations of a consolidated sector dominated by multinational (or U.S.-based) conglomerates. I argue that a greater degree of diversity, concerning both program content and production companies, needs to be supported from the start of the development process. The consistency of findings across the last two decades suggests that market principles elevate structural barriers in the British television system and political action is required to encourage change. This includes, on the one hand, the reversal of policy measures that have deregulated ownership, dismantled public service remits, cut public spending, and weakened broadcasting standards and, on the other hand, further adaptation of existing regulations in response to industry developments, for example, in the form of more detailed quota guidelines intended to counter the inequalities of the sector. Most important, to enable change, we need a shift in mindset and facilitation of public discourses that recognize and appreciate the noneconomic value of television.

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