# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION
- Research focus .................................................. 8
- Research objective and questions ......................... 9
- Theoretical approach .......................................... 9
- Links with previous research ................................. 10
- Main findings .................................................... 11
- The organisation of the thesis ............................... 12
- Conclusions ...................................................... 12

## CHAPTER TWO: INDUSTRY BACKGROUND
- The reforms in the sector in the 1980s and 1990s .......... 16
- The television sector now ...................................... 17
- The workforce in the sector ................................... 24
- The independent production scene ......................... 24
- Employment in the independent sector ................... 26
- Yorkshire and the Humber region ......................... 29

## CHAPTER THREE: THE UK TELEVISION INDUSTRY: STRUCTURE, NETWORKS AND SMALL PRODUCTION COMPANIES
- Network organisation .......................................... 32
- Geographical dimensions of networks .................... 33
CHAPTER SEVEN: ENTRY TO THE INDUSTRY

The ways in: past and present
- Traditional routes
- (No) entry rules
- A plethora of aspiring entrants
- Work placements: a way in?
- Working for free
- Helping having been helped
- Cold calling
- Serendipity
- Camera and sound
- Atypical entries: the varieties of unpredictability

Entry currencies
- Logic of recruitment
- Personal contacts: still the way in
- Previous experience
- Small companies’ specialisation and entrants’ specialisation
- Degrees
- Youth

Entry and subsequent career: entry as a career step?

CHAPTER EIGHT: LEARNING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

How do people learn: legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice

Specifics of the work in television
- Knowing the programme-making process and other people’s jobs
- Importance of social skills

Learning in a large organisation: a story from the past?

Small independents and skills development

Specific learning mechanisms
Learning by watching, asking questions and making mistakes 197
Learning in technical grades: sound, camera, editing 205
Learning in production and editorial jobs 210
Learning in other areas of specialisation 213

Learning to be a member of the community/television freelancer 215

Continuous learning: learning in the later career 217

Challenges in the process of learning and skills development 220
  Mentoring: practises and challenges 221
  What do people learn 228
  Quick progress and learning 229

CHAPTER NINE: WORKING AND LEARNING IN A SMALL REGIONAL INDEPENDENT PRODUCTION COMPANY 234

Part 1: The Company 236
  Background 236
  Working in the office 238
  People 241
  The company: commissioning 263
  Multitude of opinions, few decision-makers 267

Part 2: The Other Regional Independents 272
  Common pattern of establishment 272
  Flexible size 274
  Unpredictable commissioning: business at risk and resource planning difficult 276
  Tight network of ex-staff in a big regional broadcaster 276
  Shared pool of regional talent 278
  Difficulties in keeping staff in the region 280
  Regional network? 285

Part 3: The Production 287
  The freelancers on the production 287
  The employment side 289

Part 4: Learning and Skills Development 291
  Learning in a small independent production company 291
  Multi-skilling? 294
  Skills development in context 298
  Freelancers and staff: the view from the production 303
  Development versus production work 308
In-house opportunities?

CHAPTER TEN: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS 314

Themes and issues from the literature 314

Research question one: How do aspiring professionals embark on a career in television? 317
  Unclear entry point in a de-regulated environment 317
  Unpaid work with unclear prospects 318
  Entry jobs detached from long-term career 319

Research question two: How are skills acquired in a fragmented industry such as television? 322

Research question three: What are the realities of work in independent production companies in a local labour market? 328

Contributions 329

Policy recommendations 331

APPENDIX ONE: INTERVIEWS SCHEDULES 347

APPENDIX TWO: RESPONDENT NUMBERS BY CATEGORY 362

APPENDIX THREE: PROJECT LEAFLET 363

APPENDIX FOUR: PEOPLE IN THE CASE STUDY 364
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AP (Associate Producer)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Creative/editorial television workers</td>
<td>Producers, directors, associate producers and researchers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoP (Director of Photography)</td>
<td>Director of Photography: the highest rank in film camera crews</td>
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<tr>
<td>GM (General Manager)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indie, independent</td>
<td>An independent production company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting cameraman</td>
<td>The highest rank in television camera crews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD (Managing Director)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production television workers</td>
<td>Production assistants and managers: the professionals dealing with the organisational and administrative aspects of programme-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reccie</td>
<td>A pre-filming location visit, usually done by the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>A relatively junior television worker involved in the creative or editorial side of programme making; usually progresses to associate producer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical television workers</td>
<td>Those involved in camera, sound and editing</td>
</tr>
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<td>YTV (Yorkshire Television)</td>
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**GLOSSARY**
CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world organisations and work are being fragmented. People change jobs more often and their working lives are made up of ‘chunks of labour’ (Sennett, 1998). In the UK television sector the process of fragmentation was initiated with the reforms which began in the 1980s. The sector changed from being dominated by big vertically integrated organisations such as the BBC and ITV to being composed of a large number of small independent production companies and a small number of large ones, which get commissions from the broadcasters.

Work in television has traditionally been project-based. Before the 1980s the projects were usually done within the big vertically integrated organisations which hosted the full cycle from generating ideas to broadcasting programmes. The change in the structure of the sector affected the way in which work was organised. Networks of professionals became external to the organisations, small companies had to build links with broadcasters in order to get commissions, staff jobs became fewer and freelance employment became widespread. Numerous media degrees emerged and trade unions weakened. Entry to television became varied and subsequent progression was unregulated and unplanned. The television industry fragmented into individual freelancers and independent companies. This brought about challenges for both. Jobs became potentially more varied with bigger
control of the individual over the employment, but they also became more uncertain and irregular.

**Research focus**

This thesis considers the above and focuses on one major aspect of the changes: the implications of fragmentation for skills development and learning. Its main contention is that with employment becoming unregulated, skills development became more partial and incomprehensive. The fragmentation of the industry and the de-regulation of the labour market therefore present challenges to the traditional learning model and the long term skills regeneration of television, a sector in which skills have traditionally been high and their development - integrated into the practice of the professional community.

In order to engage with the problem in context the study considers wider labour market realities such as entry and subsequent progression. It engages with both the experiences of the freelancers and the point of view of the companies. In particular, it focuses on small companies which currently represent the largest proportion of the organisations in the independent sector and are therefore an important structural element. Although the freelancers are the primary concern of the study, it does not consider their experiences separate from the other actors in the industry.

**Research objective and questions**

The main objective of the present investigation is to enrich the understanding of freelance work in the independent television sector, especially as regards the processes of learning
and skills development. In order to achieve it, it answers three main questions: on the entry paths into television; on the learning mechanisms, experiences and outcomes; and on the realities of work and skills development in a small regional independent production company.

**Theoretical approach**

The approach to the study of learning and skills development adopted here is community-based (Crouch, 2005) and skills development is understood as evolving within a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2005). Such a theoretical perspective is suitable because it corresponds to the traditional mechanisms for skills development in television, which are based on practice and are done on-the-job. To discuss skills development, processes of learning are considered as social practice, evolving within a professional community where novices are engaged in the actual work but at the same time are ‘legitimate peripheral participants’ (see Lave and Wenger, 1991). This means that their status is determined by their position as learners.

In addition, the theoretical approach considers the institutional arrangements and the realities of the labour market because these shape, enable and limit the activities within the communities of practice. The institutional arrangements are also important for the ways in which skills are developed, as they provide a link among the various actors such as employers, trade unions, professional organisations and workers. The character of the labour market dictates the types of skills valued and the labour market regulation plays an important role in containing opportunistic behaviour (Marsden, 1999). The dual focus on the specific mechanisms at the level of the individual and groups of professionals and the
external structures which enable or obstruct their actions is also reflected in the consideration of the interplay between structure and agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) underpinning the data analysis and conclusions.

**Links with previous research**

The research builds upon the existing body of knowledge and aims to enrich it empirically by engaging with issues which have been identified as problematic for entry, progression and experience in the labour market (see, amongst others, Dex et al., 2000; Holgate, 2006; McKinlay and Quinn, 1999; Saundry, 2001; Ursell, 1998). There is no major study of learning and skills development in television, but previous research has suggested that the industry reforms had a negative impact on the traditional skill formation mechanisms in television (Saundry and Nolan, 1998; Thynne, 2000; Ursell, 1998). It is the main aim of the present investigation to discuss this problem. In particular, it is concerned with challenges rooted in unrestricted entry, the prominence of social labour market mechanisms in a de-regulated context, the negative impact of unregulated progression for the skills and expertise standards in the sector and the divergent interest of employers and novices in a commercially-driven environment. It also contributes further to the understanding of the industry, especially as regards freelance work and small independent companies.
Main findings

The main findings reveal that the outcomes of the traditional on-the-job learning mechanisms within communities of practice are challenged under the new structural context in which unrestricted entry and progression are combined with short-term projects within an uncertain employment context. Commercial pressures affect both access to opportunities to learn and the learning experience, mainly because of a lack of legitimate experiential learning possibilities and short-term involvement in the industry under pressures to perform. These aspects are at odds with the presumptions and requirements of the learning methods themselves, which require time, stable mentoring provision, exposure to variable projects and legitimate learning status. The commercial pressures based on assumptions of efficiency, clash with the long-term perspective on learning and the resulting tension impacts negatively on the skills development opportunities, processes and outcomes.

The organisation of the thesis

The thesis starts with an overview of the changes in the industry in recent decades to set the context of the study. Chapter Two examines the reform of television in the 1980s and 1990s and unveils the complex background in which skills development takes place. It demonstrates why a detailed study and analysis of the current processes is pertinent. It also pays attention to the present face of the sector and the characteristics of the workforce within it and emphasises the rise of independent production as an important part of the television industry at present. It then goes on to discuss some key figures of the
employment within it and ends with a brief presentation of the industry in the region where a part of the research was concentrated.

Chapter Three is the first of two chapters in which the current literature of the industry is reviewed. It engages with the ways in which the industry structure has been conceptualised as a network organisation, with the geographical dimensions of networks and the small independent production companies. Chapter Four narrows the focus of the literature review by looking at the individual level through a discussion of the realities of working in the television labour market. It includes studies which engage with the labour market mechanisms, the nature of the work, careers as key elements of the skills development context and issues of work-life balance. Most of the studies to date focus on London and there are not many conducted in the regions. This is a gap in the existing literature to which the thesis contributes through a case study of a small independent production company.

Following the review of the current knowledge about the UK television sector the thesis turns to the methodological approach to the study, the research design and the data collection methods applied, discussing their suitability and limitations (Chapter Five). The following chapter presents a narrative of the way in which the present study was carried out in practice. It details the problems of access and discusses issues of sampling and some practical problems associated with researching freelancers. It concludes with a section on data analysis.

The empirical findings are presented and discussed in the subsequent three chapters. They are grouped into three wider themes corresponding to the three main research questions, namely: entry to the industry; learning and skills development and a detailed case study of
a regional independent company. The themes follow the main topics identified from the literature which were used as guidance for the thematic data analysis. Chapter Nine encompasses a case study of a small independent production company and the programme it was filming. It also draws a picture of the regional network of independent production companies. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the recurring themes and suggests policy implications.

**Conclusions**

Drawing on rich empirical data this research demonstrates how the new systems pose substantial challenges for skills development. Reliance on commercial mechanisms presents disadvantages at an individual level, such as limited exposure, lack of learning or mentoring structure, random opportunities and precarious employment situations. These cannot be overcome at the level of the organisation under the current arrangements as a considerable amount of the work is performed by small companies. They, in turn are subjected to significant limitations from the commercial pressures which restrict them in their capacity to cater for the learning and skills development needs of the industry. As a result, jobs and careers are marked by uncertainty, an uncertainty mirrored in the life of small independent companies. There is a large number of aspiring entrants competing for entry in a de-regulated context. This context allocates a central place to the existing social mechanisms which raises concerns about exclusion and reproducing social disadvantage. Companies need security, both in terms of labour and in terms of work. Individuals need specific skills and credits in order to progress in the freelance environment. The two are often at odds, create tensions and present a threat both for the individual and the small
companies. Short-term interests shape the learning, skills development and working lives. Commercial pressures limit the scope of action of many of the industry actors. The current thesis discusses the specifics of these issues with attention to the skills development in UK television.
CHAPTER TWO:

INDUSTRY BACKGROUND

This chapter provides an overview of the UK television industry drawing attention to the reforms in the last two decades and the independent production sector, which got established as a result of them. It outlines the changes which the television industry has experienced since the end of the 1980s and in doing so highlights the main factors, developments and tensions which shape the current context of employment in it. It then presents facts and figures which indicate the main trends in the employment and structure of the industry and concludes with focusing explicitly on the industry-specific characteristics of the region in which much of the research was conducted. The chapter provides a background against which the problems identified in the review of the literature (chapters Three and Four) and the current research are set. This is important in understanding the dynamics and the sources of some of the present tensions. This overview of the reforms in the UK television industry has the aim of embedding the research themes in the specific context thus providing a rationale for their significance.
Chapter Two

The reforms in the sector in the 1980s and 1990s

Television in the UK has been subject to significant changes in the last two decades. These were mainly politically motivated changes in its regulation combined with changes in the technology used for programme making. A series of legislative reforms in the late 1980s and 1990s led to a transformation of the way in which the sector was funded and employment in it organised, the types of key players and the power of the trade unions (Davis and Scase, 2000:56; King, 1998; Langham, 1996; McKinlay and Quinn, 1999; Saundry, 1998; Saundry, 2001; Saundry and Nolan, 1998; Sparks, 1994; Tracey, 1998; Tunstall, 1993).

Changes in the television sector can be attributed to legislative reforms resulting from political pressures (Barnatt and Starkey, 1994; King, 1998; Langham, 1996; Saundry, 2001; Sparks, 1994) or to changing technology (Langham, 1996; Tunstall, 1993). The overview of the reforms presented below discusses the main factors which led to and influenced the transformation. In essence, there is no single reason behind the shift in the way the industry operates. Rather, the 1980s, when the reforms were initiated and took place, were a time of social, political, economic and technological developments in the UK and globally, the combination of which induced fundamental changes in the structure and operations of the industry context of UK television.

Prior to the 1980s the television sector in the UK had the status and characteristics of a public service (Davis and Scase, 2000; Langham, 1996; Tracey, 1998). This was reflected in the content of programmes, the way the industry was regulated, the funding of television from public funds, and in the long-term stability of employment within it. Producing good quality programmes for UK citizens was the primary goal of the creative and technical
staff. Until 1955 the BBC had a monopoly position in the sector. Then commercial television was introduced in the form of ITV (Channel Two) in various regions. However, even ITV was not based solely on market principles. It too had a public service aspect and was tightly regulated by legislation (Langham, 1996). The commercial sector was stable and was characterised by the same type of employment as the BBC.

The television scene changed considerably with the establishment of Channel Four in 1982 when the BBC – ITV duopoly was disrupted. As Langham (1996) explains, Channel Four was funded by ITV’s advertisement money, hence it was not dependent on profit. Its aim was to produce quality programmes taking into account the interests of the minority groups within British society. In this sense it was also a manifestation of public service broadcasting principles. “The establishment of Channel Four apparently confirmed the public interest nature of the British approach to broadcasting” (Langham, 1996:6). What was new was the way in which Channel Four produced programmes. Almost all the productions it broadcast were outsourced i.e. commissioned from outside players. These were usually small independent production companies which made and then sold programmes to the broadcasters. It was the establishment of Channel Four and its model of commissioning that stimulated a considerable growth in the number of such small production companies (Dex et al., 2000; Langham, 1996; Sparks, 1994; Tunstall, 1993). As a result, “the independent sector has now become a very important production force in the UK.” (Langham, 1996:7). As Sparks (1994) points out, at the time many regarded these small companies as a break from the large bureaucracies and rigid rules, and the professional community showed considerable support for the new channel. The steps taken to encourage the growth of the independent sector, such as the 1990 Broadcasting Act and
the introduction of ITV franchises in 1991 were a main part of the government efforts to change the principles of operating and regulating the broadcasting sector in the UK. The underpinning effort was to increase competition and efficiency within television, which put considerable pressure on cost reduction and increased uncertainty (Saundry, 1998).

Significant in these developments was the work of the Peacock Committee in 1986 following which a recommendation was made for a change in the funding of the BBC and the overall re-organisation of the television sector. The Committee recommended outsourcing 40% of production by 1996. In 1986 the government set a target of 25% to be achieved by the 1990s. The underlying view was that the better performance of the television industry was obstructed by the existence of large bureaucratic organisations and strong trade unions (Saundry and Nolan, 1998) and it needed to be reformed in order to increase competition and enhance efficiency (Davis and Scase, 2000).

In short, the government’s regulatory programme increased competition, intensified pressures on costs and removed the certainty with which companies had previously been able to plan programme production. The introduction of the 25% quota and the emergence of published-broadcaster led to an erosion of in-house programme making and a growth in independent production. (Saundry, 1998:153)

The commissioning of such an inquiry and the recommendations the Peacock Committee made were a part of a broader context of Conservative policies based on market-led economic principles (King, 1998; Langham, 1996; Tracey, 1998). These policies were marked by a hostility to public services and the regulation of society and the economy, and hence to the power of the trade unions (King, 1998; Sparks, 1994). Their logical continuation was the Broadcasting Act of 1990. The main impact of this piece of
Chapter Two

legislation was the weakening of the public service elements in the UK television sector, done by the replacement of the Independent Broadcasting Authority, which was governing ITV together with the Independent Television Commission, whose role did not involve securing any public service broadcasting elements in ITV. As Langham (1996) explains, the main reason for these actions was the continuing strong role of the trade unions within ITV. Attempts to weaken the trade unions were concurrent to the introduction of the market-led principles in the operation of the sector and the Broadcasting Act was the tool for focusing economic pressure on the commercial television sector.

The introduction of SKY TV in 1989 was also a part of the Thatcher government’s policies which had an impact on the configuration of the industry (King, 1998; Tunstall, 1993). The introduction of payment by subscription as opposed to payment by licence fee suggested the establishment of a new type of relationship between the broadcaster and the viewers. The subscription-based relationship was more direct and thus, at least in theory, gave more power to the consumers, especially in dictating programme content. It was different to the licence fee model used by the BBC where the link between the corporation and the client was intermediated and the customers did not have influence over the programme content. In this way the introduction of SKY TV was a direct reflection of the Thatcher government’s free market philosophy (King, 1998).

Until the 1980s industrial relations in television were characterised by high levels of regulation. There was a national agreement, common terms and conditions, and unions had a great deal of bargaining power (Saundry, 2001). In 1998 the National Agreement which had regulated employment collapsed and this fundamentally changed the industrial relations context, considerably weakening the power of the trade unions (Sparks, 1994).
This had been facilitated in the preceding years, according to Sparks (1994), by the workforce reduction in the late 1980s, the internal reorganisation of work and outsourcing, as well as the attitude of independent producers who wanted more freedom in making programmes. Weakening of the trade unions had a negative impact on recruitment of talent and skilled professionals as it has been largely the trade unions that had a strong say in the recruitment and retention of the skilled workers (Saundry, 2001).

The 1990 Broadcasting Act made open competition for network programming between independent companies possible (Saundry, 2001). Its impact was particularly big for ITV. There were auctions of its licences in 1991 based on the principle of the highest bidder winning. There were fifteen licences which were awarded to regional companies to supply ITV services. However, the introduction of some quality criteria resulted in main bidders losing which caused further confusion in the configuration of the sector (Langham, 1996).

Summarising the key initiatives which the conservative government of Margret Thatcher undertook in order to transform the UK broadcasting sector, King (1998) singles out six main steps: The Hunt report into cable expansion, the Cable and Broadcasting Act of 1984, The Peacock Committee dealing with BBC funding (1986), the third report of the Home Affairs Committee on the future of broadcasting, the White paper on broadcasting of 1988, and the Broadcasting Act of 1990 (pp. 279-280).

The Communications Act of 2003 introduced a number of changes in the regulation of broadcasting, which included the establishment of Ofcom, a regulatory commission which takes responsibility for mergers, acquisitions, and licensing; allowing for possibilities of overseas ownership of the terrestrial channels as well as cross-media ownership. The Act also made provisions for the production companies to be able to hold onto programme
rights. There were also changes in the public service broadcasting obligations of the commercial broadcasters, using an assessment based on the total output of the terrestrial broadcasters (Skillset, 2006).

Technological advances in the 1980s were another main reason for the changes which occurred in the television sector. Laser and space technologies, semi-conductors and fibre optics were amongst the more influential developments, but perhaps digital data processing was the one which had the most significant impact on television (Langham, 1996; McKinlay and Quinn, 1999). It reduced the cost of production and made the technology, and hence programme making more accessible to a wider range of people. At the same time, it changed the skill requirements for the workforce:

Changes in technology are associated with changes in the skill structure, including some ‘deskilling’ of craft work. At the same time the demand for organisational flexibility in response to cost pressures has increased the amount of ‘multi-tasking’ among production employees in television. (Davis and Scase, 2000:59)

Important in understanding the impact of the technological changes was the context in which they were happening. The interdependence of the technological advances and political and economic agency is commented upon by McKinlay and Quinn (1999). They point out that the initial introduction of digital technology happened in a context of strong regulation and trade unions operating under national agreement. Thus it did not displace labour. The technological processes led to deskilling only as a result of the sectoral reforms, the weakening of trade unions, a deliberate management strategy aimed at achieving efficiency and a change in the workplace power balance.
The growth of the independent sector meant growth in outsourced production which replaced in-house programme making. This in turn led to considerable reductions in staff positions and to a corresponding growth in the number of freelance workers (Davis and Scase, 2000; Dex et al., 2000; Saundry, 2001; Thynne, 2000; Tunstall, 1993). The old vertically integrated production structures of the BBC and ITV with strict hierarchies were replaced by a network of small companies (Barnatt and Starkey, 1994; Davis and Scase, 2000; Saundry, 1998; Starkey et al., 2000; Tunstall, 1993).

Restructuring has led to complex changes in the organization of production. The most important shift has been from ‘in-house’, vertically integrated forms of programme production to ‘network’ processes. These not only encourage the formation of small, specialist independent companies but also a high proportion of freelance workers contracted for short periods to work on specific projects within the larger organisations. (Davis and Scase, 2000:59)

At organisational level, the above changes were conceptualised as a means of achieving efficiency by reducing overheads, freeing the creative workers from institutional interventions and the burden of bureaucracy thus responding to the much more demanding, fragmented and varied customer demands (Davis and Scase, 2000). Importantly, they led to the fragmentation of the industry into a large number of units which had to operate at minimum overhead costs. They evolved into networks of companies and individuals and these networks replaced the large vertically integrated organisations.

It is difficult if not impossible to evaluate the extent to which the reforms achieved their aims. In many respects, the industry is still changing and the processes generated by the reforms are still underway. The rapid expansion of the sector which led to unprecedented
demand for programmes combined with dynamic technological developments makes it difficult to make reliable evaluations. However, commentators such as Saundry and Nolan (1998) and Barnatt and Starkey (1994) claim that the reforms did not lead to increased performance, especially regarding the quality of the production and creative output.

The television sector now

Currently the television industry in the UK comprises a large number of SMEs and a smaller number of large companies: the so called ‘super-indies’ (Skillset, 2007). The majority of the big companies are located in London while the small independent companies are dispersed throughout the various regions, in addition to being clustered in London. The distribution of these SMEs varies depending on local markets, labour profile and the presence of a big broadcaster. Many of the small independent companies work on a limited number of commissions and often in only one genre (Skillset, 2006). Skillset data (2007) estimates 1,450 businesses in the industry across three major sub-sectors: terrestrial broadcasters (10), cable and satellite broadcasters (250) and independent production companies (1,100). There are also community television companies and other supporting facilities, such as equipment hire companies, usually shared with the other audio-visual industries.

There are three public service broadcasters in the UK: BBC, Channel Four and Sianel Pedwar Cymru (Channel Four Wales). Among them Channel Four holds a specific position being funded not by public funds but by its own revenues and is hence classified as a public non-financial corporation. As already noted, initially it was funded by ITV’s advertisement revenues, but in 1990 with the Broadcasting Act this changed and Channel
Four was supposed to fund itself having a ‘fallback’ provision of ITV revenues should its own revenue prove not sufficient (National Statistics, 2006).

The television industry is dominated by small companies: only two percent of the businesses in the sector employ above 200 people, and ten percent have 50 or more employees (Skillset, 2007). At the same time, 25% of the companies have between 2 and 4 employees and 31% between 5 and 10. Thus it can be seen that small and micro companies dominate the television scene.

The geographical distribution of the industry is markedly uneven. Sixty-six percent of it is based in London, with the rest of the regions having between seven and one percent of it, mostly two to three percent (West Midlands, South West of England, Yorkshire and the Humber, Northern Ireland). Importantly, the general trend is towards greater concentration in the London cluster (Skillset, 2007). The overall picture can therefore be described as a centre-periphery configuration with a tendency for further concentration.

**The workforce in the sector**

Television industry is characterised by a strong reliance on freelance labour: 34% of the workforce is freelance. Considering the ones which are not working, the proportion is even higher, 36% (Skillset, 2007). Freelance labour is not represented evenly across occupations: the three specialisms with the highest proportion of freelancers are costume and wardrobe (91%), make up and hairdressing (81%) and running (80%). Camera and sound are also occupations where more than half of the workforce works on freelance basis.
Importantly, there has been an increase in the proportion of freelancers in most categories since 2004 (Skillset, 2007).

In light of the structural changes in the industry outlined at the beginning of the chapter it is telling to look at the reasons for professionals to become freelance. According to Skillset data (2007) 46% of them moved to freelance employment because they were made or expected to be made redundant, 37% less state that it is the greater freedom such working arrangements give them. This confirms the trends set by the reforms in television and suggests that compulsion is the main driving force behind the increasing amount of freelance labour in television.

The age profile of the workforce reveals that 35% are under 35 years of age which shows a slight decrease in the number of people in this age group. Of them 48% are women and only 26% men which shows that there are more younger women than men working in television (Skillset, 2007).

**The independent production scene**

The independent sector is characterised by the existence of a small number of large companies and a large number of small and medium size ones. There has been an increasing tendency for consolidation in the sector. Thus according to the independent report of *Mediatique* commissioned by the BBC (2005) thirty percent of independent production expenditure of the BBC for 2005 would have been generated by only two companies: *Endemol* and *All3Media*. As the same report observes, “With 800 companies currently supplying programmes to UK broadcasters, there is a stark segmentation among
the very large, integrated and professional independents, the ‘bulge’ in the middle (generating reasonable revenues, and relatively consistent, if low, margins) and the ‘long tail’ of small, talent-based companies surviving on a limited number of commissions.” (p.3). Importantly, some of the structural characteristics of the independent sector such as fragmentation and the almost entire dependence on the big broadcasters are seen as obstacles to its business (Mediatique, 2005). According to Skillset (2007) increasingly small companies merge or are bought by larger ones.

As mentioned earlier, currently there is a legislative requirement for broadcasters to commission 25% of their production from independent companies. According to the BBC’s Annual Report in 2005-2006 it commissioned 31% of its production (BBC, 2006). This is a slight increase from the 29% in 2003-2004 and is a reflection of the efforts of the corporation to continuously increase the proportion of independent production (BBC, 2005). Perhaps paradoxically, however, it is also noted that “…there are many powerful reasons why in-house provision may make sense: security of supply and quality; critical mass; training and development of a long-term creative tradition; greater efficiency; greater use of developing flexible cross-media products and services.” (BBC, 2005:4).

The broadcaster which outsources most of its production is Channel Four. According to its Annual Report (2005) 4,360 hours of its production was independently produced with 1,018 from other sources. In terms of budget, this amounted to £296m versus £83m for other sources respectively. In 2005 Channel Four used 311 independent companies to produce the above amount of programmes (Channelfour, 2005). There is no matching data for ITV. However, according to its Annual Report for 2005 it generates 65% of its production in-house.
Employment in the independent sector

The independent production sector employs ten percent of the workers in the audio visual industries, 16% of those in broadcast television, four percent in cable and satellite television and two percent in each of commercials and corporate production (Skillset, 2005). In discussing these figures, however, it should be noted that there is a great deal of convergence between the different sectors and hence a large number of people work across occupations. According to 2005 Skillset data, 51% of those are employed in the independent sector, 66% are working on corporate production and 64% working in commercials. There is a tendency to increase the number of people employed in the independent sector: 20,950 in 2006 compared to 14,900 in 2004 (Skillset, 2007) matched by a decreasing number of those employed in broadcast television. This clearly demonstrates the growing significance of the independent production for the employment in the television industry.

The Skillset workforce survey shows that 62% of those working on independent productions are freelance compared to 38% on permanent or long-term contracts. The Employment Census however estimates 57% (Skillset, 2007). It can be said that around two thirds of the workforce in the independent sector work on freelance basis. This ratio is not as unbalanced as in commercials where 91% are freelancers. Broadcast television, cable and satellite television as well as post production and equipment hire demonstrate the opposite tendency: there the majority are employed in staff jobs as opposed to freelance or short-term contract ones (Skillset, 2005).

According to the Skillset Census (Skillset, 2007) there has been a slight tendency towards the increase of women in independent production: from 43% in 2004 to 46% in 2006. The
ethnic background of people working in the independent television production is just one percent lower than the national average (Skillset, 2007), and there is a disproportionately higher representation of people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) in the London cluster. According to the same Census, 38% of those working in independent television are under 35 years of age.

**Yorkshire and the Humber region**

Yorkshire and the Humber region has a long-standing tradition of television production dating back to the 1950s. Currently three percent of the television sector is located there (Skillset, 2007) which makes it rather typical for a cluster outside London. Broadcast television is the main type of media employment in the region. According to the Skillset Census it employs 74% staff and 26% freelancers. By contrast, the independent sector in the region operates with 57% employees and 43% freelances (Skillset, 2004). These figures, however, have to be treated with caution as they reflect only the particular configuration on the day of the Census. This is particularly so as regards the freelancers whose numbers are likely to fluctuate considerably.

There are no cable or satellite providers. The broadcast industry in Yorkshire and the Humber is represented by the BBC and Yorkshire Television (YTV). The BBC produces mainly news and current affairs. The largest media employer in the region is YTV. Data provided by Leeds University and quoted by Skillset (2004) show that in 2002 a quarter of the non-news regional programmes were outsourced to independent production companies based in the region. YTV is the ITV franchise provider for the region. It is a relatively old establishment, and in the past it was known for programme innovations.
According to 2005 Skillset data six percent of the workforce in the Audio Visual Industries live in Yorkshire and the Humber. The Skillset Census of 2004 indicates that three percent of the television only workforce is located in the region (Skillset, 2006). The independent production companies in Yorkshire and the Humber have built a reputation for making factual, drama and sports programmes (Skillset, 2004). There are around ten well-established small independent companies with a staff of five to ten people. They use largely the same pool of freelancers (Screen Yorkshire cited in Skillset 2004).

In summary, the television industry scene has undergone considerable and lasting transformations over the past 20 years. Following legislative reforms, there was a growth of the independent sector which is currently polarised between a few large and many small companies, all disproportionately concentrated in London. Other regions do have some small share of the industry but with no more than seven percent. Small and micro companies dominate the industry. The majority of them are independent production ones. Employment in television is largely freelance with a clear tendency for increase of this type of employment: many of the freelancers are leaving their permanent jobs either through redundancies or through voluntary decisions to leave the organisations where redundancies are expected. The number of freelancers is particularly high in areas such as hair and makeup, costume and general running, all of which with entry skill levels required at the low levels.

This chapter outlined the background of the television industry. It presented an account of the main changes which the sector faced and figures which outline the main trends of employment. The next two chapters will discuss the literature and existing research into the industry, organised around the main topics of structure and employment realities. In
this they will shift the focus from the background information to specific issues at the level of companies and the networks in which they operate and then, to the level of individuals. Chapter Three will present the ways in which the structure of the television industry has been conceptualised and will discuss the research and the problems emerging from studying a regional network and small independent companies.
CHAPTER THREE:

THE UK TELEVISION INDUSTRY: STRUCTURE, NETWORKS
AND SMALL PRODUCTION COMPANIES

This chapter will focus on the structure of the television sector and in particular its network character. It will, firstly, discuss the ways in which television has been conceptualised as a networks-based industry. It will then consider the geographical dimension of networks, which is directly relevant to the present research. Finally, it will provide a review of the main issues which have been found in the studies of small independent production companies. This part of the review is directly relevant for portraying the independent sector environment in which the present study is situated. It draws attention to important characteristics of the functioning of the production companies and the networks in which they are embedded. It also demonstrates the gap in the existing literature as regards detailed accounts of the realities in which small independent companies operate. The chapter provides a review of the current knowledge about the network and firm level of the television industry important in setting the institutional context in which freelancers work and develop their skills, discussed in the next chapter.
Network organisation

Currently, the television sector consists of a large number of interlinked service, talent and equipment providers as well as individuals whose activities are organised and co-ordinated on a short-term project basis (Barnatt and Starkey, 1994; Davis and Scase, 2000; Langham, 1996; Saundry, 1998; Skillset, 2006; Tunstall, 1993). An early attempt to analyse the industry mechanisms (Barnatt and Starkey, 1994) conceptualised it as a flexible network based on flexible specialisation (Piore and Sabel, 1984). This approach regards flexible networks as a strategic response aimed at overcoming the rigidities of a large, bureaucratic, vertically integrated structure. Based on Miles and Snow’s (1986) work on dynamic networks, Barnatt and Starkey (1994) highlight the opportunities this form can provide for specialisation and the possibility of assembling a unique mixture of specialisms for each individual project. However ‘the arguments concerning the efficiency and effectiveness of the emerging flexible organisational forms in television have still to be resolved’ and, importantly, ‘[t]here is also the issue of skills development which can perhaps best be done in-house.’ (Barnatt and Starkey, 1994:259). Barnatt and Starkey’s thesis has certain analogies with the changes in the US film industry following the disintegration of the studio system (Christopherson and Storper, 1989).

By contrast, a later discussion of the new industry structure argues that the claims made for flexible specialisation in the television industry bear little resemblance to the ways in which the sector has responded to the changes (Saundry, 1998). Based on a large scale postal survey of firms and trade unions, the research found that independent companies faced a number of challenges such as increased competition, increased demand for productions and costly advances in technology plus an almost complete dependence on the
broadcasters (the latter being in line with industry concerns voiced, for example by Elliott (2005)). Many companies existed from commission to commission and could not plan their activities over the long term or invest in development. Thus, Saundry (1998) argues, the small ‘independents’ are actually ‘dependent’, and the flexibility of small companies is exaggerated. Hence, the reason for growth in independent production is not so much the efforts to improve efficiency but regulatory compulsion (the 25% production outsourcing quota discussed in Chapter Two) (Saundry, 1998:157). And the organisational structures in television can be best understood using not the flexible specialisation thesis, but transaction cost economics with its emphasis on cost reduction through efficiency measures and outsourcing (Saundry, 1998). Such transaction cost approach has been used by Jones et al. (1997) in conceptualising a similar field: the US television industry and in particular the social aspect of the personal networks.

Another approach to studying the structure of television productions is to conceptualise it as a network organisation. As Davis and Scase (2000) point out, network organisations have been increasingly represented in the creative industries, and television is no exception to this. The restructuring of the BBC is also an example of establishing an internal form of a network where the organisation acts as a marketplace space for units to hire and sell their services. It is contrasted to external network organisations, where almost all functions are externalised and even access to key skills takes the form of short-term contracts (Davis and Scase, 2000).

Taking this analysis of the industry structure further, Starkey et al. (2000) have suggested the term ‘latent organisation’ in order to describe the mechanisms by which the network structures, including personal networks, operate (Starkey et al., 2000). ‘Latent
organisations are forms of organisation that bind together configurations of key actors in ongoing relationships that become active/manifest as and when new projects demand.” (Starkey et al., 2000:299). The latent organisation concept acknowledges high uncertainty and creative risk both of which exist in network television organisation. There are benefits from longer-term creative relationships. They provide an element of stability which produces and shared knowledge among the creative workers. According to Starkey et al. (2000) the latent organisation is the one which can combine both the efficiency (although reduced) of flexible specialisation and the need for more permanent collaboration between different actors over time. In line with this notion is the finding that companies consider firm-specific knowledge to be an asset (Saundry and Nolan, 1998). This knowledge is presumably acquired by the freelancers as a result of previous work for the company which suggests another way in which establishment of longer-term relationships between the company and freelancers can be beneficial.

The concept of the ‘latent organisation’ can be related to the notion of enduring social basis for the project based work (Sydow and Staber, 2002). It sees project activities not as isolated entities, but as embedded into a more permanent system of social relationships which enable the functioning of the project organisation (p.216). The norms and culture guiding this social layer of projects contribute to the network stability which creates the appropriate context for project co-ordination (Jones et al., 1997; Sydow and Staber, 2002). This is particularly important in project network relationships which are ‘characterised by a fundamental tension between flexibility and stability’ (Sydow and Staber, 2002:226).
Geographical dimensions of networks

The television industry has a marked geographical distribution: like the film industry (Blair et al., 2003) it is concentrated in London (Skillset, 2006). In their study of the cluster of small independent companies in Soho, Nachum and Keeble (2000) point out that in 1999 70-90% of the total employment in media in the UK was in London. As a place with a dense presence of media companies, this London area is, the authors contend, an arena of collective learning, through the concentration of resources and a close network of producers and service providers. The concentration of resources, including talent, is markedly different to the situation in the regions. However, even in the areas of high density such as London, the industry is fragmented with companies being set up for a particular project, and practices are based on personal networks and relationships.

The literature on geographical locations and networks provides important insights for the current research into the UK television industry. Such research and theory however is usually based on large clusters of geographically and economically coherent networks. In addition to examples such as Silicon Valley for the biomedical and computer hard- and software industry (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Finegold, 1999), there are at least a few such examples from the creative sectors: London (Nachum and Keeble, 2000), Hollywood (Scott, 2005) and Vancouver (Coe, 2000). As Scott (1999) observes, large parts of the cultural economy are situated in the big cities. They are characterised by dense networks of companies and facilities, and the related pool of expertise in the local labour markets. Such density of resources on a limited geographical area, Scott (1999) contends, contribute to the processes of creativity and innovation.
Importantly, the geographical dimension is not the sole glue for the functioning of such networks. The physical proximity enables intensive social connectivity (Pratt, 2000). Thus geographically defined clusters are embedded in a network of social relations (Blair et al., 2003; Coe, 2000; Scott, 1999; Sydow and Staber, 2002). The geographical, the social and the cultural dimensions are closely interconnected (Scott, 1999). In addition, they are also ‘contexts of social reproduction in which critical cultural competencies are generated and circulated’ (Scott 1999:809). These clusters attract professionals and neophytes and incorporate them into the networks which then reproduce the existing mechanisms (Barley and Kunda, 2004). Such concentration of facilities and knowledge, as Scott (1999) points out, facilitate quick resourcing. Moreover, such local labour markets can function as semi-selected pools of expertise and so in addition to creativity, such dense networks can facilitate efficiency (Scott, 1999).

Hollywood is such a cluster of the cultural industries, which has attracted much attention. One strand of analysis has focused on the benefits such agglomeration of resources brings to companies and individuals (Scott, 2004). Amongst them are lower transaction costs; flexibility which allows for sudden changes of supplies while ensuring suppliers have a steady flow of work; creativity and innovation which the constant interaction facilitates; and the possibility of detailed deal-making activities through face-to-face interactions. Small companies are often entering the networks in alliances with larger firms (Scott, 2005). Scott (2004) also considers the co-ordinating role of the institutional arrangements in such labour markets which are taken on by a web of professional guilds, trade unions and producers’ alliances. Such locations and communities are a ‘magnet’ for new talent which flows into them in search of professional fulfilment (Scott, 2005). The labour
markets which operate in clusters such as Hollywood have, according to Scott (2004), favourable conditions for tacit skills development and learning. This notion however is contentious. Other approaches to studying the industrial environment of Hollywood have reached different conclusions. The Hollywood film industry has undergone a fundamental change: the shift from the studio-based system to a network of independent producers. In their analysis of the effect this change had on the industry, Lampel and Shamsie (2003) make an important observation. Given the tacit nature of most of the film making skills, the breaking up of the industry into separate producers and companies physically separated many people who would have otherwise been working together. Such separation reduced the level of informal contacts and thus put the development of tacit skills into jeopardy. And so the increase of flexibility and the reduction of overhead cost were at the expense of the long-term capabilities development. Such observation seems particularly relevant to the current research, as the UK television sector underwent similar processes of a large scale shift away from big organisational forms and emergence of a network of smaller, independent units.

A relevant analysis of the impact which the restructuring had on the labour market, presented by Christopherson and Storper (1989) critically examined the notion of ‘flexibility’ and warned against the exploitation and inequality it may bring. Christopherson and Storper (1989) made a number of other relevant points. They observed that after the shift to flexible specialisation the studios no longer functioned as the training and apprenticeship providing bodies of the film industry. Another result was the increased supply of labour which led to a new type of labour market segmentation: one based not on the hourly wages but on access to work. The notion of seniority was also eroded in the
sense that it depended on the hours worked. Craft workers had to develop more specific technical skills and talent needed to develop industry-specific skills. More recently, Jones and De Filippi (1996) formulated those as ‘career competences in a network community’: knowing what, why, where, whom, when and how.

Much of the research in the UK has also focused on larger scale production and geographical clusters of creative networks. Although local labour markets differ in terms of tacit knowledge and training (Blair et al., 2003), some of the features revealed similarities between dense creative clusters. In particular, this was the social nature and mechanisms of the labour markets, the co-operative behaviour and mentoring practices. Blair’s research into the UK film industry revealed the processes of ‘active networking’ in which the freelance professional engaged (Blair, 2000; Blair, 2009). Another relevant feature of the labour market experience of the freelances was the informal, social character of the networking (Blair et al., 2001). Further, Blair suggests that the UK film industry is weaved by networks of interdependence where actors form semi-permanent groups within which power is uneven (2001; 2003). The literature and research into networks bears parallels with the UK television sector which makes the above issues particularly relevant to the current research. The locations discussed in most of the literature however are usually hubs of activities, exceptional geographical and social networks, which are unique. The only research outside of this category is a report on the independent companies in the UK (Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999). It therefore appears that the analysis of creative networks is based on rather uniform types of formations and the more peripheral, small and loose networks have escaped the focus of attention in the research to date. The current thesis addresses this gap.
Small independent production companies

As illustrated in Chapter Two, independent production is disproportionately dominated by small companies. Their functioning and the issues which surround the ways they operate are important in understanding the realities of working in television. Some authors have emphasised the existence of small creative firms as an antidote to the large bureaucracies. In particular, it is the sense of creative freedom, flexibility, freedom from control and internalised commitment that are used as motivating forces behind their operations (Davis and Scase, 2000; Leadbeater and Oakley, 1999). ‘Relations among colleagues are necessarily cooperative and harmonious – despite day-to-day frictions and personal antagonisms emerging out of the need to accomplish complex, unpredictable tasks – since dissatisfied employees will quit.’ (Davis and Scase, 2000:147).

Other studies reveal a more complex picture. The portrait of small often pressurised companies surviving from one project to another and struggling to plan long term or to employ permanent staff is confirmed by Saundry and Nolan (1998). Their research found, for example, that sometimes in order to keep talent available, certain companies from the regions were trying to secure employment for their freelancers in between the commissions they themselves had. This may be linked to the characteristics of regional networks highlighted by Sydow and Staber (2002) as vulnerable to the risk of dissolution because of the potential competition from other networks. Hence the periphery of the UK television, the regional networks, is particularly endangered to losing people to the London cluster.

Independent companies operating in the current environment are subjected to a number of pressures which shape their market, including labour market behaviour. The issues which small regional independent production companies face in the process of growth have been
the subject of a qualitative study conducted by the Television Research Centre (Preston, 2002). The findings highlight the uncertain environment in which small independent companies have to operate, especially as a result of volatile programmes commissioning based on relationships and reputation. This process is not necessarily predictable and almost completely out of the control of the firms (further insights into the commissioning process can be found in the dedicated report by the Television Research Centre (2003)). In brief, the commissioning process is the way in which programmes are being outsourced from independent companies. Each broadcaster employs commissioning editors: professionals with experience of the industry. They are familiar with the strategic focus of the broadcasting organisation and are looking for programme ideas in line with it, trying to respond to the programming needs of the channel through independent production.

A large part of a commissioner’s function is to be an intermediary or conduit, either championing or defending the independent’s or broadcaster’s point of view to the other party. This role can leave commissioners feeling peculiarly invisible or without real power. (Trc, 2003:4)

The commissioning of the programmes is usually preceded by conversations between the company or producer and the commissioning editor. In this commissioners usually engage with a small number of independent companies with which they have an established relationship. Relationships are key to commissioning. They help building trust and with time lead to a smoother production process. However, the existence of a limited number of ‘preferred suppliers’ may lead to an exclusion of a large number of companies. In a study by Pollard et al. (2005) thirty four percent of the companies participating in a survey recognised that this practice built barriers to the extent they could compete for
commissions. On the other hand, the commissioning editors operate in a very fragile environment where risks should be avoided at any cost. This obstructs the straightforward decision making, as they often have to refer to their superiors. Independent companies are the ones directly affected by this as it makes the process quite unpredictable.

The independent sector is particularly concerned about the length of time it takes to make a commissioning decision. Most are adamant that they would rather hear a ‘no’ about their project than be given a ‘maybe’ which lasts for months. For their part, commissioners argue back that in their experience independents often refuse to accept a rejection and prefer to keep a proposal under discussion. It appears that ‘no’ is a word that commissioners often find hard to say, and indies find hard to hear. (Trc, 2003:8)

The above findings illustrate the complex nature of the relationships which both the commissioning editors and the independent companies have to manage in an environment of unclear decision making power within the broadcasters and highly individualised contracting practices. Moreover, there is a high turnover among the commissioning editors and relationships have only a limited time to reap fruits. The process of creating a good working association can only last for a short time as commissioning editors often move jobs and positions. The new commissioning editors bring their own contacts. Importantly, the volatility of the contracting process and the resulting unpredictability of the outcomes impact upon employment and the ways in which independent companies organise their staffing. Permanent employment is almost non-existent and employers resort to it only when there is lack of talent in a particular area (such as the regional labour markets).
Location in the regions also proves problematic for winning business: firms cannot liaise closely with commissioning editors who are based exclusively in London.

Further insights into the main challenges which independent companies are faced with, are revealed by Leadbeater and Oakley (1999). Amongst these were insecurity and a heavy reliance on informally convened resources. The feeling of freedom of the companies in their study was accompanied by uncertainty and the feeling of satisfaction - with insecurity. Independent companies are based on individualistic values and collaborative working practices. In the four cities where the researchers developed their case studies, namely Cardiff, Sheffield, Glasgow and Brighton there were strong networks and connections among the companies which were used to support creative efforts.

In another regional study (Tsai et al., 2006), even the more established small media companies admitted that they were losing employees to the big broadcasters – mainly because of a lack of career prospects and pay rates. Their more senior employees were usually leaving to work either for a broadcaster, to start their own company, or simply to become freelance.

The above insights into the ways small independent companies operate suggest that there are significant tensions both in terms of gaining commissions and finding and keeping skilled workers. Given the scale of independent production and the role of the small companies within it, such issues are of great importance in understanding employment in the UK television. There are however only a very limited number of studies or part of them which have tried to map some of these problems.

To summarise, the television industry depends heavily on the functioning of networks. These networks have an important geographical dimension. There is a contrast between the
centre and the rest, peripheral ones. The latter have stayed largely outside of the focus of research: a gap which is addressed here. There are also a few pieces of research which suggest that small independent companies face serious pressures in gaining commissions and in securing skilled workers. These factors are important in shaping the realities of employment and skills development in such companies. The present thesis has focused more explicitly on them in its aim to fill the gaps in the existing knowledge.
CHAPTER FOUR:

THE REALITIES OF WORKING IN TELEVISION: INSIGHTS FROM THE EXISTING RESEARCH

This chapter presents the insights into working in television which the existing research provides. It starts by discussing the working conditions including finding jobs, pay and working hours. It then points out their negative impact on personal lives. Further, the specifics of the labour market are highlighted with particular attention to the role of social mechanisms and personal relationships. Then attention is paid to the skills development and learning mechanism. It is followed by a discussion of the role of the changing technology. Finally, the nature and issues around career development are discussed.

Insecurity and low pay

A key feature of employment in television is freelance work (Skillset, 2007), whereby people are hired for specific short-term jobs in specific productions. For the freelancers jobs are, as Storey et al. (2005) found, distinctive ‘pieces’ of work and ‘termination’ is an intrinsic property of their employment (pp.1039-1040). Working as a freelancer is marked by insecurity (Paterson, 2001; Storey et al., 2005; Tempest et al., 2004). The main pressure comes from the need to find employment jobs. This insecurity is what Randle and Culkin
(2009) term ‘structured uncertainty’ (p.112) as it is rooted in the very way risk is devolved to the individual in such labour markets. Finding work is largely dependent on social mechanisms and sometimes additional efforts and strategies do not necessarily lead to finding employment (Dex et al., 2000; Paterson, 2001). Paterson’s study (2001) of freelancers’ diaries revealed that the majority of the participants favoured employment stability and had put individual ‘survival’ as a priority in their working lives. Skillset data demonstrates that there is an increasing number of freelancers who find their jobs through informal channels (Skillset, 2007). Thus 39% heard about their most recent job directly from an employer and 24% from someone they have worked with before. Such sources are also common in independent production.

Individuals employ different strategies in order to cope with the insecurity and instability of their freelance employment. Dex et al. (2000) found responses to uncertainty such as diversification of an individual’s portfolio, building a network of informal contacts and information collection, or simply relying on a partner for a regular income. Similar mechanisms have been found for other creative industries (see, among others Blair, 2009; Haunschild and Einkhof, 2009; Jones, 1996; Randle and Culkin, 2009). This volatility of work opportunities is the reason freelancers often look for their next employment whilst still working on their previous project (Saundry and Nolan, 1998). There is a tension between being a team member and at the same time acting as an individual; uncertainty ‘tampers’ the trust and establishes a ‘complex sense of sharing and competing’ (Paterson, 2001:516). Moreover, insecurity can have a negative impact on creativity. As Paterson (2001) notes, “For people on short-term contracts it is the next job that is important and this leads to the holding back of ideas and less creative exchange within companies.” (p.
This seems to be at odds with the other feature of freelance employment: the importance of the quality and success of the last project (Blair, 2001). The tension between the two creates conflicting pressures upon individuals imposing a ‘restrained’ form of creativity.

Hours of work in the creative field can be very long. According to the results of the 2005 workforce survey conducted by the Audio Visual Sector Skills Council, the average working day for all the industries (i.e. not only television) is a little more than nine hours. It is highest in commercials (approximately 11 hours) followed by independent production and equipment hire (a little over ten hours), and corporate production (ten) (Skillset, 2005). In terms of specific occupations, the longest working hours were reported by make up and hairdressing (nearly 13), costume and wardrobe (12) and camera (11). These occupational groups are the ones where freelance employment prevails. For example, in hair and make up freelancers amount to 96% of the workforce, in costume and wardrobe 78%, and in camera 63%. According to Skillset (2007) freelancers work approximately a day longer on average compared to employees. Also, 11% of the freelancers reported that they worked 13 hours or more compared to two percent of the staff (Skillset, 2005).

Pay has also increasingly come under pressure given the large numbers of entrants to the labour market and the pressure to reduce the cost of productions (Saundry, 2001; Storey et al., 2005; Tsai et al., 2006; TVWrap, 2005). The average annual pay across the audio visual industries in 2005 was £32,239 (Skillset, 2005). The 2005 data also indicates that on average freelancers earn less than staff (£25,832 compared with £33,373). In 2008 the average income of the television workforce was £36,300 while in independent production it was £34,600 (Skillset, 2007). It is a matter of concern that earning levels vary depending
on personal characteristics. Women, people from ethnic minorities and disabled people were found to earn substantially less across occupational groups (Skillset, 2005). Hourly and weekly rates in the industry can be (although are not necessarily) relatively high, but the lack of full employment throughout the year results in fairly low annual incomes (Randle et al., 2008). A large number of the respondents to a longitudinal survey by Dex et al. (2000) reported that they had to work outside television as a way of securing an alternative income. Unpaid work is also common in the industry. Forty seven percent of the workforce have worked for free and this figure is higher amongst freelancers: 58% (Skillset, 2007). Some of this may be accounted to the length and nature of contracts. Thirty nine percent of the freelancers reported having a contract of less than one month in length (Skillset, 2007).

Saundry (2001) points at the historical introduction of individual working hours and ‘buy outs’/‘all in deals’ as a means of increasing flexibility of the staff. As a result there was a decrease in overtime pay, reduced staffing and a disproportionate increase in work for certain groups. Saundry’s research also found continuous and strong pressures on independent productions to cut costs and often underpay freelance staff, especially at the bottom end of the labour market. The same study also found a parallel process in which freelancers had bigger bargaining power: when independent production companies needed to ensure the quality or needed specific skills or style required by the commissioning editor. In these cases they were hiring a particular senior professional in order to get a contract. In these cases the individuals demanded by the client had more bargaining power.

Ironically, where contracts are of a finite length, production companies and broadcasters were, and are, potentially at their most vulnerable to the increased
bargaining power of labour. Such power is dependent on the existence of scarce skills within a particular area of work and the ability of workers to exploit reputation and track record. (p.53, original emphasis)

Efforts to reduce cost result not only in declining pay rates, but also in using free labour. According to research by Pollard et al. (2005) 29% of the companies surveyed have used, or rely on, unpaid labour. It seems that the ones more likely to work for free are the ones with a more disadvantaged position on the labour market, for example, those from a minority ethnic background (Pollard et al., 2005). The pressure of low pay is also particularly evident at entry level. In 2005 a group of freelancers started a campaign against the exploitation of young people who are trying to enter the industry: TVWrap (2005). Low levels of pay or no pay at all was one of the main issues (along with long hours) which the television professionals were campaigning against. The power of the individual on the labour market is dependent on their reputation and the quality of their portfolio. As Saundry (2001) suggests, the

[N]ew entrants to the freelance market with limited skills, no track record and little access to the networks which underpin employment within the industry have nothing to bargain with, such workers are therefore prone to low wages, poor conditions and chronic insecurity in the absence of formal structures of labour regulation. (p.35)

Power, of course, lies with the clients and studies have confirmed that freelancers make every effort to please companies and commissioning editors (Storey et al., 2005). Overall, the sector is still marked by unfavourable working conditions, long hours, continuing
disadvantage for certain groups based on ethnicity, disability and gender (Randle et al., 2008).

**Pressures on personal lives**

Intensive and long hours of work in television are another factor which has a negative impact on the balance between work and personal lives of those working in it. The main reason for this is insecurity and the difficulties of planning (Dex et al., 2000). Applying a longitudinal work history approach, Paterson (2001) followed the careers of different age groups within the television industry. Each age group faced various issues in their work lives as they were subjected to different changes within the industry. One common trait was respondents’ growing awareness of the considerable and often detrimental impact uncertainty and long working hours had on their personal lives. For example, one of the case study respondents, a woman who entered the business in the 1990s wrote the following in her diary:

> [P]roduction is fantastic to be in but not at the cost of my life which is what it feels like. It seems to be a requirement that, in order to succeed, you have to give up everything else. (p.503)

Age is related to this. As the research by Randle et al. (2008) demonstrated, there is disproportionately smaller number of women and freelancers at the age when childbearing and family responsibilities are likely to be present. Another pressure comes from the blurred boundaries between the personal and the economic. As research into Hollywood film practitioners (Randle and Culkin, 2009) and German actors showed (Haunschild and
Einkhof, 2009) the personal relationships can become subject to economic logic which assesses all friendships against instrumental values.

**Yet, it is a labour of love**

Creativity, self-expression or, simply passion for television are important drivers for a lot of the industry professionals. This is an industry which values highly intrinsic properties and person-specific characteristics (Smith and McKinlay, 2009a). Creativity, the nature of the work itself and the necessity to pass on and use knowledge already created is considered by Starkey et al. (2000) as a major reason for the existence of a ‘latent organisation’. In other words, in addition to the uncertainty and functioning of the labour market, some aspects of the motivation behind the attempts of people to somehow form more permanent work units is the nature of the work, the engaging creative process and knowledge creation, sharing and development:

Effective cultural industry production usually benefits from a combination of those talent synergies, shared knowledge development activities, and production continuity that can best be sustained within a set of relationships that persists and develops over time. (Starkey et al., 2000:304)

Discussing the motivation of people to become freelancers or establish their own companies Leadbeater and Oakley (1999) emphasise industry professionals’ desire to make programmes in their own way, to create their own products and pursue their own interests rather than financial incentives. Ursell (2000) expresses similar ideas, but is also more critical of the realities of employment in television:
For the workers, television production is simultaneously a source of potential rewards, both material and existential, and a source of definite exploitation.... There is still the business of excitement, the pleasure which motivates so many to volunteer for exploitation at the hands of the others, or to self-exploit. The pleasure goes beyond a concept of job satisfaction.... Television work is not invariably just a job: it can be a labour of love.... In television production, you can pursue your sensual pleasures and, if you are lucky, people applaud you. If you are lucky, they might even pay you. (pp. 819-821)

And Storey et al. (2005) point out that “While freelancers talked openly about the vulnerabilities of their freelance lives, they were also aware of its rewards.” (p. 1047). But this self-motivation and commitment can function as a form of control over creative labour (Smith and McKinlay, 2009b). Although the context of creative industries is often presented as a liberating environment, in practice it is subjected to market principles, competitive pressures and performance targets (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Smith and McKinlay, 2009b).

**Informal mechanisms in the labour market**

The main change in the UK television labour market has been the shift from strong internal organisational labour markets to external or occupational ones (Baumann, 2002; Langham, 1996; Ursell, 1998). As a result, a key characteristic of the labour market in UK television at present is its reliance on informal social mechanisms (Baumann, 2002; Randle et al., 2008; Saundry et al., 2005). In the 2005 Skillset workforce survey 30% of the respondents indicated that they heard about their last job directly from an employer and 18% from
someone they had worked with before. In the independent production sector these figures are higher than the average: thirty-five percent of the respondents heard about their last job directly from an employer, 32% from someone they have worked with before and 12% through word of mouth (Skillset, 2005).

These informal practices are not entirely new to television, but the changes have intensified them (Langham, 1996; Ursell, 2000). This characteristic has been emphasised by almost all authors who have researched contemporary work in the television industry. Saundry (2001) summarises: “The ability of workers to find freelance work was based on reputation, track record and their contacts within the industry” (p.28). Following an extensive study of freelancers Ursell (2000) comes to a similar conclusion: “Television workers are hired (substantially if not completely) on the basis of their reputation.”(p.818). In their study of the UK film and TV, Randle et al. (2008) point out that the confidence of freelancers to make contacts at social events, for example, directly effects their chances of getting work (p.107). In this labour market people cross-reference each other and are colleagues and competitors at the same time.

Analysing the television production labour market from a critical perspective, Ursell (2000) highlights the fact that the freelance staff in the industry organise the labour market themselves. This process involves increased self-commodification and continuous reproduction of labour market segmentation. Ursell further reinforces the notion of reproduction of social systems by the discretionary power of the individual. In searching for the sources of inequality among different individuals in the labour market (rooted in the ‘material structures of work, employment and market exchange’, p. 811) Ursell starts by identifying three main characteristics of the dominant form of employment in the industry,
freelancing. These are: freelancers organise their labour market themselves; there is a widespread lack of (clear, if any) employment relations and it is not clear why freelancers choose to work in such context (p.811). The labour process in the television industry goes beyond the immediate organisational boundaries and extends to the pool of freelance labour (Ursell, 2000). She draws an analogy with the 'economy of favours' (after Ledeneva 1998), which is governed not by monetary mechanism, but building relationships as a means of access to scarce resources. Value is not only money. "They organize their own labour market, their own work teams and their own marketing, in an economy of favours." (Ursell, 2000:822). These mechanisms are also captured in Starkey et al.'s (2000) thesis of the 'latent organisation' in the television industry: the dormant network which 'reanimates' itself at appropriate market conditions when people are drawn together again for a specific production.

The operations of the labour market in the television industry rely almost exclusively on informal networks and personal contacts (Paterson, 2001; Saundry, 1998; Saundry et al., 2005). Both entry to the industry and any further employment steps are all secured through informal processes (Langham, 1996; Randle et al., 2008; Tunstall, 1993; Ursell, 1998). Informality of the labour market has been analysed through the concept of the occupational labour market and institutional labour market theory (Baumann, 2002). Baumann claims that the flexible specialisation thesis is only appropriate when discussing labour market volatility, but is not able to explain the accounts of personal relations and other social phenomena which are key mechanisms in that labour market. The television industry is characterised by frequent changes of employer and short-term employment duration. At the same time it no longer has strong institutions or organisations which can enforce
industry-wide standards, especially as regards skill levels. This means that social mechanisms are performing the functions of the labour market institutions: they safeguard transactions against uncertainty. For example, reputation provides a record on past performance and is used to reduce the uncertainly in future interactions (p.32). Baumann interpreted the use of intermediaries as ‘buffers’ against risk: both reducing uncertainty for individuals and cost for companies.

The television labour market with its strong reliance on personal networks and consisting almost entirely of freelance labour does present challenges for those at entry and at exit points. At entry level, aspiring professionals are suffering from the many social inequalities reinforced by the entry mechanisms. For example, people are selected on the basis of race, gender and above all, class (Holgate, 2006; Randle et al., 2008). Even if this is not done intentionally, the informality of the recruitment methods and the fact that people in television like to work with people similar to themselves (Langham, 1996), motivate and allow for this replication of existing imbalances. At entry level there are a large number of media graduates (Davis and Scase, 2000; Langham, 1996). This is partly due to the boom of media studies and related degrees in the last decade. The increased competition at this lower level of the television labour force combined with the informality of recruitment and selection practices lead to the widespread expectation that young talent will work for free (Holgate, 2006; Tunstall, 1993; TVWrap, 2005). This free work is often associated with poor working conditions or learning opportunities (Holgate, 2006; TVWrap, 2005). For example, here is one account of a 24 year old runner (Percival, 2005):

I worked on a large reality show last year which left me close to mental and physical collapse. I worked 18-hour days as a matter of course and averaged five
hours' sleep. The demands on me and the team I worked in were at best ludicrous and yet any failure to deliver such impossible targets was punished daily by such means as public humiliation. "This is what running is about," they fumed.

And of a 26 year old male shoot/edit researcher who subsequently gave up trying to break into the industry who told the newspaper:

I can use a variety of cameras, I can edit, budget and script. But despite that I have been working for nothing at an independent. I joined on the promise of getting paid work afterwards, but I had to leave as I couldn't survive without an income. When I asked the producer about a paid position she said there were no jobs and even her job wasn't guaranteed. She told me I could stay as long as I worked unpaid.

Problems have also been established at the ‘opposite end’ of freelancers’ working lives. Platman’s (2004) research on workers in their 50s and older media freelancers found that those in the later stages of their careers were more vulnerable to pay rates being constantly reduced particularly in the context of young ‘cheaply’ available labour. Workers were also finding difficulties staying in the active networks which were crucial for finding jobs, and they were facing challenges as their skills went out of date. So for those more senior freelancers this type of labour market did bring greater insecurity and made them much more vulnerable to competition. In line with this, research by Dex et al. (2000) studying the effect of the reforms on different age cohorts reported that television workers in their 40s were the group most affected by the changes in the television industry in the 1990s.
Skills development, learning and training

The general level of education in television, even for those employed at the lowest grades is very high. 69% of those employed in the audio visual industries are university graduates. In independent production they are 67% and in broadcasting 65% (Skillset, 2005). This, however, just gives the workers general capability and competence to develop specific knowledge (Davis and Scase, 2000). And,

It is only by working with others through the project oriented process of mutual adjustment that such a general capacity is converted into technical abilities that are relevant for executing specific work tasks. This leads to interdependencies between colleagues who are then only able to exercise their own particular skill within an informally constituted and flexible division of labour. (p. 16)

Personality and personal qualities as well as personal compatibility are very important in the working context of television (Davis and Scase, 2000; Starkey et al., 2000). The interpersonal relationships can be “as important as technical expertise in shaping the composition of project teams” (Davis and Scase, 2000:16). Smith and McKinlay (2009b) highlight the importance of such personal relationships for building the ‘fast trust’ in the fragmented labour markets of the creative industries. This is a safeguard mechanism where frequent moves have to be combined with high level of trust. Such fragmentation however, as Paterson (2001) argues, can be a ‘double-edged sword’. On one hand, it provides opportunities for new people to contribute with their ideas. However, “there can also be a negative impact on creative environments, as negotiation and trust have first to be established before creative learning can take place.” (p.515).
Training and learning in television has traditionally been and still is on-the-job. During the period of domination by the BBC and ITV the most popular form that this took was traineeships or apprenticeships in those organisations (Langham, 1996; Tunstall, 1993). Although the two broadcasters, and especially the BBC, still play an important role as training providers in the industry, the fragmentation and the significant decrease in the number of staff positions led to considerable reduction of the number of people who could train and benefit from the development systems of the big broadcasters. As Langham (1996) points out, for long years BBC and television training have been synonymous (p.79). The Corporation trained more people than it needed and the surplus then moved on to jobs outside it. It had a well-established and smoothly functioning internal skills development system linked to internal career structures.

Learning on-the-job, especially outside large structures, can be related to skills formation which Crouch (2002) defines as ‘community type’. It is typical for environments characterised by networks of small companies as well as for specialised areas (Crouch, 2005). Success and competitiveness in them depends on tacit knowledge, ability to innovate, creativity, close relationships between suppliers and customers, and scientific or other knowledge. The skills development mechanisms within community type structures, with the exception of a possible University education, are characteristically informal, uncertified and sometimes even unnoticed (Crouch, 2002:5884). There is also little distinction between initial and subsequent training, e.g. between the initial skills acquisition and just doing the job. Knowledge, in other words, develops in the process of working:
The creative community therefore represents a skill formation system where most of the distinctions that are normally crucial to the discussion of this topic break down: if the community is strong enough, the distinction between collective and private goods breaks down; distinctions between levels of training disappear; even that between training and the job itself, and therefore that between the school and the market. (Crouch, 2002:5884)

Skills development is related to a large number of contextual and historical characteristics, to factors related both to time and space, to the individual and collective, to the temporary and more permanent. Skills development under the community type of system is always dependent on the activities of the individual within a group, and therefore is not an isolated process.

There are different types of skills and they may include both technical and social dimensions (Cockburn, 1983). In fact, the latter have gained an increasing importance in both the reality of working life and the work/skills discourse (Grugulis et al., 2004; Payne, 1999). Skills are acquired through a process of learning. The process of learning itself is not contained within the boundaries of a particular classroom or curriculum. It is essentially a social process. This understanding is at the core of Lave and Wenger’s concept of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (1991). It is closely linked to the existence and functioning of different communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2005). Learning from this perspective is related to the lived experience of being a member of a community of practice. It takes a holistic form, concerns the whole person, including his/her relationships with the other members of the community. It is not a mere result of performing specific activities. Skills and knowledge are acquired in that very process of
participation in the social and cultural practice, “it involves becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person.” (Lave and Wenger, 1991:53).

Understanding the learning processes from this perspective is based on the appreciation of its social nature. It is therefore important to consider historical developments, relations between ‘old-timers’ and ‘newcomers’, the role of technology and technological developments and social relations among colleagues. The learning ‘curriculum’ is the actual practice of the community. It includes much more than mastering a specific task: it usually involves appreciation of the activities of the whole enterprise (Lave and Wenger, 1991:92-93). The issues of access to that practice and community are crucial in those processes as is the asymmetrical nature of the relationships between the newcomers and the old-timers. In other words, there is a potential tension at the entry point and a latent conflict in the subsequent developments. The very process of learning, as mentioned above, is conceived of as a holistic activity, “both absorbing and being absorbed in - the ‘culture of practice’” (Lave and Wenger, 1991:95).

This uneven sketch of the enterprise (available if there is legitimate access) might include who is involved; what they do; what everyday life is like; how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; how people who are not part of the community of practice interact with it; what other learners are doing; and what learners need to learn to become full practitioners. It includes an increasing understanding of how, when, and about what old-timers collaborate, collude, and collide, and what they enjoy, dislike, respect, and admire. In particular, it offers exemplars (which are grounds and motivation for learning activity), including
masters, finished products, and more advanced apprentices in the process of becoming full practitioners. (Lave and Wenger, 1991:95)

A more ‘mechanical’ view of the process reveals that apprentices start by being involved in peripheral, less complex and vital tasks and not in the practices by which the production process actually starts. Once they have spent a sufficient amount of time in the community they are entrusted with more and more central tasks until they become full members.

Creative labour is rarely non-standard or fully innovative (Smith and McKinlay, 2009b). It has a routine aspect to it which is rooted in the training into a community of fellow-artists. Importantly for learning, it has similarities with craft labour in that it requires working on a certain tradition or an established form (Smith and McKinlay, 2009b). Hence by its very nature learning and skills development in television presume and require community, norms and shared formal and informal practices. Because the skills required are a product of socialisation (Smith and McKinlay, 2009b), they can only be developed within a social system, alongside more technical capabilities.

At their core, the mechanisms of skills development in the television industry are still the same: the main type of learning is still on-the-job (Skillset, 2005). A case study of a digital television production, part of Thynne’s (2000) research on women in the era of digital television, provides important insight into this. Because of the small budget, the staff hired did not have much prior experience of working in television. In addition to informal channels, the production, which recruited only women, had to recruit by advertising in local newspapers. The advertisement said that experience was not required as training would be provided. Hence, most of the crew members were inexperienced. In the end, the young crew members had mixed opinions about the reality of their learning. Although they
recognised the project as a good opportunity to develop skills, the lack of time and resources limited it significantly.

The above is resonant with other opinions. Almost all authors who have studied the television industry in the UK and the majority of those who have considered the reforms of the last two decades have raised concern about skill formation and skill levels. Langham (1996) explains how the process of fragmentation changes the technical skills situation:

> It was the burgeoning of the small independent companies and the expansion of the freelance market which brought the problem into focus. New recruits sometimes had no training at all and had to pick up skills and knowledge as they went along. It is difficult to convey how much of a shock this was to old-timers with a tradition of rigorous and thorough apprenticeships behind them. Craft unions that had protected high-level skills no longer had the authority to insist on anything. Moreover, craft technicians with years of experience were retiring and there were no replacements.

(p.81)

In one of the earlier academic analyses, Barnatt and Starkey (1994) acknowledged that skills development in television was probably best done in-house. This was one of the major roles in the well-financed BBC and ITV before the sectoral reforms: they both acted as a ‘strong training base for the British industry’ (Born, 2004:37). Saundry and Nolan (1998) argue that fragmentation has ‘eroded traditional patterns of skills formation’ (p.421) and even more fundamentally, as a result of this, that freelancing is threatening to weaken and damage the skill base of the industry. This view was maintained by the respondents from the companies interviewed. Saundry and Nolan (1998) conclude that fragmentation has actually fractured both the formal and informal processes of skills regeneration (p.
422) in line with Saundry’s arguments elsewhere (2001). Studying a medium size production company Ursell (1998) found that reductions in staffing levels eroded on-the-job learning and training. And one of Thynne’s (2000) female respondents, a freelance vision mixer, said that she would not like to be entering television now because there was no training anymore. Moreover, the respondent pointed out with disapproval, it is assumed that for digital technology one does not need much skill. Although the same respondent recognised the benefits of freelancing (choice for whom to work and more free time), she also recognised the crucial importance of in-house skills development and the experience which she acquired while she had a staff position. From her personal work history presented in the case study it was also evident that the jobs she got when she started to freelance were through contacts she had from her staff job with a big broadcaster. These insights into skills and learning in the sector at present suggest that there are challenges to it, which the present thesis sets to investigate further.

Relying on traditional skills formation mechanisms in the new context, however, also raises concerns about the diversity of people who can benefit from it.

Much learning in the industry remains craft-like, built on tacit skills developed by shadowing more experienced workers on production. Flexible production, based on transient networks, can be positive at the individual level if you are a talented, self-starter who will push for learning opportunities from experienced production professionals. However, this individualized and entrepreneurial context for learning and development raises genuine threats and challenges for those many individuals who are more reactive and need more hands-on support and mentoring in establishing their career. (Tempest et al., 2004:1535)
According to the above authors, exclusion also results from the fact that the most challenging and ‘rich’ jobs are with those with established reputations. Having in mind that the quality of on-the-job learning actually depends of the possibilities a job offers for extending one’s experience and skills (Finegold, 1999; O’mahony and Bechky, 2006), this finding means that the opportunities for development are more difficult to obtain at the lower levels.

In confirmation of the above findings, skills shortages have also been identified. Ursell (2000) mentioned companies complaining of skills shortages and Varlaam et al.’s (1989) report pictured the same situation. While, as Paterson’s (2001) respondents acknowledged in their reflective diaries-questionnaires, the pressure to improve skills was constantly present in their working lives along with the pressures to build reputation and contacts (p.498). Skillset also identified a number of skill gaps (2006). Skill gaps were reported by the employers in regards to technical, practical, communication and team working skills, mainly attributed to lack of experience (86%). However, as Skillset recognises, it is not possible to identify the skills gaps with high degree of precision because of the large number of small companies and the high levels of freelancing (p.24). Despite the reservations, it seems reasonable to summarise that overall, there have been serious concerns about erosion of skills in the sector (Born, 2004).

The combination of on-the-job training and weak trade unions means that obtaining any measure of the skill levels in the industry is very difficult. While previously trade unions used to control levels of competence mainly by using years of service as a guarantor of certain skill levels, deregulation resulted in vacuum in the industry-wide criteria for skill levels (Langham, 1996). In the early 1990s a series of attempts were made to introduce
vocational qualifications in television, with the strong involvement of the industry training organisation Skillset. Although Skillset did manage to launch new qualifications in 1994, there is much scepticism in the industry as to the role they play (Langham, 1996). Skillset also recognises the very limited adoption of apprenticeships which led to their suspension in England and Wales. The main reason for this was considered to be the lack of technical certificates (Skillset, 2006). There are a number of schemes such as the ‘New Entrants Training’ or subsidised short courses for freelancers offered by Skillset or regional screen agencies. The Sector skills council, however, realises the limitations such initiatives have in benefiting individual freelancers. In 2006 Skillset, in collaboration with other interested parties, developed the *TV Skills Strategy and Action Plan* (Skillset, 2006) which recognises the training difficulties of companies and individuals. For example, in the discussions of the ‘First Post’ entry scheme aimed at broadcasting post production entrants we read:

> However few of the smaller companies in the sector have either the resources or expertise to pursue this option. This is significant because, as previously noted, the freelance pool, independent and cabsat sectors have become the main entry point for newcomers to the industry. So the vast majority of people entering the industry are now doing so without the benefit of a structured development, gaining skills, knowledge and experience in a largely ad hoc fashion. (p.37)

In his analysis of occupational labour markets and institutional theory Bauman (2002) suggested that the lack of standardisation of skills has lead to an increased reliance on social mechanisms for establishing and communicating skill levels. Reputation is an example of a mechanism which helps assess the skills against an established and well-known level. A number of researchers have commented that employment prospects in this
labour market depend on reputation (Baumann, 2002; Saundry, 2001; Ursell, 2000). Reputation, however, is dependent on very elusive factors. As Paterson (2001) explains,

Television is an industry of opportunity as well as uncertainty, but it is constrained opportunity where how you network, whether you are attuned to fashionable ideas, and the success or failure of your programmes with audiences, determine the reputation of individuals. (p. 517)

Perhaps not surprisingly, another study of media freelancers, conducted by Storey et al. (2005) found reputation to be one of the main sources of anxiety amongst freelancers, because their own judgement was constantly under potential challenge from the judgement of others.

‘Multi-skilling’ has been another concept present in discussions on skills in television, especially by management-oriented commentators. The factor which has made possible the introduction of multi-skilling was the advancement in technology. The more critically oriented authors point out the limits of the processes. In a case study of a medium sized production company Ursell (1998) points out how it soon reached its natural limits. She also agrees that multi-skilling cannot be a boundless development as it is generally connected to specific technologies. A different aspect of the acquisition of multiple skills can be found in Storey et al. (2005). The pressure to be in employment may lead to freelancers accepting jobs they have not really specialised in. As one respondent put it, his expertise was ‘an inch deep and a mile wide’ (p.1048). In other words, the way the labour market operates and the way flexibility reflected upon people’s lives could encourage shallow development of skills.
Technology

Whilst the structure of the industry with its reliance on social relations is an important factor related to creativity, the role of technological progress should also be emphasised. The main development in this respect has been the shift towards digital technology. Authors such as McKinlay and Quinn (1999) point at the blurring of the traditional division between craft and creative input in commercial broadcasting. They found that there was an increased requirement for aesthetic and creative input from the technical staff to the work process in an era when training in the industry had rapidly declined. Previously, as their respondents explained, the equipment was complex and heavy, requiring more technicians to operate the different parts of it. There was a strict demarcation of tasks and every crew member identified him/herself with their respective craft occupation. Camera operators, technicians and engineers all had ‘extraordinary dexterity’ (p.4). Also, skills development had a collective dimension.

The complexity of individual tasks was overlaid by a need for collective improvisation based on shared experience…. Graduating from second to first assistant and finally senior operator was a slow experiential apprenticeship in collective coordination as much as a mastery of individual tasks. During breaks in production or on less demanding shots, younger camera operators would be temporarily ‘promoted’…. The crucial part of skills development was wholly controlled by the trade group and, as for the other broadcasting technician trade, was accompanied by socialisation into the norms of the craft. (pp. 4-5)

Certain authors, such as Barnatt and Starkey (1994) express concern that maybe the space for creativity and the quality of the creative type of work may be better provided in a more
traditional, rigid, ‘functionally departmentalized’ organisation. So, despite the fact that the authors see flexibility as a positive form of organising work in television, they also warn against the risks associated with it:

Ironically, functionally departmentalised organisation may actually be a prerequisite for the preservation of the creative space necessary for the quality in cultural production…. There is also the issue of skills development which can perhaps best be done in-house. (p.259)

An additional factor commented on by Saundry (1998) was that the introduction of new technology led to a process of standardisation of production, in line with Ursell (1998) who argues that the production process resembles the neo-Fordist paradigm.

Careers

Careers are an important element of the context in which the freelancers learn and develop their skills. They shape not only the processes and outcomes, but also the motivations behind the skills development.

Certain authors contend that in the past decade there has been a fundamental shift in the nature of the careers: the decline of the organisational career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996a; Herriot, 2002) and new realities of the boundaryless (Arthur, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996b) or protean (Hall, 1996; Hall, 2004) careers. Others insist on preserving the legitimacy of progression within a single employer (Guest and Mckenzie, 1996). While it is also argued that more empirical research is needed as career realities are a ‘complex mixture of change and continuity’ (Edwards and Wajcman, 2005:67) in line with the
concern that research into the new types of careers has been conducted only on a rather limited scale and within a limited set of occupational environments (Pringle and Mallon, 2003). But increasingly careers are ‘boundaryless’ (Arthur, 1994), or ‘occupational’ as opposed to ‘organisational’ (Watson, 2003). Career paths are no longer linear and static, but dynamic and multidirectional (Baruch, 2004). This shift also implies that careers are now owned by the individual with individuals adapting, learning and improvising in the changed career environment (Arthur et al., 1999).

Organisational careers were characterised by long-term vertical and hierarchical progression while inter-organisational ones were more individual with segmented and horizontal work path development. Organisational careers were related to long-term, often single-employer jobs, where the measure of success was upwards movement in the organisational structure in a context of strong internal labour markets (Herriot, 2002; Marsden, 1999). This logic of vertical co-ordination and the organisational career model stemming from it was widely understood by all the parties (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996b). People were hired at the beginning of their working lives, expected to stay with their employer for most of it and were offered in return a clear and predictable succession of hierarchically superior positions. Training, development and experience were provided to match the generally established standards for those positions.

Contemporary careers are said to be unfolding outside the boundaries of a single organisation. It is the responsibility of individuals to develop their careers. In a fragmented and unregulated environment the traditional understanding of organisation is transformed into the concept of organising, e.g. the static function is replaced by a dynamic concept.
The boundaryless career is seen as a vehicle for enacting and effectuating the process of organising (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996b).

Following the boundaryless career approach, Jones (1996) developed a project-based career model using US film industry data. She distinguished four stages: beginning, crafting, navigating and maintaining the career. Beginning a career in film is challenging as the environment is highly competitive and there are no established entry paths. Motivation and good interpersonal skills are a must and people are selected on the basis of those. The process of ‘crafting’ one’s career involves acquiring technical skills through on-the-job training while being socialised into the values and the culture of the industry. The latter, the author asserts, lays the foundation of work organisation and co-ordination in the industry by enabling individuals to understand conventions and work routines and hence move between projects and firms. There is also a notion of ‘paying one’s dues’ to the industry by working long hours and doing menial work (p.68).

The next stage, navigating one’s career, involved establishing a reputation (by creating good work), developing skills and establishing a network of industry contacts based on relationships. So, Jones affirms, it is essential to produce good quality work in order to be able to secure further projects, e.g. further work, development opportunities and maintaining and acquiring new professional connections. Importantly, Jones emphasises also that,

Along with performing quality work one must seek out projects that challenge and expand one’s skills. In project networks, the individual, not the boss or organisation, is responsible for developing and enhancing skills. (p.65)

Individuals have to be able to balance the skills development aspect of a job with the quality of performance: because skills acquisition occurs on-the-job, they have to accept
challenges within the boundaries of the good work to enable them to maintain reputation. Jones’ respondents associated their individual reputation with the reputation of the final product, e.g. the success of the film they worked on (Jones, 1996). Careers then become really precarious, because the success of any film, as the author herself points out (p.66) depends on a large number of factors.

The final stage of the film career is maintaining it. Jones highlights two main challenges at this stage: sustaining and extending one’s network, and balancing professional and personal lives. The first challenge has three main aspects: identifying and training new members, establishing workshops that develop talent in the field, and integrating the industry by co-ordinating events such as film festivals (p. 66). In this way the focus is shifted to developing others and maintaining the industry.

Jones (1996) also looked at the career patterns within the industry. She identified two types of employment relations (‘subcontractor relations’ in Jones’ terms): free agents and team members. The former are more prevalent which suggests the dominance of market-type relations within the industry. These can be further linked to the following patterns of relationships: market (single involvement with a firm); hybrid (working repeatedly for one or more firm, but there is no dominating firm); dominant (dependence on one firm for about two thirds of the work); exclusive (reliance on a single firm). It is not surprising that the last one is the least observed one in the industry. Jones further suggests that certain skills are associated with particular positions (pp. 70-71). Thus ‘managerial’ skills pertain predominantly to the producer and director’s roles. ‘Technical’ skills are associated with the work of cinematographers, editors and production designers and are linked either with
team or with free-agent patterns and with hybrid relationships. These were the skills least likely to be associated with exclusive relationships.

It is also helpful to conceptualise careers in television as careers in project-based enterprises, similar to the way this was done for the film industry. Faulkner and Anderson (1987) describe how such careers evolve:

Career lines are forged as participants on both sides of the market move from film to film, from opportunity point to opportunity point. Career attributes are accumulated as people move from credit to credit. Sustained participation in this structure of contracts, credits, and attributes is the requirement for continued success. (p. 883),

and

Building a career line is an uncertain and often erratic process, with quite a range of outcomes possible in the form of (a) continuity of contracts over a period of time and (b) a range of recurrent ties with many and different kinds of people in the business. What has long existed in this business is a form of socioeconomic organisation built up from this constant weaving and interweaving of credits and relationships. Freelancers work hard through credits and transactions to be in films and film-based relationships. From this viewpoint, the number of credits and contracts can be seen as a robust indicator of market productivity. The number of ties to others becomes an accurate gauge of network location, for participants work through transactions and work to be in transactions continuously. (pp. 887-888).
Chapter Four

Arthur and Rousseau (1996b) emphasise the positive aspects of careers unfolding across organisational boundaries. However, this move away from organisational careers has also been described as disruptive and negative for both the individual and society. With the fragmentation of one’s career, Sennett (1998) argues, the narrative of one’s life is fragmented and the whole process of sense-making of both working and personal life is shaken.

In a working life constructed between organisations and jobs, there is also a tension between skills development and career development, which previously, in an organisational context, used to run in parallel. It is reflected in the so called ‘career progression paradox’ (O’mahony and Bechky, 2006). Based on research on US film professionals, the concept problematises the ways in which freelancers/contract workers expand their skills in order to make their next career step. In this type of employment such a move depends largely on the previous project role. In fragmented and external labour markets there is a higher risk for employers hiring people with the right skills. When applying for a job, a freelancer would be looking for positions similar to the last one held, and employers would hire individuals who have had experience in similar positions, i.e. use credits as an indicator of skills. Because there is a risk in hiring ‘external’ individuals anyway, it is highly improbable that a freelancer would be hired for a position different to or ‘higher’ than the one (s)he had held previously. And so there is a paradox, which freelancers can overcome by explicit tactics to enable them gain additional skills (‘stretchwork’).
The reluctance among freelancers to take creative risks has been remarked on by Saundry and Nolan (1998). Tempest and her colleagues (2004) found the links between learning and freelance career or job moves problematic:

The quality of experiential on-the-job learning depends on the challenge and diversity of the production role offered. The most challenging jobs tend to be concentrated in the hands of those with established reputation, creating important issues of exclusion from access to learning opportunities for many workers. (p.1535)

This tension can result in the constant pressure to perform and ‘please’ clients by adapting to their needs (Storey et al., 2005). This potentially restricts the scope and methods of work under a project and hence restricts the learning possibilities: the main aim becomes to conform and not experiment.

The nature of careers is a factor which shapes the processes of learning and skills development. Understanding the mechanisms which link one job with another is closely related to understanding how one learning opportunity is connected with the next one.

Anyone who wants a career in film, television or video in the 90s must understand the new structure (or lack of structure) in the industry and the implications of the changes for employment opportunities… During the 90s a career in film, television or video demanded great resources of emotional stamina to accept the uncertainty and even enjoy the roller-coaster atmosphere of the industry increasingly subject to rapid change. (Langham, 1996:49)
The literature on careers discussed above provides a relevant and helpful framework for understanding careers in television. There are however not many studies dedicated to examining careers in UK television specifically. The few exceptions are a project of the British Film Institute described in the works of Paterson (2001) and Dex et al. (2000), and a research on careers and social capital in the television and financial service industries by Tempest et al. (2004). The latter, based on 32 interviews with company managers and relevant third parties in the television industry, confirmed the shift from long-term employment within a single large organisation associated with in-house training and progression through well-defined structures and clearly set out grades and roles to short-term contracts based on reputation, on-the-job training and freelance training and ambiguous, fluid job roles. A particular concern was the increasingly blurred association between job titles and previous experience. This was mainly to be found in cases when less experienced workers were offered a higher title in order to compensate for lower pay.

A useful discussion by Tempest et al. (2004) conceptualised careers as the context in which the social capital is acquired. The fragmentation of careers raised issues for organisational social capital which both individuals and firms acquired. Importantly, as the authors pointed out, a lot of successful freelancers’ social capital had been developed in the course of their organisational career which preceded the freelance one. So, Tempest and her colleagues raised concerns as to where social capital would be acquired in the future. A further complication was the relationship of the social capital to trust, which has been eroded with the shift to flexible employment patterns in the industry:

The short time-frame of contemporary business and the constant reconfiguration of flexible capitalism limit the ripening of informal trust. (p.1541)
Tempest et al.’s (2004) concern parallels Sennett’s (1998) position and relates to the observations that ‘careering alone’ i.e. the fragmentation of the career paths and their individualisation, is likely to have negative consequences (p.1542).

Changes in career patterns were experienced differently by the various age groups of professionals (Paterson 2001). While those who entered the industry before the early 1980s had entered it ‘seeking a career that had purpose, status and good earnings’ (p.498), the careers of later recruits were marked by uncertainty which they disliked and tried to respond to by various strategies (Dex et al., 2000; Paterson, 2001). The individuals were divided into three age groups and case studies for each of them were discussed. The career stages were linked to the individual’s assessment of their creativity. In the first age group, of those below 30, a female freelancer (case study A) acknowledged that the lower pay rates actually enabled her to progress more quickly by accepting reduced rates. It bought and brought her more creative freedom. However, the overall conclusion regarding the careers of the under 30 age cohort was that,

In a freelance role uncertainty can become intolerable if the increasing need for financial security cannot be met, while the impact of working life on an individual’s personal life plays an increasingly important part in attitudes to work the anchoring of these careers is highly unstable unless underpinned by an organisation of effective network able to sustain continuity of employment at crucial moments of change. (p. 506)

In the next age group: 30 to 40 years old, the career choices were marked by the pressures of the personal life, especially the need to have children or provide for a family. The initial creative motivation behind the decision to pursue a career in television was subdued by the
need for bigger financial stability and reflected in the initiatives they took to provide other sources of money. The third age group of people studied provided a contrasting picture of the later stages of career, which for this particular section of people started as an in-house stable path.

By the age of 40 most careers are well set and individuals can look forward to good pay and challenging work. What we find in television production, however, is a rags or riches dynamic among creative workers in this cohort… Many of these people became the victims of the changes in the industry in the late 1980s, although some became the beneficiaries of good deals and, with smart positioning, have built independent companies with reputations for good quality programming. (p. 511)

As a result of such experiences, Paterson (2001) argues, the career values of individuals have become reactive (p. 513). Whenever individuals do take the initiative, it is either at very high risk or as a coping strategy. And so the career studies of the UK television demonstrate how the changes in careers in the particular context of the UK television sector has resulted in restricted choices and the employment conditions and environment limit or at the very least shape the choices of individuals, setting a new type of boundary against their ‘boundaryless’ careers. Relevant to this is the very way in which work in this sector has been conceptualised and regarded. Western societies have long have accepted the romantic idea of opposition between the creative and the commercial. However, much of the contemporary creative achievements are made within a commercial system (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). So, as Smith and McKinlay (2009b) point out, creative industries are subjected to market principles, efficiency imperatives, risks and competitive pressures which they have to manage. The nature of creative labour is largely based on routine and
an established form (Smith and McKinlay, 2009b). Conceptualising it as unique and innovative acts may shift the attention away from the context in which it takes place. “Yet, it remains the case that the relationship between creativity and commerce is a matter of negotiation, conflict and struggle” (Hesmondhalgh, 2007:70). Another problem, noted by Thompson et al. (2007), is the frequent shift between consumption and conception which has resulted in lack of specific accounts and analyses of the employment, management and work in creative industries. The current thesis addresses this gap by examining in depth a particular organisation, a small independent production company into its context.

To summarise, working in television has attracted academic attention and there are a number of relevant insights into the television world of work, freelancers’ careers and the functioning of the labour market. Employment in television is uncertain and the work involves long hours and often low or no pay. Freelancers often experience pressures in maintaining personal relationships and separating friendships from work. However, the high value placed on intrinsic satisfactions often means that the television practitioners readily subject themselves to such working conditions. The labour market is dominated by informal mechanisms which serve both as a co-ordinating tool and as a risk-reducing strategy. Skills development and learning also bear the characteristic of informality. They are most often on-the-job, tightly dependent on employment. In this they are heavily influenced and shaped by the ways in which the labour market operates and have been subjected to challenges in the new industry structure.

The above leads from the existing literature provide a good basis for identifying significant themes which relate to the tasks set out for the present research and which require further investigation. The problems experienced by newcomers in entering the industry, the
controversial working practices, the fragmented employment shaping the learning opportunities and the ways in which informal and social mechanisms impact on them are themes developed in the current work. Together with the issues identified in Chapter Three, they have formed the content basis of this thesis. The next chapter is going to discuss the methodological approach, research design and data collection methods used to in the empirical research on these themes.
CHAPTER FIVE:

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The previous chapter outlined the main themes and issues identified from the literature. This chapter shifts the attention to the specific research questions set under the current study. Considering their nature and specifics, the chapter then discusses and motivates the choice of research approach to the investigation. It then explains how the chosen methodology was translated into research design and data collection methods. In order to do this, an overview of the research design is made, with its two main components: an industry-wide study and a case study of a small independent production company. It is followed by sections outlining the data collection methods employed under each of the components and explaining the benefits which the methods bring to this research. Finally, a discussion is presented of the ethical considerations and principles followed in the process of data collection.
Research questions

The thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of the issues which employment in a fragmented organisational environment raise for learning and skills development. In fulfilling this aim, it sets out to answer the following research questions:

1. How do aspiring professionals embark on a career in television?

2. How are skills acquired in a fragmented industry such as television?
   
   2.1. What are the learning mechanisms and how are they related to the industry structures?
   
   2.2. Where and how does learning occur? How is it secured/provided and facilitated?
   
   2.3. What skills and knowledge do freelancers acquire?

3. What are the realities of work in independent production companies in a local labour market?

Each of the above three main research questions addresses a gap or a significant theme identified in the literature review. The first question focuses on the issue of entry to the industry. This is a topic which emerged as key from the review of the literature. It not only is one associated with problematic issues requiring further investigation, but is also closely related to the question of learning (including access to learning), career choices and hence the types of skills and knowledge acquired.

The second question focuses explicitly on the issues of learning and skills development. Although there are relevant aspects mentioned in the literature, there is no considerable work done on the mechanisms and issues of learning to date. The question encompasses specific methods, the role of the institutional environment, the types of knowledge it
produces and the factors which impact it, all reflected in the sub-questions. The problem is particularly relevant and unexplored in the context of the sector changes and one of both theoretical, academic and policy relevance. The targeted contributions in these three areas concern respectively problems of learning and skills development in fragmented environments which are based on informal, community-based on-the-job mechanisms; enriching the empirical body of knowledge of a field characterised by high levels of freelance work; and the issues de-regulation brings to ensuring sustainable skills development in an industry which has been deemed a model for the future of employment.

The third question investigates the issues of working, learning and skills development into a particular context and discusses them in relation to a specific company and production in a local labour market. Researching not only a production but also its immediate environment contributes to the knowledge of the independent sector and small regional companies in particular. Despite the growth of independent production, discussed in the chapter on industry background, not much research has been done on it. The contextually rich research, such as the case study approach, has usually focused on productions only. The link between such projects and the companies which manage them has largely been ignored and this research question addresses the gap, too. Following access to the specific company an additional contribution was identified: to the knowledge about small companies operating in the regions.

**The research questions and the methodological approach they require**

The research questions and approach presume attention both to the structural context and individual initiative and discretion. The processes through which skills are acquired and
progress made through individual careers are not isolated from each other: they shape and are shaped by the environment in which they occur. Investigating them involves a consideration of both the wider context and the other actors within it. It therefore acknowledges the existence of certain industry structures and the individual’s actions within them.

There is an economic, institutional and social context which bears the inherited traits of the changes and (recent) past of the industry. It guides, constrains or provokes the way freelancers enter, learn and progress. It also guides, constrains or provokes the ways in which those dealing with freelancers (companies and broadcasters) act. There are rules, a legislative framework and established relationships which shape the environment and define the parameters in which the industry actors operate. There are also unwritten community rules, which guide actions and behaviours. Other parties exist, too, and their activities and behaviours impact on the processes of learning and skills development. All players in the industry have a different degree of influence over their and others’ behaviours and actions. They can only act within the limits of their powers, which are variable. Moreover, freelancers are dependent on both external/material and intangible factors and powers. Individuals follow their own extrinsic or intrinsic motivations and make choices and changes within (or possibly beyond) the web of other powers and structures. Thus the answers to the research questions is situated in the relations of external and subjective. The questions problematise the processes and choices conceptualised and understood as outcomes of existing structures and individual action/agency. These are internally related (Fleetwood, 2005). However, structures exist independently of people and condition their actions (Danermark et al., 2002). This concept corresponds to the
present study’s focus on the interplay between the industry or company settings and individual actions. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) emphasise the interplay of routine, purpose and judgement in the notion of action. Moreover, they point out that the interplay varies in different structural contexts. Agency is understood as a “temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).” (p.963). This temporal conceptualising introduces a further dynamics in the notion of agency which may be particularly suitable for making sense of the frequent transitions freelancers make in the course of their employment.

It is important to decide on the level at which the research should focus on. Edwards (2005:275) emphasises the need to look at different levels of analysis in current studies of the world of work. He also mentions the need to link workplace experience to other levels of employment restructuring, for example. This notion is particularly relevant to the present study because of the complex background of the television industry and the different levels upon which it has impacted. It also harmonises with the attempts to answer questions related to ways and reasons for the phenomena, i.e. ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions. As there is no pre-conceived hypothesis the answers may be found at various levels and it is important to consider the interplay between these in answering the research questions.

Methodological approach to the present study

For the purposes of the present thesis preference was given to a qualitative research paradigm. The choice of qualitative over quantitative techniques is motivated primarily by
the nature of the research questions and the type of data needed in order to enable the necessary answers and explanations. Looking for data and explanations at various levels is necessary in order to explore reasons, establish different motivations, interests and viewpoints, find influences and establish power issues in the processes of learning and the realities of working lives in the television industry. As Miles and Huberman (1984) point out, it is what one wants to find out that dictates the way in which data should be obtained.

The questions require that the data captures a diversity of perspectives as well as meanings and interpretations, which makes a qualitative approach more appropriate (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Flick, 2002). Employing qualitative research techniques brings at least the following benefits for this study. Firstly, it allows the issue of variable definitions to be addressed which enriches the understanding of work realities within people's interpretations. Secondly, qualitative research allows one to study the processes and not only the outcome. Thirdly, it enables bringing together a multitude of sources to build an understanding of the contextual and power aspects which are essential for studying skills. Fourthly, qualitative studies are appropriate when investigating informal processes (Marshall and Rossman, 1989), which are essential in revealing the processes of learning on-the-job and in an environment regulated predominantly by socially established and enforced rules.

Qualitative research allows to focus on process and meanings (Blaikie, 1993; Blaikie, 2000; Bryman, 1989; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Van Maanen, 1983), rich contextual background and thick descriptions (Blaikie, 2000; Bryman, 1989), to remain close to the data (Bryman, 1989), to obtain details as opposed to wide scope (Silverman, 2005) or develop concepts and theory (Blaikie, 2000). It is therefore suitable to adopt such an
orientation when we seek to understand rich details rather than universal laws (Silverman, 2005). In order to answer questions such as how skills are acquired in the television industry, what skills the freelancers acquire, how learning occurs and how professionals start and develop their careers in the industry, one needs to be open to a multitude of individual circumstances, motivations and experiences, and to consider in detail the institutional, occupational and technological context. The recent profound changes in the industry are an additional complicating circumstance. The answer to the research questions requires data enabling explanation, which is preconditioned on collecting variable and rich in detail data. Qualitative methods were chosen as they are more appropriate when we try to capture both context and individual understandings, new or changing situations, processes and issues of power dynamics. Following a more pragmatic line (Creswell, 2003:21), the choice of qualitative research methods is based not solely on the research question, but also on the personal experience of the researcher, and the research audience. This also resonates with Silverman’s opinion (2005:123) that

[M]ethods do not just belong to social researchers. Before choosing a method, you should reflect upon the broader, societal context in which this method is located and deployed.

Television industry engages with words, images and interpretations. Hence researching work in television naturally presumes certain openness of expression and variability, which was considered in the choice of qualitative approach to the research.

Considering both the institutional and labour market context, and the individual experiences of the freelancers in the UK television allows for the learning and skills development mechanisms to be grasped in their variety yet in connection with the wider
in institutional and employment context. This is essential for providing an answer to the specific research questions also because of the recent changes in the television sector, which would be best registered in the combined consideration of both the structural change/continuity and individual diversity in experiencing them.

**Research design**

The research design had two main components: an industry-wide study conducted through a set of interviews and a case study of a small regional independent company. The first component comprised semi-structured biographical interviews with television freelancers and semi-structured interviews with other key industry informants such as trade unions, skills development organisations, regional development agencies and other regional players. The purpose of the interviews was to find out what were the learning mechanisms, ways of skills development and employment realities in the industry. This component of the study was a sectoral one because of the opportunities such research provides for studying the external, objective context, the specific practices of the companies and the network in which they occur and function (Smith et al., 1990) at the same time. This was important because the answer to the research questions, in line with the chosen methodology, lies in the interplay between internal and external, subjective and objective and the ways in which the complex factors from the wider context relate to and interact with the specific regional, organisational and individual circumstances. A small part of this component was an observation of a one day shoot of a food programme.

The second main component of the research was a case study of a small independent production company in the North of England over a period of three months following the
production of a one-hour science documentary. This component enriched the industry-wide study in at least three ways. Firstly, it served as a ‘lens’ through which the issues researched were examined in greater detail, in specific context and incorporating various parties’ viewpoints. Secondly, it addressed a gap in the literature by researching an independent company situated outside the big media cluster in London. Thirdly, it provided an insight into a small-scale production and small-scale business which experienced many of the changed features of the industry such as tighter budgets and smaller teams and was hence in a position to reveal these.

Under the above components of the research design specific methods were employed through which the data was collected. These specific methods are going to be discussed below in more detail.

**Industry-wide study**

*Semi-structured interviews*

The research used semi-structured interviews with freelancers and key industry informants. Interviews were chosen because they provide vividness of data (Gillham, 2000:130), which was necessary in order to understand the complexity of employment and obtain rich accounts of experiences in the industry. Respondents’ answers not only described facts of the external reality but also brought accounts of feelings and meanings (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008:195). With its similarity to a naturally occurring conversation, the interview allows for a direct interaction which facilitates establishing trust. The latter was particularly important as the interview data provided access to the reality of the mechanisms in the industry. Hence, openness and rich accounts were essential to secure good quality data.
The research questions, formulated following a review of the literature, needed to address both the themes identified in advance and to allow sufficient flexibility to the respondents to elaborate, suggest relevant issues and analyse situations. The latter was necessary in order to open the research to interpretations, possible explanations and depth. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as most appropriate for the purposes of such data collection. Preference was given to this type of interview as opposed to structured or unstructured ones because they allowed the respondents to express views freely and in their own words, to provide opinions and suggest reasons while following the main issues identified. Thus it was the interview form which provides access to detail and facilitates deeper understanding of the issues studied. It not only ‘freed’ the respondents but also allowed for probing and additional questions where necessary in order to establish exactly what the respondents meant or to guide the interview in a direction suggested in the course of the conversation (Pole and Lampard, 2002). This form also provided the flexibility to change the sequence of the questions and sometimes the exact wording, depending on the course and the themes covered by the respondents. Thus it allowed for the interview to resemble a conversation rather than interrogation (Pole and Lampard, 2002) which was needed especially in order to establish rapport and trust during the telephone interviews (discussed below). Unstructured interviews were considered initially because they would have allowed gathering variable and rich data. However, practicalities such as sufficient number of respondents willing to spend a considerable amount of time and the large amount of data which had to be analysed were reasons not to choose this type of interviews. Another reason was that there were some pieces of research which indicated a few potentially interesting issues for further study (such as the issue of entry, for example)
which the research aimed to build upon in a targeted way, and so basic interview schedule was readily available. An unstructured approach would not have allowed for this. This naturally suggested the use of semi-structured interviews.

Application of method such as interviews involves certain non-technical but important dimensions such as sensitivity towards the respondents and self-presentation of the interviewer (Fontana and Frey, 1994), the ability of the interviewer to predispose the respondents and to create and maintain rapport (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Hall and Hall, 1996). Fielding and Thomas (2001:126) emphasise the importance of an open and spontaneous discussion during research interviews. The manner of the interviewer is decisive in this respect (Fielding and Thomas, 2001; Oppenheim, 1992; Robson, 1999). Good interviewing skills involve the ability to listen, to ask clear and straightforward questions, eliminate leads to a particular answer and (appear to) enjoy the interview (Robson, 1999:232). Communicating ‘back’ to the interviewee is also important. The researcher “must communicate trust, reassurance and, even, likeableness to the respondent so that the latter’s interest and motivation are sustained.” (Ackroyd and Hughes, 1992:108). All the above were followed as useful guidelines for facilitating the practical conducting of the interviews in practice.

Many of these skills were improved or even acquired in the very process of interviewing. In my experience it was also a process of building confidence while fine-tuning the content of the interview: for example, finding the shortest working formula for introducing the research, of assuring respondents about anonymity and confidentiality without distracting them from the thematic introduction of the research and the general themes I was going to discuss. There was also an initial consciousness on my part of the fact that the vast
majority of the respondents were skilled in conducting interviews for their work (especially in roles such as ‘researcher’ or ‘assistant producer’).

**Biographical interviews with freelancers**

The first group of semi-structured interviews was conducted with professionals working in television on freelance basis. Following the initial few interviews with freelance television professionals a slight change in the structure of the interviews was made: a stronger work history/biographical component was introduced, especially as regards the initial stages of respondents’ careers. This was suggested by the naturally evolving interview process as well as the research questions focusing on entry and learning which occurred in the initial stages of one’s career. Certain questions were prompted by the initial few interviews. For example, asking camera and sound people about their assistants. I also removed the question of working on more than one project at the same time.

The semi-structured interviews with freelancers covered issues related to entry to the industry, learning, skills acquisition, finding jobs, working conditions, networks, reputation, career and future development. A sample of the interview schedule is presented in Appendix One. The initial list of questions was developed on the basis of the literature and the research questions. However, as mentioned above, once the interviews have started, it became obvious that a stronger work history element was needed in order to obtain richer data on specific situations, particularly job moves and workplace context. At the same time the intention was to cover the topics with some degree of flexibility in order to be able to reveal mechanisms, powers and tendencies beyond the strictly biographical information. The balance between the two was found in an interview schedule which
incorporated core research themes and a biographical approach. Respondents were asked about their work history with particular focus on the initial stages where more details were sought, the major subsequent moves were discussed as well as working conditions, reputation and social capital. Thus interviews started with a chronological account during which questions were asked about the main themes and examples of specific events.

A considerable proportion of this group of interviews was conducted over the phone. This was done mainly in order to respond to the limitation the target group of freelancers had in being able to predict their availability and commit the time for a face-to-face interview. The distances, which made quick response to interviewees’ availability difficult, further motivated the choice of conducting interviews over the phone. Telephone interviews are recommended in cases when there is a geographical spread of respondents (Berg, 2007). Under the current study this was complemented by the existence of a variety of respondents’ working arrangements which represented a further difficulty to conducting face-to-face interviews.

There was concern that telephone interviews would not be able to facilitate an open conversation, building rapport, reading body language and hence obtaining rich data. Berg (2007) suggested that telephone interviews were not a major method for collecting data as they cannot register important non-verbal communication clues and similarly to Fielding and Thomas (2008) recommended that it was best to use them once a face-to-face contact has taken place. However, as the details of conducting the research in the next chapter will confirm, such concerns did not prove justified. The skills and characteristics of the respondent group compensated for some of the limitations of the method. Freelance television professionals are used to talking about their employment over the phone as part
of their working lives. Moreover, certain groups such as researchers, associate producers, directors and production staff employ similar telephone investigation techniques in their jobs: when researching a topic or negotiating with potential contributors. This meant that the respondents were prepared and at ease discussing the questions on the phone. Thus during the telephone interviews I was able to both collect facts and discuss opinions. In this way concerns about the limitations of the method for collecting data on feelings, attitudes and views (Fielding and Thomas, 2008:252-253) were overcome. This method had been used previously once, in a smaller scale study (Saundry et al., 2005). The current research made a more extensive use of it and found it to be a fruitful means of data collection particularly attuned to the specific characteristics of the respondent group.

*Interviews with other key informants*

A second major set of semi-structured interviews were conducted with key respondents from the industry which included trade unions, regional development agencies, regional skills bodies and screen agencies. Their content revolved around the main themes used for the discussions with the freelancers. These interviews however were structured more loosely to correspond to individuals’ areas of expertise. The aim was to understand the role of the respective body, the issues regarding skills development, employment and industry mechanisms for finding jobs/building careers. The interviews with production companies covered themes such as finding people, winning commissions, evaluating the skill levels, employment practices and employment conditions. Examples of these interview schedules are presented in Appendix One.
Chapter Five

Additional research methods

A secondary method of investigation in addition to the semi-structured interviews, was attendance and participation in industry events. It was a method suggested by the practices within the researched community. This method was innovative and presents a contribution to the set of data collection methods used for research into television. It was useful in providing access to young professionals and aspiring entrants in particular. The industry events: fairs and industry week-ends, are initiatives which industry bodies organise to the benefit of freelancers and aspiring industry entrants. These events took places over a weekend organised during film festivals or were one-day workshops and seminars organised by BECTU. They also provided access to discussions of the way the industry works and workshops featuring industry professionals who shared their industry experience with younger aspiring talent.

An additional data collection method was the review of secondary industry data such as workforce surveys and employment census. Its purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of the features of the context and provided another way of triangulating some of the findings. The documents and public sphere publications included a review of the press coverage of ‘TV Freelancers’ TV Wrap campaign. The full press coverage is available online (www.tvfreelancers.org.uk) and it contained documents, cases of individuals, especially young freelancers revealing their experience of the industry, as well as opinions by professionals, trade unions and employers. In addition, relevant articles were sourced mainly from the Media supplement of the Monday The Guardian newspaper. There were useful opinions and insightful comments; some of them contained interviews with a strong biographical component. Occasional reviews were made of a few web-site forums for
television freelancers such as www.productionbase.com, www.mandy.com, and www.TVfreelancers.org.uk. As also mentioned, a one day filming was observed of a BBC-commissioned food programme.

*Case study*

The second main component of the research design was a case study of a small regional independent production company. The problems studied required consideration of the contextual factors and characteristics when investigating the issues. Case study was therefore chosen as a method preferred when the researched phenomena are tightly intertwined with the context and when the researcher wants or has to include contextual or complex factors (Yin, 2003a; Yin, 2003b). It is also appropriate for investigations in under-researched areas (Hakim, 2000) such as the changing employment context of television. Moreover, one of the research questions explicitly addresses the significance of the organisational context, which means that the method chosen should be sensitive to grasping the relevant details. Case study is precisely such a method (Lincoln and Guba, 2000; Stake, 2000). Furthermore, questions interested in *how* are best answered by applying case study methodology (Yin, 2003b). Thus the explicative power of the method made it a good tool for achieving the purposes of this research. These characteristics and possibilities of the case study approach were the main motivation for the choice of case study as the most appropriate approach. This research pursued a holistic case study with single embedded units (De Vaus, 2002; Yin, 2003b). The specific case was selected by two main criteria: access and theoretical fit. The second was judged against the criteria derived from the literature review and research questions. The purpose was to study an
independent production company. Once access was secured, the particular characteristics of the company became available. Although the case has inevitably an idiosyncratic aspect, it shared many common features with the rest of the companies in the region in its size and ways of operating. In this way the selection of the case was guided by a purposeful theoretically-driven criterion (Eisenhardt, 1989), while also incorporating self-selection logic, as regards its secondary characteristics.

Under the case study methodology two main methods of data collection were used: semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Participant observation was chosen as a method for the following main reasons. Organisational contexts are complex environments where many of the processes are subtle. Attitudes and spontaneous reactions are best registered through observation. Moreover, a method such as the interview may not be comprehensive enough to reveal issues which the respondents do not necessarily want exposed or of which they are not aware (or self-aware). Thus a method which allowed direct access to such factors and problems was needed. It also served as a data triangulation tool used to confirm, question and interpret the interview data. Through reflexive practice it also enhanced the analysis of the data especially as far as it enabled a deeper and richer interpretation in addition to the greater contextualisation of the issues studied.

Constant efforts to reduce the subjectivity of the method are important in using observation and these are best achieved through awareness and research skills applied to avoid selective attention, selective memory and interpersonal factors (Robson, 1999:202-205). Keeping detailed field notes as close as possible to the time of the observations is also essential when using participant observation (Silverman, 2005). Field notes can extend
beyond immediate observations and can also include explanations, causes and contextual constraints which people are subjected to (Silverman, 2005:174). A limitation of the method is the issue of generalisation (Yin, 2003b). However, as De Vaus (2002:24) points out, case studies can achieve theoretical generalisation. The sensitivity of this strategy to the specific context is a beneficial property which makes them particularly suited to conducting research under the chosen a methodology (Edwards, 2005). The data collected by the different methods in the case study was triangulated which was done in order to enhance research validity.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical issues were considered throughout the application of the above methods. All interviews and participant observations were made after informed consent was obtained from the respondents. For the interviews in the case study informed consent was obtained at two levels: at the company and at the individual level.

In an industry where reputation plays such an important role the issues of anonymity and confidentiality were particularly important. Confidentiality requires the non-disclosure to anyone of any information which can lead to identification of individuals who provided it (Denscombe, 2002:180). It is closely related to anonymity: separating the individuals from the information they give (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1997:88), practically meaning “the identity of those taking part not being known outside the research team” (Lewis, 2003:67). Anonymity and confidentiality have implications not only for ethics, but also for methodology (De Vaus, 2002): if respondents are convinced that the information they provide is kept strictly confidential, it is more likely that they give honest and
complete replies. They are important in order to ensure that no harm is done to the respondents. An aspect of this is the matter of data storage. Data was stored in a locked drawer. The names of the respondents were not disclosed beyond the immediate research team (supervisor, transcription assistant). Whenever used, quotes from participants were not attributed and pseudonyms were employed instead. Also, in the cases where indirect attribution was possible the details which could lead to disclosure were omitted or altered.

An interesting finding was made in relation to anonymity. Companies and television freelancers use credits as signs of their achievements. Hence being credited is by default a desired outcome of any endeavour in the television sector. A contradiction was apparent: while social research emphasises the importance of preserving anonymity of the participants, the values of specific respondents often resulted in them not desiring to be anonymous. The discovery of this contradiction contributes to the understanding of conducting research in reputation-guided environment where past credits are a signal for future performance, and hence attribution is regarded as a benefit. It is not suggested here that the principles of conducting ethical social research should be modified. Rather, it draws attention to a particular situation where anonymity may not necessarily be perceived as inherent benefit by the interviewees. On a more general note, it confirms the importance of consideration of the particular respondent group and environment while conducting research and reinforces the idea of sensitivity towards respondents, situations and context.

To summarise, having outlined the methodological foundations of the research which motivated the choice of qualitative approach and the interplay of structure and agency as a methodological paradigm for the study, this chapter also discussed the research design and the specific methods which were employed for data collection. These were based on a
consideration of the methodological approach, research questions and practical issues related to conducting the research. The following chapter will give an account of how these were implemented in practice, including the ways in which the two main components of the investigations were carried out and data was collected, managed and analysed.
CHAPTER SIX:

CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

The previous chapter outlined the research design and explained the motivation for choosing the specific data collection methods. It explained the two main components of the research: the industry-wide study based mainly on a set of interviews and the case study of a regional company filming a science documentary. The subject of this chapter is the practical implementation of the research. It takes the above information to the level of actual realisation of the investigation. It does so by, firstly, giving a chronological account of the implementation of the two components of the research. Secondly, by discussing the problems encountered and the ways in which they were approached and solved. Thirdly, it reflects upon these in attempting to achieve the fourth purpose of this chapter, namely, to highlight the methodological contributions of this research. Underlying the chapter is the awareness of the constraints accompanying any ‘real world’ research and therefore effort is made to reveal the limitations as well as achievements in a transparent account of the process. The chapter concludes with a section on data analysis.
Overview of conducting the research

The research started in October 2004 as a part of a wider project on skills and organisational forms. A few possible sectors were considered before the area of creative industries and more specifically film and television was chosen. Once the industry was decided upon, an initial review of the literature was done including a more general awareness of the situation in the sector. The focus of the current thesis is the UK television industry. It is a part of the wider study, which encompassed both film and television. The two industries share many traits, and in many cases, pool of talent. However, a closer look at the employment practices in them revealed considerable differences. They can be attributed partly to the different traditions and development of the two fields and partly to the nature and character of the work process which requires different length of involvement, different skills, output and different technology. It was therefore decided to focus on the television sector only. The disproportionally larger amount of the data collected for television compared to film also was a factor which influenced this decision.

The research components were conducted concurrently. Initially, the intention was to focus on the case studies first, but late access was the reason to start with the data collection in the order in which it was practically possible. Hence in practice the research elements did not follow in discernable ‘blocks’ of data collection. Rather, the interviews and other methods were applied while continuous attempts were made to secure access to a case study.
Chapter Six

The interviews

Finding respondents and issues of sampling

At the outset of the research the main target groups were defined: workers freelancing in television in the UK. Freelancers were a focus of specific interest as the research questions concern learning and skills development of such workers who are the ‘product’ of the fragmentation. Identifying respondents in accordance with their type of employment was not as problematic as, for example, identifying them through the area or field in which they worked. Because of the convergence of the various sub-sectors it was often difficult to define the boundaries of ‘working in television’. For example, one production manager did not consider herself to be working in television although she was working on commercials for one of the big television channels. Sometimes freelancers would work on different types of projects such as one cameraman who worked on television productions, films and commercials using different job titles (depending on the ‘jargon’ of the genre) and charging different rates. There was also an editor who was freelancing almost exclusively for a big broadcaster, although sometimes through independent companies. People doing television drama considered themselves to be working in film rather than television: understandable given the length and nature of projects. Such situations however, required sampling decisions to be taken i.e. interpreting what is employment in television and deciding whether interviewees were falling into the category of the people sought. In making such decisions a pragmatic approach was adopted which was guided by the principle of gaining as diverse situations and information and using these to inform the study. Freelancers’ situations were evaluated on a case by case basis and if it was deemed
that they could fall under any of the categories of those freelancing in television, interviews were pursued.

An exception to this was a staff member of a big television company whom I interviewed. The respondent was a highly skilled professional: a studio director. This specialism is increasingly rare and his readiness for a conversation prompted me to interview him. The respondent had seen other colleagues leave to become freelance and at that stage was considering such an option for himself. So I decided that an interview with him would provide both useful information about the training he had had and about the considerations, motivations and prospects he saw in changing his type of employment. It was done also in the hope that the person would provide links to colleagues who had left the big broadcaster and joined the freelance cohort. It also provided access for observing the broadcasting of a live lunchtime news programme.

Another atypical interview was a ‘double’ one: two people were interviewed concurrently. As a family of two television professionals, they invited me for a talk in their house. All questions were answered, and in some cases discussed, by both. Sometimes they were adding to each others’ replies and reminding each other of circumstances and examples to illustrate their answers. This contributed to the quality of the data I obtained from it.

The sampling used was ‘purposive’ or ‘theoretic’ (Saunders et al., 2003; Silverman, 2005), and where possible a ‘snowballing’ technique was used. It was ‘purposive’ in the sense that it aimed to identify respondents whose characteristics corresponded to those of the target group, e.g. those working as freelancers in the television industry (Creswell, 2007). Thus it served the purpose of selecting the people who had the characteristics sought. It was guided by the time limits and resources available. As Silverman explains (2005:130),
this type of sampling is very similar to ‘theoretical’ sampling with the only difference that
the latter serves a theoretically driven purpose. The number of interviews followed the
principle of data saturation i.e. the interviews are considered enough when with every new
interview there is no new data or information obtained.

The total number of semi-structured interviews was 71, 12 of which were conducted in the
case study company. The latter amount to 21 hours and 16 minutes of the total hours of
recordings. The average length of interviews was about one hour with extreme cases
ranging from 35 minutes to 4-5 hours, especially when case study respondents were
interviewed at several stages. The average length of the transcribed interviews was about
20 pages. Eleven of the interviews were with industry bodies and other significant actors
and six with small independent regional companies. In a couple of cases there was an
overlap between the interviews: in one case a BECTU representative interviewed was also
a cameraman and in the other an editor had just started his own independent company.
These instances exclude the cases in which freelancers set up their own companies for tax
purposes, the guiding principle was the way in which they worked and not their legal
registration. Of the 71 interviews 25 were conducted over the phone and the rest were face-
to-face. In one case a camera operator I had contacted through a professional organisation
and who did not respond to my request for an interview agreed to be interviewed following
a personal recommendation from a colleague and a friend. Instances like that informed the
study, too, as they were telling of the industry mechanisms. A more detailed table of
respondents is presented in Appendix Two.

The dominance of the project-based organisation of work and the strong reliance on
informal networks in the industry made it particularly difficult to locate freelancers. The
initial attempts to identify respondents revolved around two main approaches: personal contacts and cold-calling. However, these brought only a limited result. The industry bodies were contacted using initial ‘cold’ calling. They were identified through official web-sites or following personal recommendations. Most of them were sent a one-page outline of the project which varied slightly in emphasis depending on the body contacted. A generic sample of this is attached in Appendix Three.

Freelancers proved particularly difficult to identify and contact. I approached them firstly through the various industry bodies. The first response was from a regional branch of the industry trade union BECTU. Following a few attempts, an interview was agreed and further contacts obtained. However, the trade union was reluctant to mediate by approaching their members. Further interviews were conducted with industry bodies. Overall, it was the industry actors based in Yorkshire who proved most responsive to requests for interviews. Some of the other organisations based in the North did not respond at all even after repeated requests. A few agreed only after a personal contact was found to facilitate the interview. Meetings were held with creative industry funding organisations in Manchester, Huddersfield, Leeds and Sheffield.

One part of the attempts to identify either television freelancers or independent companies was Bradford School of Management alumni organisation. In the recent past the School of Management had delivered an MBA programme to BBC staff and these were contacted through the alumni office. Because of the Data Protection Act contact details could not be obtained and hence no direct contact was possible. Contacting BBC alumni proved fruitless. Personal contacts were used and, through a lecturer, two people were approached. Having met with one of them to explain the project, he declared that his position was
uncertain and despite continuing attempts no further contact was established. The second contact put me in touch with the BBC Resources Department from where I was hoping to obtain access to the freelancers they work with or a production which could lead me to them. The initial response was very promising but subsequent contacts revealed increased suspicion and finally the communication ceased.

The next step was to compose contact lists based on professional organisations. The first organisation was the Institute of Broadcast Sound (IBS): the organisation of sound professionals. The e-mails or letters I sent to the members introduced the research and asked for an interview. These were followed by telephone calls. A few interviews were conducted and further contacts obtained. In this way the sampling followed a snowball technique. Initially I would send out e-mails in groups in order to avoid clashes in interview scheduling. The response rate, however, soon proved this was not necessary. Later the same process was repeated with the Guild of British Camera Technicians (GBCT) which was targeted at getting access to camera and related areas. Contacting people from such professional organisations had the drawback of providing access to more established freelancers, those with a certain number of credits or recognised level of work, which should be acknowledged as a sampling limitation.

I attended industry events such as industry week-ends and workshops at two film festivals in Bradford, in March 2006 and in September 2006. At the film festivals there was time assigned for seminars, workshops and exhibitions/networking events which professionals could attend against a small fee. I acted as a volunteer at one of the events and this helped me to get contacts for interviews. Apart from this, such events were helpful through some of the seminars where established professionals discussed the realities of working in the
industry and their own careers. It was typical, however, that delegates at such industry week-ends were predominantly aspiring industry entrants who attended in the hope of getting practical advice and making useful contacts. In this sense such events could only provide fairly limited access to the community and were most useful for targeting those in the pre- or early stages of their career.

I also attended two Freelancers fairs in London organised by BECTU (in June 2006 and June 2007). During the first one a contact was made with a representative of the Production Manager’s Association (PMA) who advised me to post a note on the PMA web-site. I had previously put an ad on productionbase which did not bring any result. There was just one response but once the person acquired more information on the project, he stopped communicating and I could not interview him. The note on the PMA’s web site however, did result in a few good contacts which led to more interviews using the snowball technique. In the meantime efforts continued to identify freelancers through personal contacts and these proved fruitful on a few occasions.

The practical aspects of interviewing freelancers

Freelance work requires flexibility and is marked by unpredictability. Freelancers often could not firmly commit to a date and time for an interview. Interview arrangements had to respond to these flexible work schedules. Conducting interviews over the phone provided such flexibility. Freelancers who were contacted were given the option to do a telephone interview which many preferred. As mentioned in the discussion of the methods, this particular group of respondents proved quite appropriate for telephone conversations. The process of data gathering was facilitated also by the fact that in their everyday interactions
freelancers do discuss the nature and conditions of work with colleagues. They were at ease elaborating on how the industry works, how they found their way into it and what is important for their career. These were all issues they had discussed with their seniors or were asked by their juniors. The themes of this research were topics they had considered extensively being freelance and hence responsible for their employment and career. Most of the interviewees were articulate individuals who had considered the circumstances of their situation and had thought about their working lives. On a few occasions the respondents were keener to discuss issues related to the content of their work and it was difficult to keep them focused. Thus one respondent I had met in an industry context talked to me as a colleague and despite my explanation constantly turned the conversation towards ‘our’ love for the art of making television programmes. This however also threw light on issues related to the work and their attitude, and so the data did inform the analysis.

Some of the respondents could only be interviewed in their lunch break. I also spoke to a few people while they were on their way home from work or while working in the office. One of the respondents did the first half of the interview on the bus returning from work. Another one was doing housework while we spoke. Yet another was going away for the week-end and we spoke as her partner was driving. A number of interviews were interrupted, sometimes by work-related calls, and had to be resumed one or several times afterwards, sometimes even on different days. Sometimes the respondents preferred to talk later in the evening and so a few interviews would be conducted after 9 pm. There were several cases where, despite agreeing to be interviewed and talking to me a few times, potential respondents would stop answering their mobile phones and not resume contact.
Chapter Six

The specific characteristics of the respondent group were manifested in an unexpected response to the assurance of anonymity (already mentioned in relation to the ethical considerations). Although relieved that their opinions will not be attributable, some interviewees’ reaction suggested a slight resentment. Unexpectedly for me, the assurance of anonymity which I would give at the beginning of each interview was not always accepted with relief. Sometimes it would even be met with disappointment. Being named and mentioned carries particular value in this employment environment. By consequence, assurance of not being mentioned provoked mixed reactions. It required a quick judgement at the beginning of each interview and the solution I found was to state clearly but not explain and elaborate on ensuring anonymity.

All interviews but five were recorded with respondents’ agreement and subsequently were professionally transcribed. An MP3 recorder was used to record the interviews. On one occasion, which was an interview with a creative agency representative, it failed to record and so notes were taken by memory immediately after the interview. The availability of long hours on the MP3 recorder allowed for smooth running of the interview as recording was not dependent on the length of tape. Also, it was easy to connect the recorder to the telephone for the recording of the telephone interviews. Storing the data was also easier when it was in a digital form.

There was one case in which the respondent, a cameraman, had serious concerns about anonymity and refused to be recorded, so notes were taken during the interview. There was however a difference in data quality. Another interview was not recorded because of technical failure. This was an interview with a female producer-director who had recently left the industry. In this sense it was not a core interview and was a part of attempts to
identify recent industry leavers. This line of research was not followed subsequently. Two of the very first interviews were not recorded but notes were taken verbatim.

Most of the transcription was outsourced. This was done ensuring data was kept safe. Each transcript would be checked against the recording by me, mainly in order to make sure that the punctuation corresponded to the intonation and the meaning was preserved in the written text. Outsourcing had certain advantages such as speed and time saving. It also benefited from the fact that the typist had knowledge of the cultural context, references and the local accents, and caught the subtleties and details which might have otherwise escaped a less experienced person.

**The case study**

*Access*

Initially the case study component was conceived as a number of case studies of independent companies. The regional focus of the study was developed later and so the initial attempts to secure access to a company were not following this requirement. Through the annual classification of the ‘Broadcast’ magazine of the independent production companies a selection of the best performing ones was made and 17 were contacted. Telephone contacts were acquired from the web-sites and calls were made with an inquiry about the most appropriate person to speak to, with a request for an interview and access to a production. A one-page summary had been prepared on a University headed paper and was sent to the relevant contacts (please refer to Appendix Three). Only one company got back and that was a negative response. A contact suggested by another
company was obviously fictitious. I made a call to one of the biggest production companies to establish the best person to write to and was advised to send a letter by post to ‘Buffy Bolles’. Unsurprisingly, no reply came. As the data subsequently revealed, contacting independent production companies for access without having being recommended, was likely to fail. Production companies are inundated with emails and letters from freelancers amongst whom many young graduates. They all have the same request: to be granted a little time for a meeting or the chance to spend time in the office or with a production, to shadow or in any way be involved in or at least be near the programme making. Although differently motivated, as far as the production companies were concerned, my request was essentially the same. Letters from graduates get little attention, especially in the big companies, and mine met the same fate. Reflecting upon this, the people who were likely to give me access to production and whom I approached i.e. production managers or directors, would have been very likely to be freelancers and hence only temporarily involved with the company. Thus I could not convincingly offer the often recommended in the research literature collateral ‘access for expertise’. Researching such an industry puts the researcher in a rather unprivileged position together with masses of others who just want to ‘see’ the work and ‘talk’ to professionals. The independent production companies were ‘spoiled’ by interest and offers of free labour, and so my offering to work for free had no particular value to them.

Having failed to obtain access through contacting the most successful production companies, I started contacting regional industry bodies as they would presumably be more interested in discussing industry-related issues and could be a source of information about local companies and freelancers. It was a circumstance which channelled the case study
element of the research design in a particular direction, namely, the regional aspect. In this way the regional dimension of the study was to an extent motivated by the type of access I had.

Contacts were made with independent production companies in a city in the North. Three of them agreed to interviews over the course of a few months. Although valuable and insightful, these interviews did not lead to access. I subsequently contacted the companies which agreed to an interview three or four times with requests for access, but with no success. For the next two years I also sent them Christmas cards as a way of reminding them of me. A year later I contacted other seven regional companies with requests for an interview (again, as a first step to securing access) but not one responded.

I also tried to gain access to a case study through another academic who I met at a seminar. Although coming from a different field, she had conducted research in the industry and had a number of contacts. She agreed to assist me in my attempts to gain access and forwarded my request to her industry contacts. No one responded.

Fieldwork

In October 2005 I gained access to a production in a small independent company in a city in the North of the country. This was achieved through an initial request for an interview with the general manager of the company. The person was very forthcoming, and promised to allow me to spend time shadowing a production. He kept his promise and contacted me a few months later. I had full access to the everyday operations of the company while also following the making of a one-hour documentary on a science topic.
Whilst ‘shadowing’ the work on the specific project, I spent a lot of time in the office of the company and due to the very good support by the gatekeeper and the staff I got to know their history and the details of their operations. The company had less than ten core staff: staff employed on fixed term contracts for more than six months or to do development, i.e. not for a specific production. The company was established in a way similar to a lot of the regional independent production companies in that it was founded by ex-staff television professionals. Its operations and budgets were far from secure and each commission was usually a result of personal contacts combined with long and hard efforts on negotiations. Moreover, almost every commission was crucial for the company’s survival. In this sense my case study was a very good example of a ‘regional small independent company’ and fulfilled the ‘purposive sampling’ concept.

The case study was embedded in the sense that it involved different entities. I collected data at the level of the specific science documentary project, at the level of the company and at the levels of the individual freelancers and core staff. Thus, in addition to observing company practices and interviewing core staff, I followed the making of the programme observing and sometimes participating in the process, had interviews with key freelancers and developed an understanding of the project-led case and the ways in which it related to the company. The three levels of analysis: company, production and individuals were interrelated and marked the boundaries of the case.

My position was the closest to being a ‘participant observant’: a position which as Tedlock (2003:180) points out “implies simultaneous emotional involvement and objective detachment”. Striking a fine balance between the two (‘participant’ and ‘observant’) was a constant concern during the fieldwork. I had to be careful not to be involved too much both
for the reason of becoming emotionally attached but also because I risked having to deal with issues not related to the production I was supposed to shadow. This became apparent on the very first day when I was given a research task by the company director and at the same time a production meeting was called for the science documentary production. Volunteering and taking initiative is a must if one wants to be noticed in such a company. At the same time in my position I needed time and space to observe the work and interactions in the office. This was a very fine boundary which proved challenging to manage.

Another method I employed for the case study data collection was informal interviews and semi-structured interviews. I would talk to people most often in the kitchen and would conduct interviews with them afterwards usually in one of the editing suites which was used for equipment storage. This provided enough privacy and the flexibility to start the interviews whenever it was convenient for the respondents or alternatively to interrupt them if there was an urgent matter which needed their attention. More details on the case study are given in Chapter Ten.

In attempting to follow the initial research design I continued to seek access to other case studies. Requests for access were made at the end of almost every interview I conducted. In two cases the leads seemed promising. In the first instance the head of production of a big independent company was contacted through recommendation and for about a month there were various contacts and discussions as to what production would be best for the study. Gradually the communication started to be less frequent. The head of production explained that there was restructuring in the company and the timing was not appropriate. After a few more e-mails, communication ceased. The second, more promising lead, came
from a production manager who had been offered a job. She had recommended me to the head of production and I contacted that person. However, they had been told that I was seeking an internship. Despite a few lengthy explanations, the situation continued and they insisted on having my CV. I did send a slightly tailored CV, but this was the end of their interest. My subsequent e-mails remained unanswered.

In trying to gain access to another case study, I had the opportunity of observing a day shoot of a freelance producer-director-cameraman. It was secured through a personal contact. The day shot involved also an assistant who was trained to be a ‘shooting assistant producer’. It was an insightful observation which informed the topic on learning and on-the-job training. However, it also did not lead to production or company access.

I continued to try and secure further access while conducting interviews for about a year after the case study was completed. The interview data started to bring up similar opinions and accounts, the differences were mainly in the specific details but not the generic paths to the industry, for example. I felt that the interview information was reaching the data saturation level and not being able to secure further access, stopped the data collection. It was then that the majority of the interview transcribing was outsourced. The main reason was budgetary: funds had been kept in reserve hoping that there would be access to further case studies. However, should I have to manage the same process again, I would outsource the interview transcription at an earlier stage. The transcription was done in stages, by groups of interviews. This process was linked with the main data analysis.
Data analysis

Although data was revised and reflected upon during the data collection stage, it was only when the transcriptions were completed that a more structured and intensive analysis took place. Each transcript was checked against the recording. Then the transcript was read again following which separate files were created with the interview quotes relevant to pre-selected three major topics: entry, skills and careers. Then these were read further in order to group them around theme-specific issues within these categories. Sometimes this would involve reading of the whole interview, mainly in order to confirm the context and interpretation of a quote. The analysis of the case study data followed a similar method: reading the field notes and interviews, and switching between the two. The interviews with relevance to the regional companies and networks were analysed in a similar way: identifying major themes and then specific issues within them.

The above process contains elements of both the coding and thematic analysis. The first one was not done in a structured way as usually described by grounded theory researchers (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). I wanted to preserve the vividness of the data in its interview context and considered that a strict application of the technique would be too rigid and remove me from the rich conversational nature of the interviews. Hence I wanted to stay close to the text, and to the interaction with the respondents which continuously stimulated my understanding and interpretation of the data.

The organisation of data around certain topics relates the process to the technique of ‘thematic analysis’. Although widely used by researchers, there are no detailed descriptions of it. My aim was to consistently follow the principles dictated by the ontological and epistemological positions of the research and the ways they were translated.
into methods. Hence the data was both a source of information about the external circumstances and structures, and the individual feelings, opinions and views on it. Therefore I needed ‘anchors’ in the objective and enough interpretative freedom at the same time. Staying close to the interviews and looking for themes within the text provided me with this balance.

In summary, this chapter outlined the main steps which were undertaken to conduct the research. The process of real world enquiry inevitably involves limitations and it is good practice to reflect upon those and the ways in which they could be avoided in a future replication of the study. For this particular project, the specific industry and the nature of work within it proved a major problem. Governed largely by informal employment practices, the sector requires that a similar approach is taken when seeking access to data within it. Not having a personal contact, I found it difficult to obtain access to people and companies. A formal approach was not customary. Moreover, in this environment the researcher is associated with someone who wants to break into the industry: they both seek an opportunity to observe work and are willing to offer their labour for free. Hence informal channels are likely to bring more results in seeking co-operation in television.

The respondent group of freelancers also provided some interesting insights. As a geographically dispersed community with only short-term attachments to firms and teams, and with long often unsocial working hours, interviewees were best accessible by telephone. This method proved a fruitful means for collecting data. Moreover, the employment awareness, experience in work-related telephone conversations and flexibility of the telephone communication met the restrictions in time, location and availability the respondent group presented.
Further, research into such environment where one’s professional ability is largely judged on the basis of previous work (e.g. credits), and where acknowledgement of co-operation is a norm when dealing with contributors, for example, should consider the effect which assurances of anonymity might have on the enthusiasm of respondents to participate. Respondents appreciate the freedom of expression it gives them, but it should be accompanied by an explicit acknowledgement of their help in the personal communication between them and the researcher.

The following chapters present the empirical findings of the research. As the analysis was done in a thematic way, following the main research questions, I decided to present the findings in a similar fashion. There are three chapters which present the empirical findings and they are organised around the major themes of ‘entry’, ‘skills’ and ‘small independent production company’.
CHAPTER SEVEN:

ENTRY TO THE INDUSTRY

The following three chapters will present the empirical results from the study. In accordance with the research questions and the thematic logic underpinning the data analysis (as discussed in Chapter Seven), they, too, will be organised thematically. The first theme to be discussed in this chapter is entry to the industry. The two chapters which follow discuss skills development and learning mechanisms, and a chapter dedicated to the case study company and the regional network of independent production companies. Each chapter is a thematic cluster and includes a presentation of the findings with examples and some interpretation, which is complemented by the discussion in the final chapter.

This chapter discusses the entry of young professionals or aspiring television workers to the industry. Entry mechanisms are important to understanding the functioning of this labour market (Blair, 2001). It is particularly revealing with regards to learning and skills development for the following reasons. Firstly, the ways in which people enter the industry reflects the guiding mechanisms in the labour market. Secondly, it is during the initial work following entry that a lot of the skills necessary to perform the work are learnt. These skills are heavily dependent on the job, conditions and environment so it is essential to look into this initial period of industry involvement in order to understand the mechanisms and outcomes of learning in television. Thirdly, it is in the experience of entry that the
novices are guided into a specific job. Hence it is an important factor for specialisation related to the issue of career choice. Fourthly, many young people enter the industry on a freelance basis which is also their entry into specific employment arrangements. Hence this entry channels learning about employment as much as learning about the job itself. Fifthly, it is at the point of entry that the profile of the workforce is selected in accordance with written and unwritten rules. It is therefore important in understanding the role of the institutional setting in influencing or directing the access to jobs, including the problems of selection and types of jobs available. The point or rather, the process, of entry, is blurred. This is related to the types of work young entrants do, the paid or unpaid jobs they enter into, the border between being able to sustain oneself from work in television and alternatively to sponsor involvement in television productions. These aspects of entry inevitably shape the types of skills learnt and the way people learn in this crucial initial period of work. Finally, the chapter discusses of the implications this processual and unclear entry has for learning and skills development.

The chapter has thematic sub-sections discussing: the traditional entry routes into television; the entry currencies or the properties which make a difference in recruitment, reflecting the logic of the current recruitment in the sector. The analysis focuses on the link between entry and career. Lastly, the chapter raises the issue of age and television as a ‘young persons’ game’. This proves fundamental to discussing and understanding entry: both as regards to the characteristics of those who succeed and unveiling the rationale of those who recruit. Each of the above themes is broken into sub-themes which summarise the main findings.
The ways in: past and present

Traditional routes

The traditional route for people to start in television used to be joining one of the big broadcasters such as the BBC and ITV. While camera and sound professionals were an exception, for those on the editorial or creative side joining the industry through the BBC or ITV was almost the only possibility. Joining such organisations meant being trained under established in-house programmes.

Many of the ‘older’ interviewees had started through this traditional path. For example, Barry, a cameraman, started his career in the London Television Centre of the BBC as a studio cameraman. Mark, an experienced editor, had a friend who was a film editor at the BBC. Having seen him work a few times he thought ‘this looks like fun’ and applied for a training course at the BBC. Other people had similar stories:

I applied to the BBC for various jobs and didn’t get them and then they advertised for trainee cameramen and I got a job as a trainee cameraman with the BBC in Bristol. And then I only did that for a year, then I got a job as a floor manager, and then I got a job in production as a sort of a junior producer and that was it really, and then worked my way down. (Alexander, producer-director)

Brian, a producer-director joined television through BBC radio. Having finished school he applied for the job and got it. He did not have any contacts, just a keen interest in music recording and an amateur knowledge of it. Another interviewee, Emma, a writer and researcher, started by working in newspaper, then radio, and then moved to television:
There wasn’t an opportunity, I just phoned them up and said ‘I want to come and work here’. And I suppose it just happened. I mean, I went down to see them and I wrote to somebody who was head of researchers, [name], at the time and I said ‘I am coming down to [a city] on this particular day’ (which I wasn’t) ‘I could see you on this day’ and he agreed to see me and so I went in and I got a contract. But that is how to make things happen really, if you wait for a job to come up, you are going to be waiting a long time, don’t you think?... That is how a lot of people get in don’t you think, it is about kind of making it happen, really. (Emma, writer and researcher)

Barbara, an ex-researcher who had recently left the industry, had a similar experience to Emma’s. She joined ITV as a researcher having worked as a print media journalist. Robert, a producer-director, joined ITV as a typist and once in the organisation, he simply waited for a suitable opportunity to work his way through the hierarchy and become a producer-director. A recurring pattern was for people to start with a big broadcaster having worked in a different type of media. Aziz, a company owner reflected on his experience:

I think when I came into the industry, at that time it was the most traditional route for people to enter television, even to enter radio. Because it was deemed that you just had to work somewhere else to gain certain level of skill, that they didn’t do the fundamental training: the training was done elsewhere and then you entered television. So, I started in newspapers as a journalist. And then, sort of, after working for a variety of newspapers and freelancing, I went to work for [name] television, in the newsroom. Which was at that time, I think, quite a traditional way of entering television.
This mirrors the experience of a number of people who entered in 1970s and 1980s. Here are two more accounts:

Well, when I came into it, 15 years ago, most people came into the editorial side from newspapers, from local newspapers. That’s how I came. But increasingly new people have come in, and have come into [the production company] from college courses. (George, company owner and producer)

I moved from written journalism to London Weekend Television as a researcher when they were looking for somebody with the specialisms that I then had through written journalism. (Chris, executive producer)

Before the de-regulation the unions played a strong role in the entry. It was essentially a ‘closed shop’ and this was a hurdle for many to find their way into this professional field.

I did find that when I first tried to get into television it was very much a closed shop. And if you didn’t, if you weren’t a member of the trade union, you couldn’t get in and you could only get into the trade union if you were a working member, so it was completely stupid. (Dorothy, director)

While it was common for people up to 15 years ago to enter television through a training course having worked in other media, the option of entering through BBC or ITV was much rarer for the younger freelance respondents. An exception to this was Malika, a producer-director, whose career path resembled those of the earlier generations: finding a job in the BBC and then moving within the organisation:

I was at university doing an IT degree and they were making their first website for coming up across nationwide and they advertised for you know, journalists
basically to work on them [BBC Radio]. And I applied, didn’t think I had a chance of getting in and I went for an interview and was successful (Malika, producer-director)

The closest option available nowadays are the traineeships which the big broadcasters offer. Yorkshire television for example, is currently running an entry-level training scheme. Sometimes they would offer a trainee a year’s contract following the completion of the training and s/he would eventually become staff. However, not all terrestrial broadcasters, and not in all branches, train. BBC Leeds, for example, acknowledged that they have not taken trainees for many years now.

(No) entry rules

Currently there are no institutional restrictions to entry in the labour market, and with the weakening of the trade unions few formal barriers exist either for those who want to enter the industry or for those hiring newcomers. A respondent summarised:

There is no prescription way to get in, there is no prescription way to get promoted or get through. You cannot write a ‘how to’ manual because nobody knows anything. (Sandra, production manager)

Previously access to a paid job in television was possible only if entrants had a union card. Two years of experience were needed in order to obtain the union card and enter the ‘closed shop’. And so entry to the industry was done either at a place where novices could acquire the two years experience or in a big broadcaster where union membership was the norm. Either way, entry to a job and starting to work in television was closely linked to
union membership. Nowadays the closed shop situation no longer exists and there are many more opportunities for entry.

Entry to the labour market operates mainly through informal channels (Skillset, 2007). These are the traditional means of getting in the television industry. Although there are multiple paths of entry, none is regulated. Entry is essentially an informal process (Blair, 2001; Blair et al., 2003; Jones, 1996). To a large extent it has always been an industry of ‘who you know’ and an industry where family and personal connections play an important role in recruitment. There is, however, a new element to this, brought about by the industry changes: the unrestricted entry where neither dominant organisational structures nor trade unions exercise formal selective power or can put entry requirements in place.

In the 1980s the entry points for aspiring professionals were few, but with the growth of the independent sector, the establishment of more television channels and the emergence of numerous small and a few bigger companies possibilities are much wider. This is not to claim that the industry has grown more popular. It has always been a much desired and glamorous career. However, there were entry barriers. The union membership, the more complex technology, the smaller scale of production output and to some extent the lack of specialised educational provision restricted entry for the vast majority of people. Moreover, the point of entry was clearly marked: ‘getting a foot in the door’ meant getting any job in a broadcasting organisation or a facilities company (for technical grades). In this sense entry was a clearer process for those who wishes to pursue a career in television.
Chapter Seven

A plethora of aspiring entrants

The liberalisation of the labour market and the introduction of new and more flexible means of production took place alongside continued strong interest by young people to be professionally involved in the industry. The wider entry options were thus matched by large numbers of aspiring entrants. Moreover, the majority of respondents agreed that currently there were far more applicants (many of whom recent graduates) than jobs. Parker, a studio director, remembered that when recently the big regional broadcaster had a vacancy for a news assistant (essentially a runner’s level job), they received 150 applications. As he commented, ‘people are just desperate to get in’. A trade union official confirmed that there were many more aspiring entrants than were needed in the industry. The reasons for the abundance of candidate-entrants were suggested to be mainly the appeal the industry has with young people, its image of glamour.

[It is] a nice industry to work in, seems to be well-paid, people that you see on the television screens. (Simon, trade union representative)

Because of this glamorous image it was much desired by a large number of people. The consequence, as one of the respondents noted, is that,

it has always been a buyers’ market; because again, because of this glamour thing you know, a lot, there are always more people wanting to work in television than actually there are jobs for. (Alexander, producer-director)

This glamorous appeal has not changed. What has changed is the lack of entry restrictions. Since there are no requirement for minimum skill levels or basic training, and since there is no formal way of assessing any knowledge or skills-related attributes of the entrants, the
industry is virtually accessible to anyone. However, not everyone who desires succeeds in working there. There are no formal barriers to discourage young people from trying, nor to prevent repeated attempts. The formal rules are misleadingly ‘inviting’ but this is not matched by the realities of how and when people enter.

The introduction of media-related degrees is another ‘invitation’ into television. Interviewees acknowledged that the media degrees were regarded as a way into the industry and many graduates saw them as a prerequisite for employment in television. Indeed, the recent Skillset employment census suggested that the proportion of the media-related degrees held by industry professionals had increased in recent years with 46% of the graduates in the industry holding such (Skillset, 2007). Universities and colleges compete in advertising their degrees as ones which lead to employment in the industry, boasting sound contacts with companies. But even when true, such links are usually in the form of ‘work placements’, a two weeks’ unpaid experience in a company, and do not involve a commitment to subsequent jobs; or any commitment to skills development or learning. Such work placements are not an established path into television and the benefits from them are varied. Further attention to work placements will be paid later in the chapter.

The existence of a large number of young people wanting to enter the industry has at least two important implications. The first one could be defined as the ‘quality’ of the people, the skills they have at entry:

In the old days, when I started in TV in ’82 it was very limited entry level so by definition those who did enter had often been applying for several years so were probably pretty high class graduates. (Jim, company director)
Chapter Seven

[I]t has pretty much always attracted people you know, people who got the jobs were often, were normally the people with degrees and so on. (Alexander, producer-director).

The companies interviewed also recognised the considerable variations in training that people received. The owner of one regional independent company mentioned that they had recently made an agreement with a local college where the best candidates came from:

So what we’ve done is made a deal with them specifically so that for a year we will take their students and no one else, and we’ll see how that works. And that is good for them because they have an idea what they are coming to, they know what they, but it is not as wide range. But I think that will work. (George, company owner)

The second implication of the large number of candidates was for the working conditions on entry.

[T]hat creates enormous downward pressure on rates and working conditions and it is part of this whole thing about people working for nothing. (Simon, trade union representative)

The low or often no pay at the bottom positions is combined with poor working conditions. While in the past trade unions regulated (in some cases – overregulated, as some interviewees acknowledged) hours of work, health and safety and pay, nowadays their lessened role has resulted in exploitation of the young people. The respondents spoke about it as something widely known in the industry.
Work placements: a way in?

Work placements are often short, one or two weeks unpaid experience with a company usually as a part of a media-related degree course. Skillset data shows that 71% of the television employers offer such placements to potential new entrants (2007). Securing a place may be facilitated by the university or college, or arranged by the students themselves. The purpose of these is for students to get immersed in the actual industry and develop some of their skills further. Many do work placements in the hope that they will lead to a subsequent job with the company. This further intensifies their desire and keenness.

All the colleges in the area and all the individual students in the area all write ‘Can I come in, can I come and do work experience, can I show you what I am up to, I have got an idea for you’, and then all the colleges try to push them as well: ‘Can you have a look at the, can you…’. I am not just talking editorial, a lot of them want to be cameramen, a lot of them want to be editors, a lot of them want to be production co-ordinators, and they are all on courses. (George, company owner and producer)

The views on work experiences as unpaid form of skills development vary. When they are a part of a course and learning is their main purpose, work placements are not the same as free work in the industry. In practice, however, the line between the two is rather blurred.

A company owner of a regional indie elaborated on the fact that such a placement was only meaningful where a project or a role exists to offer to the young person, even if it was a runner’s position. However, with budgets becoming tighter and tighter, companies can rarely afford to have an additional junior person in the team. Thus the commercial
pressures on small companies to reduce costs preclude them or the productions they produce from being vehicles for learning. It was a shared view that work experiences were only meaningful if there was actual work i.e. a position the students could fill in:

We do have free placements. There’s no policy on it – someone will come in to see you and ask. We would never do that unless there was some hope that they would get taken on or used again. The difference is people get put on placement and end up making tea and being a runner for 16-hour days. (Jim, company director)

[T]here is always an issue with work experience that to add any value to them you do need to get people actually doing something. Just standing in the corner of the office doesn’t really do it and all they do is get in the way. But then there is the ethical issues about you know, are they taking someone else’s job and all the rest of it. So he [a student on a placement] had been doing stuff and all the rest of it and there was more work to be done and I decided that we did need to take someone on. So since he had already got the experience and knew how we worked and knew us and all the rest of it, you know, it seemed sensible. You know, no open recruiting process or anything like that. (Alan, producer)

An aspect of the work experience process is the issue of pay and power. It is not always to the benefit of the company, and is hence rather complex.

It has always been my view that if you want someone to do something you need to pay them because then you have got some sort of control. If you have people just in for the jolly then they can pick and choose what they do to an extent. (Alan, producer)
During the participant observation there was a student who came in on work placement for two weeks, but left at the end of the first week as she was offered a placement in a company she perceived to be better and potentially more useful for getting a subsequent job in the industry. In the first placement she did development: working on ideas she had with the purpose of potentially developing them to programme proposals, independently and perhaps on a few occasions she would discuss these with colleagues. She was very loosely linked to the work in the company. A few of the other students who spent time at the company during field work were doing placements mainly in the hope that either some of their ideas would be commissioned and they would be given the opportunity to work on an actual production, or that if a production came up and the company needed people they would be the ones to join. The latter scenario would be a likely one, as the rule of ‘the last one’ staying in producer’s mind would apply. Such a situation has certain benefits for companies, too. They have people on the premises ready to start should there be a need, and able to begin work at short notice as the industry often requires. There are also people who develop their ideas potentially to the benefit of the company with no cost or risk to the company. The commissioning process is such that editors commission productions from companies and not individuals so anyone would have to use a company as a vehicle for their project. Young aspiring entrants are willing to trade their ideas for an opportunity (or a potential opportunity, in most cases) to work on production, again in the hope that this will constitute a path into television. However, in a less busy environment where commissions are fewer (such as the ones in the regions are), the knowledge of the industry or the chances of a potential job coming are minimal. In this specific environment young people seemed not to be exploited in the way suggested by TV Wrap campaign, for
example. They were not a part of core team. Rather, it was a case of slim chances and much wastage. The situation makes the link between the students and the companies very weak, which can explain the concern of the producer that people who are not paid can choose what to do and what not to do. In a situation in which both parties, companies and young people, have to respond to different pressures (commercial and career respectively), it is likely that each will pursue their own interest.

Another function of work experience was to assess a candidate’s abilities or personality and thus it could function as an extended job interview, especially the cases where companies would like to extend their pool of candidates or need someone to join the team.

The average amount of time that people would get would be two weeks. But in terms of assessing personality, that’s quite a long time. And then… if they like the company, the chances are that they would then come back and ask could they we have some further work experience… and maybe be more specific about where they wanted to be focused. And at that point, for example, we have some very junior positions which are offered on a freelanced day-by-day basis like cable clearers, camera… camera trainees, sound trainees, you know, junior sound assistance in studio. Which would enable them to come in and work in the environment for people to say: ‘Actually, I think they’re worth persisting with because I think they’ve got a talent, they just need to be given the opportunity to learn the skills’. And enthusiasm matters a lot in that situation then. (Kevin, head of resources, broadcaster)

Jane, a costume and make up freelancer, pointed out the above aspects, too. She did a job just for a work experience and the costume designer she was helping persuaded the
executive producer to pay her. She only managed to negotiate half rate. Nowadays she is trying to help other people in a similar way:

They’d come in as my work experience and I would think they were really good and I would like them and I would want to give them a chance…. People who come to do work experience who are really nice and really keen and really friendly, I then tried to give them a paid job if I can. When I was at make up school I already had a lot of contacts and, so, like, that is how I got my make up work, though existing contacts and I tried to pass some of my contacts on to some of my make up school colleagues for jobs that I couldn’t do or for… just to get them involved.

You get so many people wanting work experience and, to be honest, I don’t give it to a lot of people because I don’t like to give people work experience if I haven’t got anything valuable for them to get out of it. If it is going to introduce them to some good contacts or if they have never been in a studio before and it is important to them or if, I don’t know, if they can get something out of it, then I would give it to them but, you know, but I wouldn’t really like to give people work for no money if they couldn’t, I wouldn’t make people work for no money if they couldn’t get any work for money after it or get anything valuable out of it educationally, do you know what I mean.

A key criterion on which work experience people were judged was personality, enthusiasm and aptitude. Almost all companies, quite understandably, admitted they sought these rather than high level of television-specific knowledge. This approach harmonises with the general tradition within television to recruit people for ability, potential and ‘fitting in’ the team or company. It worked well under the old structure of the industry as it was after the
start of one’s career that the team or company developed individuals’ expertise by exposure to projects and experienced colleagues over years. However, with people being trained in the educational system, this approach to recruitment based on general potential abilities, clashes with the fragmented structure of employment. The combination of recruitment practices aiming for long-term potential and commercially-driven short-term targets is a major source of tension in the process of entry to television.

Doing work experience can indeed lead to a job or contacts which can then potentially lead to a job. There were stories which confirmed this. Elizabeth, head of production in a small regional independent, remembered a German language graduate she took on work placement despite the fact that the company director favoured science graduates. Elizabeth’s ‘instinct’ was right and the person turned out to be really bright, with lots of initiative, thinking of and doing things before she was even asked to. So from being on two weeks’ work experience she got a job as a runner on a production and subsequently as a researcher on a science programme. There were other success stories:

As another part of the course you had to do work experience so I did work experience at a production company in London…. I was very much doing real work when I was there but I think maybe it was easier because I had got that science background and what have you that you know they needed someone to, who knew that stuff, you know…. You know, and I think that is how people get in to the industry no matter how many courses you have studied or whatever. It is really doing work experience and people getting to see well, yes, you know that person is bright and they have got a bit of initiative and ‘nous’. (Jessica, researcher/AP)
Well, it could be that chance could be just to come in for a week on a university work placement, which I am not really keen on, but we do do them. I am not keen on just because you know… I always feel that they are working for nothing. You know, we are not paying them so sometimes we will pay their expenses if they are coming a long way. So it could be that sort of person or you think OK, well… we had it with [current employee]. [She] came in for two weeks I think, five weeks a couple of years ago, to do some work experience and I was directing a film that she was shooting, we were shooting and I just thought ‘she works’. There at the end, there at the beginning of the day, the last person to go even though not handling a lot of responsibility but enough and assisting the producer. But I sort of, noticed these things and think you know, late night shoot first in. OK, that says a bit and then when she left I said, ‘if you are ever looking for a job you should come and talk to us, but she ended up going and doing a job at [broadcaster] and kept in contact. Because she obviously knew that she was liked and then I made it clear that there would be a job for her if she wanted to come back. But those seeds were sown two years ago with her. (Andrew, company owner of “ColourTV”)

As mentioned above, when work placement was used as a selection device, employers, who generally claimed they were looking for experience, were essentially looking for the ‘right’ personalities and behaviours. This was evident from their accounts of the work placements and entry level employees:

We have taken a couple of people recently for whom we didn’t really have a position. They want to be researchers and they want to go on to be producers. And we’ve said to them, ‘come in at the lowest level and because we think you are
interested in the industry and you’re thoughtful and you are curious in all the right things, your best way to get an actual offer is if you are already in. So come in, get to know everyone, talk to people and this is your opportunity. You go and grab everyone. Go and say ‘can I take you to lunch and will you tell me your experience of the industry, and will you tell me how difficult it is, and will you tell me how many companies you have to work for to make this work, and will you tell me how long I have to wait, and will you tell me what skills I am lacking’. If they’ve got the confidence to do that, then they are probably worth having here. If they sit in the corner because they are too shy to do it, they’re probably not. And it is quite a, I don’t want it to sound more ruthless than it is but you know, people who you want here have got to have something about them. And if they don’t and if they are too timid to ask, they probably don’t belong here. That sounded a bit cruel. (George, company owner)

Another regional company’s owner elaborated on the qualities and attitudes which he noted down as he was observing the people on work placements:

People started with us some with no, had no formal education so to speak but they had something about them that was sort of street sense, energy, enthusiasm, work. You know, people that take responsibility. I mean, most people don’t want responsibility, most people avoid it. And they do everything they can to kind of oh, it is not my issue, it is not my fault and the more educated they become often the better they become also at avoiding responsibility. You know, you get some kid who is, like, hungry and wants to get in and yes gimme, gimme, gimme, I will do, I will run that letter faster, I will do that job faster, I will clean the bins out, I will
make tea. Not advocating that is the way to do it but sometimes you sense that that real energy and enthusiasm doesn’t go away and if you can spark that and train them and allow them to grow within the system as we have here, then they become very good, and they become often extremely good. (Andrew, company owner of ‘ColourTV’)

The personality and social skills of the entrants had to fit specific expectations and they did not always do so. Nanak, a small company owner had very mixed experiences taking people on work experience. Their attitudes and behaviours, as well as their skills, were not what he had wanted. His opinion was that they were not seriously interested in making a career in television but they were on placement for the sake of it. With them being late, going home early and not being helpful, he thought it was a waste of time rather than an asset. Michael, a director and lecturer, felt that there were mutual benefits in the practice of inviting company representatives from the region to give a talk to the students and was happy to facilitate this. In his opinion it was good both for the companies to filter out students, and for his students to find placements and so he was using his ‘name’ and contacts to facilitate this.

_Working for free_

Entering the industry was desired but difficult and young people were prepared to make sacrifices to achieve it. Some would start working in any capacity or position: to get contacts or to learn more about the way the industry worked. And in many cases this paid off. Below is just one example:
So I worked on this low budget short film first of all, that was it, as a runner and then basically there was four of us that were runners and someone got a job on this programme called [name 1], one of the runners, and then got us all jobs on it. So it was literally the guy we knew from the first one got us the one on the next and then we stayed with that company, all four of us for six, for nine months working as sort of runners and that was the [name 2], that was a TV drama and then it was [name 1]. and when I was working on [name 2], [name 2] the location department actually got the sack, just sort of a disagreement with the producers so I kind of slipped in as a location assistant. I kind of got my chance I suppose (Laura, location manager)

Many others worked for free in the hope they would build enough contacts and skills to help them find paid jobs in the industry.

Before I got started I often worked for free. I mean, six months I worked for free at [company]. I worked for free for [company] London in the sense that I made a 40-minute programme and didn’t get paid. If people have projects that they need help with I will, you know, if they don’t have money, I will work for free. (Dorothy, director)

Linda, a production manager was working for a University and having made friends with some of the students they asked her to help them with their final projects as a location manager, and then more people asked her to help as a production manager. So she started building skills and experience.

Young people were keen to get a ‘taster’ of the work in the industry and the unpaid jobs were often the closest form they could get. Led by their keen desire and passion to be television professionals, they could accept being exploited.
Sad to say in some sectors of the industry, the way in is perceived to be for young people, that you make yourself available to work for nothing or next to nothing. And because there aren’t formal structures, it’s not as if you can reliably say ‘well I know I have got to do this because everybody does it but I also know that having, in a sense, won my spurs, I will move up, I will get paid employment’. It is a lottery, I mean that *might* happen, but very often it *doesn’t* happen. And the reputation you get is as an eager young person who will work for nothing rather than as somebody who is really good and deserves, you know, a leg up you know. And the only people who can actually hang on and do that and carry on doing it, are people with private means.... But the issue there isn’t of your background and your aptitude for the work, it is simply of your financial ability to hang on in there despite the fact that nobody is paying you for any of the work that you are doing…. you know they take one batch of kids on, you know, sort of use them, spit them out, and take the next lot on because I mean the trouble, the trouble is it is a terribly exciting, it’s perceived to be a glamorous industry, it is very exciting, very sexy. There’s always going to be more people wanting to work in it than there is employment available. (Simon, trade union representative)

The self-selection of the white middle-class background people is another consequence of the practise which such (lack of) structure involves (Randle et al., 2008). The interviewees also commented on this:

[T]he ones who survive are actually just because they come from privileged and relatively wealthy backgrounds, and really talented working class kids are just being lost, because they can’t cope with this nonsense you know they need to go
out and earn a crust somewhere. That’s just bad for the industry, its ridiculous that we are losing people like that. (Simon, trade union representative)

Which has always been the case and it is part of the curse of the nature is that for, you know, it is a business that has a degree of supposed glamour attached. So it will always have people who maybe have the financial resources to work for free if it means that when they are mixing with their chums at the weekend, they can say oh well, of course I am working in telly, you know. (Alan, producer)

Claudia, a production manager explained it from the perspective of the aspiring entrants, and of the point of view of someone who has experienced it personally:

The thing is when you are really, really that young and quite naïve, it is not like my parents knew people or anything like that. You know, my parents worked in factories and had no connection with media at all. So I didn’t really know anyone. So you know, when you are desperate and you had got no connections and you so want to do that… that was what I had wanted to do all my life, you know, you just take the job even if they are going to exploit you. It is terrible.

Opinions on free work in the industry differed. Most of the respondents agreed it was not a positive feature. For them it was wrong and exploitative. Others saw it as a perhaps not right but at least some way to get in and hence they did not resent it as much. A young researcher spoke rather favourably of people being given the opportunity to ‘run around doing the odd thing’ on a production: with no pay because she appreciated the fact that budgets were tight and productions were very busy. Concluding, she said: “I think people are going to struggle to get into television now because they are not allowed to work for free, which is a bit mad, really” (Grace, researcher).
The element of glamour and lack of restrictions exacerbates the tendency to accept free work. It reaches the point of open absurdity, in practices mentioned by Alexander:

There are companies in London who actually tried to charge people to be runners. They would actually… if you wanted to be a runner for them, you had to pay them £100 a week and in fact there was such an outcry about it that they have stopped doing that now. But, maybe you can get away with it, but I mean, they expect people to work for free for long periods of time. You know, I know people who have worked for six months with no pay as runners… the other problem is because they are the bottom of the pile, they are the most junior people, they often end up working the longest hours because what they have to do is often be the people who drive and pick up the artist, you know, because they can’t afford to employ a proper taxi company, so they get the runner to drive and pick the artist up in a hire car. That happens very commonly, they then work all day you know, running, doing anything that needs doing on location, they then have to drive the artist home and in fact it is a health and safety issue as well. (Alexander, producer-director)

Working for free at the entry point requires persistence. There are no guarantees nor is there a standard length of this ‘latent entry’. People move from project to project working with different crews. This conceivably increases their chances of further employment as it increases their number of contacts, each of whom is a potential link to a new project. However, the lack of continuity of crews makes it less likely that persistence and good work will be rewarded with a paid job.

Even when people were paid at entry level it did not mean they had finally ‘entered’ the industry. Jane, at placement in costume and make up, for example, got paid simply because
the producer liked her work and by chance discovered that she had been working for free. Such accidentally paid jobs were not actually access to paid employment. Hence entry to the industry in a freelance capacity essentially is not a point; it is not an event or a single project. Rather, it is a process of random and repeated attempts to secure jobs and eventually paid jobs, and an unstable oscillation between work and non-work. Respondents claimed that persistence paid off but their stories did not suggest that this was inevitable or sure. Susan, a production manager compared her own career with the experiences of those of the young people she worked with:

I was very lucky because people who I now employ for work experience end up doing like months, which is awful and I was glad it wasn’t that way but you know, that is the way it always happens. (Susan, production manager)

You know, often a worry for the younger kind of generation coming into the industry, how long they can really last doing what they do because it doesn’t support them for their future. But certainly the people that succeed the best are the ones who put the effort in and work hard to prove themselves. (Joanna, production manager)

Michael, a director and lecturer related his personal experience of feeling rejected in trying to get in and subsequently get jobs, and pointed out that this was the reason that a lot of the students gave up in their attempts to break into the industry. This was Imran’s experience, too:

I basically sent off my CV, sent off and made video tapes of the film and started giving them out. And I didn’t get anything. I would send them out to production companies, broadcasters, and I would, I wouldn’t get anything. I couldn’t get
anything…. Work experience, yes, work experience, running, just anything in broadcasting. But I couldn’t get anything. No one was willing to give me anything.

(Imran, writer and editor)

Some supported themselves by doing temping or other type of work in the beginning of their careers:

I used to work as a waitress at night and in a production office in the day, and it always used to amuse me that I would rush from one to the other and only ever got told off when I got to the restaurant, not the other way round. But, and I think also in the past whilst I was getting things off the ground I did temp work as well.

(Joanna, production manager)

The unrestricted entry to the industry has nurtured new practices: free work and minimal-pay work. Most of it is low level work constituting prolonged and insecure attempts to start working ‘properly’ in television. Unrestricted entry was not matched by discouragement to attempt to enter. Quite to the contrary: the possibility of switching between unpaid and low paid work stimulated young people to keep trying. The ones who could afford it were the ones who already had means of supporting themselves. The ones who could not afford it tried to enter under very harsh financial and hence living conditions, having their hopes sustained by the blurred rules and the potential opportunity they created.

Helping having been helped

Respondents have been not only helped but they also helped people to get their first jobs in television:
And I got one of them his first ever running job in a camera hire company and he is now a burgeoning DOP [Director of Photography], and a very good friend of mine. And the other one I got him his first running job at a production company which got him into script reading and he is now a burgeoning script writer. And I have helped them both, we have worked on short films together and stuff so there is a nice kind of, you know, give and take. (Claire, production manager)

Respondents who commented upon the motives people had for helping others to enter the industry suggested three main reasons. Firstly, Deirde, a production manager confessed, she helped a lot of runners because she felt sorry for them. Secondly, people were helping friends as a favour to them:

Well, a lot of the time it would be friends of friends. I mean, there is like a friend in the past whose girlfriend wanted a job as a runner and I got her a job in the post production company that I used to work in. (Deirde, production manager)

In this way the people already in the industry reproduced their own experiences by recommending friends and doing favours. Another respondent, Claire, suggested a feeling of reciprocity, giving back what had been given to her. She told the story of a runner who oscillates in the grey zone of trying to break in and doing low level jobs.

I mean there is a runner which I have been trying to get onto this job that I am doing at the moment and she has kept in touch with me probably over nearly three years. And I just met her when she was just doing a work placement when she was at school. And I just keep saying to her ‘keep in touch’ and I have managed to get her one break so far. And I hope I can get her another one. So that is good. You
know, I feel like people have done that for me and they still do. (Claire, production manager)

Another motivation, tentatively suggested, was the fact that people who are being helped may become useful in future. Because, as Colin, an editor and company owner said, ‘you never know where those people are going to end up’. This latter reason for helping people was more common in the later stages of one’s working lives rather than at the entry point. The reasons might be that at the entry people were more in competition with each other or simply because entry was never clear-cut and being at low level job did not mean that people would be staying on in the industry. Interviewees commented that helping junior staff was sometimes motivated by the realisation that people move quickly and the person might be in a more senior position after a few years hence to be of use in finding jobs.

**Cold calling**

A vast number of the candidate-entrants tried to find their first job by cold calling. Companies said they received a large number of CVs and respondents confirmed this, with many claiming to have written hundreds of letters and messages in search of a break into television. Laura, a location manager, got her first job simply by writing hundreds of letters. She received a call from someone who asked her if she would work for very little money on a documentary project and learn about the job. Claudia also managed to get in through cold calling but her first job was a disappointment:

I started off writing lots and lots of letters to every single production company from A to Z. I think I got up to the letter J and someone gave me a job. It was not a very
nice company and I was really exploited as a runner. And then I can’t remember what I did after that, I think I went and offered myself somewhere as free work experience, something like that. And did it for a while and the people I was with liked me and took me on. (Claudia, production manager)

The method of ‘traditional’ cold applications is nothing new. However, the experiences of the people applying a few decades ago and now is rather different, as Sam’s account revealed:

I was with a band and I was dissatisfied with being stuck in studios, so I simply wrote to every television company where I was interested in working and this was, sort of, the late 1970s and in those days they were still employing people and I got, because of my interest I guess, and my background I got offered two or three positions, I think. (Sam, sound recordist)

The main difference between trying to break into television previously and now is in the scales and potential results of the efforts. While previously people did not have to write as many letters, nowadays it is very common for candidate-entrants to write hundreds and hundreds of them. Many young people admitted they have done it with a lot of persistence and no success.

I didn’t know anybody and I wrote about 250 letters and I think probably five actually even replied. And all of them saying, you know, there is nothing at the moment but good luck. So that is how I got it. I think that job might have been through an advert in the Guardian as a secretary but I couldn’t even type. (Dorothy, director)
While in the old days a similar strategy would be limited by the very lack of wider options:

I wrote to the BBC and Granada and they didn’t have any positions for me so I just gave up on that. (Edward, sound recordist)

And as the second option at that time were facilities companies, Edward entered through one of them.

The existence of numerous points of entry to the industry and the lack of particular legal or other formal restrictions, such as years of service of formal qualifications, create numerous potential opportunities for entry. In finding a way to work in television, young people engage in a process of lengthy and numerous attempts which more often than not bring no success. What sometimes can make a difference is mere chance.

**Serendipity**

One of the surest ways to enter the television industry was by pure luck. It was very common for people to succeed in getting in simply by being ‘at the right place at the right time’. Sometimes it meant being on a placement in a company which received a commission and so they need people to start immediately. It was a possible scenario, as commissions were difficult to plan and there was no standard procedure or steps which could assist a company in predicting when a production was going to be commissioned.

It was often in the hope of such a scenario that many of the aspiring entrants frantically wrote to production companies asking for unpaid work experience. Alongside wanting to learn, getting a job was a major motivation for all these eager young people. This was essentially a chance for entry: either by impressing those working there or simply being
lucky and be engaged on a commission which starts while they were there. The role of chance was revealed both by those who have gotten a chance and those who have given it. Here is the story of the ‘lucky break’ that Ciru had:

I think it was a three week placement….. it was one of those things where I, kind of, happened to be in the right place at the right time. I mean, at the end of my two-three weeks I said to my mentor, because he was executive producer for the whole show, I said ‘Look, I would really like to stay on, can you find something for me to do’. And he said ‘Great, you can be, we will take you on as one of our production runners; and then about a month after that they needed a junior researcher. Just because they had this other element of the show that no one had kind of, sort of, thought about, or there was just not the manpower around to actually look after that part of the show. So, he asked me ‘would you like to be a junior researcher’ which of course I couldn’t turn down. And yes, and that’s, and the rest is history, as they say. (Ciru, researcher/AP)

As the above quote shows, there was a general expectation that it was up to the candidates to show initiative repeatedly and ask to be given a chance. Individuals were in charge of their own career and it was their insistence and persistence that could lead them to being given an opportunity.

The viewpoint from the hiring side was perhaps even more revealing:

[T]he first job thing is the thing that gives it away. A production secretary I recruited some years ago, she was Norwegian, she had done a media studies course over here [University]. And she was looking for a job. I had, and I interviewed her amongst a couple of others. There was someone who was my first choice and I
can’t remember what happened, anyway, my first choice turned down the job. But it happened at relatively short notice so I was stuck because again, the whole way the production is to just suddenly leap into action. So, you are not hiring someone for a month’s time you are recruiting someone because we want someone to start on Monday; when I said ‘well, can you start tomorrow?’ she said ‘yes’. And so that became a prime qualification for the job. So yes, it can be very flukey and it can be you know bizarre the way it happens. (Alan, producer)

Or, as Paul, a company owner, admitted, with the amount of applications they have it is always the last person that stays in his mind and hence the person he thinks of when the next job comes around.

The arbitrariness of recruitment suggested by the above quotes was characteristic of the industry. It was manifested both in the entry or initial recruitment, and often the subsequent hiring. The informality of recruitment when combined with lack of institutional or legal restrictions evolved to a situation of often random recruitment. While employing friends and family was traditional, employing people based on urgency and availability is rather new. A major factor in this change is the commercialisation of the sector and the related pressures: need for quick response and short timescales of output. The quick turnover of people often results in less attention to their talent, potential and skills. Sometimes companies would have only a couple of weeks to find the people and start the production. A few of the interviewees mentioned having been asked to start ‘tomorrow’, sometimes even with travel abroad.
Camera and sound

Those in camera and sound departments seemed to have a distinct way of getting into television. The respondents who had been actively working as camera and sound professionals were ones from a previous generation. The current trend is to develop ‘multi-skilled operators’, especially for lower end productions (such as many are). Many of the younger respondents in different job specialisms (those in their 20s and 30s) knew how to shoot or record sound, even if they did not always have to do it.

Camera and sound departments have traditionally been male-dominated. They were hierarchical. Also, in addition to the social skills in communicating ideas with the director or putting contributors and actors at ease, these departments were characterised by very ‘tangible’ technical output which required clear, technical skills. The camera and sound professionals commented on three routes they had used for entering: through a traineeship with a big broadcaster, through work for an equipment hire facility or through a related field such as photography. Sometimes the choice was prompted by a side interest. Sam, an established sound recordist, was working in a sound recording studio which subsequently helped him to get a job in television. At the same time, his hobby evolved as a sideway of his main expertise and he developed his skills while establishing himself as a niche specialist:

[B]ecause I’d an interest in natural history, I started to take the recording equipment which I had outside the studio environment which interested me in particular. And so I got more and more interested in that. It was a hobby, really, in many ways, recording wildlife that actually, as I saw the potential and possibilities and the more interested I got I saw the sort of career potential of it as well.
Chapter Seven

A second route into the technical positions, which is still used today, was to start by working at an equipment hire company or a facility where the person would be exposed either to learning about equipment or to establishing contacts, or both. Arthur’s story was representative:

My first job: I was a kit room assistant in a camera facility company. I just saw it advertised in ‘Broadcast’ magazine and then applied for it and got it. And previous to that I was working at ITN in the tape library there, just sourcing and condensing tapes. So when I applied for this job I think they saw that I was working at ITN and thought ‘that’s great, we’ll have you’. (Arthur, lighting cameraman)

The third route into a technical grade is through a related subject which for the camera operators was most often photography.

I worked in like an audio visual studio doing rostrum photography which is basically using other people’s original material, so using kind of photographs or slides or transparencies of people, you know, things that they want to illustrate… so I worked in an AV, audio visual studio and then I did little jobs like a camera assistant. (Hugh, camera operator)

The way people entered technical grades in the past mirrors the overall logic of entry to the industry at the time: at a low level but with training provided. People were recruited not because they were skilled enough to start working straight away, but because they would have the abilities, desire and potential to do so. Often the criteria were even more subjective such as personality, behaviour, friendships. Even when people entered through one of the few production companies at the time, their chances to succeed were much
bigger. Edward, a sound recordist, remembered how he attempted to join some of the first independent companies:

I wrote to three different companies, independent companies, in Manchester. I got a reply off two of them and an interview off one of them for a van driver’s job. Which was great, I am a trained electrical engineer and I just took a massive drop in wage and then became a van driver for a while. And then they said ‘right, we are going to open up this recording studio, do you want to get into that?’ So I said well, anything to get off the van, I will do that. So that is what shoved me down the sound side. (Edward, sound recordist)

Comparing this to some of the accounts of more recent industry entrants it was clear that the amount of effort they had to put into entry and the chances of success differed significantly. It seems that entering the industry was easier in the past. And the low level jobs people did were all paid. However, entry was different also in that it was a lot more clear-cut: being hired in any capacity in an organisation dealing with television meant one had entered a path which will likely lead into television. Nowadays few organisations can provide such ‘long-distance’ entry point. Entry is much more fluid. It is also more varied in terms of first jobs.

Camera and sound departments demonstrate the most ‘conservative’ link between entry, learning and career progression. It can be contended that this is related to the progression steps closely dependent on the existence of technical skills which are more measurable and tangible than a lot of the ‘soft’ skills required for the other specialisations. It is an area where quick or unregulated upward career moves are not common. The greater formalisation of skills development and progression in the ‘ranks’ resembles the processes
in the old days, when the unions regulated them. They are also dependent on the nature of the skills and the patterns of progression within a strict and demarcated hierarchy.

Atypical entries: the varieties of unpredictability

As with any informal system, there were certain accounts which seemed to contradict the above. For example, having finished their course, some respondents had gone directly to work:

[A]t the end of college because I went straight into work: at a junior level as a runner and then I got a step up to clapper loader on the next series of [name].

(Martin, lighting cameraman)

Or indeed Ciru who got a placement through a scholarship:

I got into the industry straight off university. I finished my degree and then I… part of my degree was I won a scholarship to work for a company. And as part of that scholarship I ended up kind of, working on one of their productions. That is kind of, how I started. (Ciru, researcher/AP)

Mohammad, a news cameraman who had started his career in the earlier days, took a placement with a company where he was able to help with a problem they had, so they were impressed and took him on on freelance basis. These accounts, which in other industries or times may have been typical, were found to be exceptional in television. In this they added to the variety of entry paths confirming the picture of multiple possibilities and no standard or predictably secure way in.
Entry currencies

Logic of recruitment

The changes in the mechanisms of production and the labour market changed the underpinning logic of recruitment in the industry. Commercial logic re-defined the types of people which the industry started to value. Alexander, a producer-director, explained this:

In those days the idea was that you employed creative people who kind of, they came up with ideas and they made these programmes, and that was it. Nowadays it is much more run like an industry. In those days it was run almost like a hobby and you know, the idea was that you would try things out. You would let people have their head and that is why British television used to be the best in the world.

Joanna, a production manager, elaborated on it:

Well, I think you know, the industry has grown enormously and it is possibly more kind of cut-throat now. It is much more commercial than it ever used to be…. And because of that, in order to make things more commercially viable, then, the industry becomes more ruthless. And when the focus is a lot to do with profits and you know, how much output you can make and how much money you can make and all those sorts of things it just… I think it moves away from a creative industry to a much more kind of, commercially-driven experience. And that in itself doesn’t limit the opportunities, it just makes it harder for people to get themselves in as individuals as opposed to just kind of, cogs in a wheel, if you like.

The people who had worked in the industry long enough to have seen the old days were critical of the commercialisation of the sector. Their concern was that at present entry was
not preconditioned by ‘creative worth’ or more holistic individual creativity. Shortened time horizons and the logic of efficiency underpinned fundamentally different mechanisms and function of entry within the industry. The reasons for which people were recruited were different: firms required immediate output, and the types of people who got access may be different. There was far less room for experimenting and slowly working out one’s preferences. As a result employers expected entrants to be capable of doing the work from the very beginning, to be job-ready, ‘to hit the ground running’. This put more pressure on individuals to perform to standards which is both very challenging and bears high risk of failure to them. A lot more depended on the ways young people worked at the beginning of their careers, which was the point at which they were least prepared. Competition was so fierce that entrants often put up with bad conditions and exploitation while working for free or for very low fees. The general ethos was one of accepting any opportunity and so pursuing a specific career became more difficult. Entrants could get channelled into specialisms just because they were available at the time in a particular company or production rather than the ones they aspired to. While under the umbrella of the bigger organisations they could change jobs and discover the ones which suited them best (often taking years) while also learning about all aspects of production. For example, Alexander, a producer-director joined the BBC through a camera training course and then moved into directing. Brian applied to the sound department at the BBC and having established himself as a sound specialist moved into directing, again within the BBC. In the freelance world it was much less feasible to be able to try various jobs.

The new, less stable environment in which entrants started as freelancers appeared to have reduced the degree and types of decisions young entrants could take. This was perhaps
ironic given the increase in the points of entry for them. Independent companies could not make a long-term commitment to an individual’s career and development and this put the young entrants under additional pressure to fit and perform immediately regardless of their qualities, abilities, talents and aspirations. It was the entrants who were supposed to take the risks and this made them especially vulnerable at the beginning of their careers. Without an established reputation and proven skills, or knowledge of the industry mechanisms, young entrants had little power. And although entry paths have increased, the individual is currently more susceptible to the risks of the business.

*Personal contacts: still the way in*

For current entrants personal contacts were the most common way into the industry. According to the interviewees, knowing somebody who knows somebody was the method giving the highest chance of getting a foot in the door. The informality of recruitment continues to make the use of personal contacts as a common way to get in or at least to get a chance to work on a production. This is not new in television. In the old days family friends were used as a way to find a way into the broadcasters:

> It wasn’t sort of saying ‘oh, my mum is an assistant producer so therefore I deserve a job’. You know, I had to prove myself as well. But I would strongly emphasise right from the beginning how important it is to have contacts, to have people on the inside that you can talk to and that will introduce you to the relevant people and point you in the right direction because without those you are always seen, I think, as an outsider, with just a CV and a covering letter is very, very difficult. (Michael, director and lecturer)
As Barry, a cameraman, explained, in the BBC one could get an interview for a job simply by having a relative inside the organisation. This did not guarantee a place, but it certainly secured an opportunity to be considered.

Friends were the other common type of personal contact to use in order to get in:

Well, on my first job I was very lucky because I was employed by a friend of mine and she knew that I was looking for something, and she was looking for someone to hire. So it was a coincidence for both of us. But I began work with her and I have known her you know, for probably ten years at that point. (Joanna, production manager)

Nowadays family contacts, friends and other personal contacts are used in a similar way: and here are a few accounts of it:

My father does fire safety and a friend of his does fire safety for the television industry, and he was working on [TV show]..... And he knew that I wanted, a sort of family friend, you know, he knew I wanted to get into television, passed on my CV to the unit manager there and she asked me to go and meet her, so I went along, had a bit of a chat with her. She was very encouraging you know, told me the sorts of things I needed to do and said that she would pass my CV on to an HR department at [production company], which is actually where I work now. Passed it on to them, they called me and told me that they didn’t actually have sort of any jobs to offer me but they would be willing to meet me, just you know, as a general chat and I went along there, had a meeting with them, kind of a bit of chit-chat with them about what I wanted to do and why I wanted to do it. And by the time I had
got on the train and got off the train on my way home from there they had rung me and offered me a job. (Grace, researcher)

Abigail, a producer-director got asked by the mother of a friend of hers to do some research for a while, in her production company. By that time Abigail was already doing an internship at CNN and took this as a side job, ‘just to help out’. Susan did try to find a job by simply sending CVs, but to no avail. So she found a surer way into television:

And then I found out that one of my very distant relatives was related to the managing director of [production company] so it was completely nepotism. And so she agreed to see me and so I went in for, went and met up with her and she had a long chat with me and sort of told me I need to work, ‘yes, I know but I can’t get in anywhere’ and she ended up putting me through to the HR department at [production company] and they just rang me and said ‘we will give you two weeks work experience’. So I went and did that and when I was doing that I had to do an extra job for one of the production execs and I did more than she asked me to and I took it to her and she was really impressed and everything, and she said ‘what do you mean, oh, you have to stay’ and I got given a permanent job from there. (Susan, production manager)

From an individual’s perspective contacts had at least two main functions. The first one, as illustrated by the above examples, was their role of ‘guarantor’ for the young entrant. It presumed a more active involvement of the contact. In many cases it was relatives or parents who acted in such capacity. Their age and seniority implied authority to provide a valid recommendation and to act as a referee when facilitating the connection between companies and entrants.
The second function of contacts was their capacity to provide information. It was possible that they were used more for this function in the process of seeking employment rather than entry to the industry, as it was at the entry point that people needed some negotiating support (provided by the authoritative contact). However, the two functions were used in both cases. Deirde, a production manager found her first job through friends she shared a house with. One of her housemates had heard of a job, she went there and got it. Here the contacts were used as a means of information provision. In practice, however, it is not always possible to draw a clear-cut line between the two. The ways in which informal recommendations functioned, partly by their very social nature, was subtle and complex.

[I]t was through a friend I got a contact and did like a few weeks of kind of research…. like I say, I was lucky because I had got like a contact and so it was through a friend that I met them and got that job and whatever. Because she was on it already. (Prakash, filmmaker)

Contacts remain a key means of getting into the industry. An interviewee, who herself found a job through friends, opined:

I have even started noticing that a lot of people who start as runners now know somebody in the company or know someone’s parents or something, which I think is so unfair. But I do think it works like that, definitely. (Deirde, production manager)

Anna, a producer-director, was another interviewee who got a placement through a personal contact having tried before that by sending hundreds of CVs and applications.
[I] went to the BBC through a friend of a friend, I managed to blag myself a work experience placement. So because I was living at home it was OK but if I had been living anywhere else it would have been a complete nightmare, you know. So, anyway, I did my three weeks work experience at the BBC at which point they had just got another commission coming in and said ‘how do you fancy starting as a researcher’. So I did that, and that was a short term contract, that was like, literally one month, then that became two months, it became three months, it became… I think I did about six months in the end. And then while I was there I was trying desperately to kind of put out feelers and made a few friends and kind of going to talk to other people internally because that is kind of how it works, or how it worked in those days getting jobs.

Anna’s account illustrates not only the importance of connections discussed above, but also the fact that one job was essentially not a way into the industry, mainly because of the project-based industry structure. Secondly, it demonstrated the crucial importance of being in the organisation when commissions happen as this was a chance to actually get a job and thus enter television. Importantly, unlike before, the process of trying to secure ‘the first job’ is ongoing.

Sometimes the contacts were much more removed: people simply came across someone who helps them. Such was the case of Colin, an editor and company owner who, having graduated in photography, about ten years ago, did not know what he wanted to do. Then, one day he met an acquaintance from University. And the person said he could get him a job where he was working. So Colin became a runner, making tea and coffee and this was the starting point to his successful career as an editor. Claire, a production manager, got
her first job after volunteering to help at a film festival and impressing the organisers with her enthusiasm and hard work. So when one of them got asked by a famous band member to recommend someone for the production company the band was setting up, the director of the festival suggested her. Jane and Sandra’s stories were similar:

I was signing on and working as an usher and doing various bits and bobs of like just other things, just working in shops and you know, just like, crap, like, rubbish jobs. And then I went to a barbecue and met a girl who became [a] friend, who wasn’t my friend at the time actually, but we just talked about what she did for a living and she was head of costume and make up at [company]. And I said ‘oh, I would like to get into that dah-de-dah-de-dah, that sounds interesting’ and she, she, I sent her my CV and she would put me up for various jobs like running and stuff like that. I was about 25, and then in the end, mine is quite a weird story, she, her assistant had gone away to Australia for six weeks and she’d tried to get somebody to cover her for six weeks, but the girl who was supposed to cover her for six weeks went on holiday and had a motorbike accident and ruptured her spleen. So, she said, could I come and do a week for her, just getting stuff out for costumes and putting them away again blah, blah, and then it ended up I was doing the full six weeks. (Jane, costume and make up)

I was on a personal development course and a guy on there whose friend was working on a television programme. And just in the conversation it came up that I wanted to work in film and telly and his friend had just, she had just moved across from films to television and so he spoke to her about my doing some work experience. So that was my first job in television. (Sandra, production manager)
Using personal contacts had a two-way function. For the companies or productions, it was a risk-reducing recruitment method as the one recommending acts as a ‘guarantor’ for the qualities and aptitude of the entrant (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2009). In this way using personal acquaintances pre-selects candidates with some potential. Importantly, it did so at no cost for companies. It was a rather inexpensive way of identifying suitable and reliable people at short notice, such as most of the projects in television are. For the entrants, as outlined above, using personal contacts had two functions: recommendation and information. It could bring other benefits, too. They would already have some information about the way the industry works or know some names, have insights and probably have someone to ask for advice. A few respondents mentioned taking their children to shoots. One cameraman had even used his son as a sound recordist. A sound recordist mentioned taking his daughter along to a job in South America and introducing his sons to producers and organisers at sound-related events. Such people would definitely have a better head start than the vast majority of young entrants, because of their knowledge of the job, and their knowledge of the industry mechanisms, and the contacts. And so sometimes the informal apprenticeship was done ‘within the family’.

Previous experience

Entrants were expected to have had work experience in television. Sometime during their studies and after graduating they were expected to have acquired practical experience in productions if they were to be considered for a position, even one at the lowest possible level.
It is catch 22 in a way. You need the experience of doing the job to get the job. But then if you apply for the job and you haven’t got any experience, you don’t get it. So how do you get the experience to get the job, is the complication. (Gavin, sound technician and lecturer)

Even at entry level employers expected certain, reasonably advanced levels of practical experience. Interviewees from trade unions and regional skills agencies expressed concern about this. They mentioned people being turned down for work as runners as they did not have ‘enough experience’. This was in addition to the assumed educational level which in most of the cases was a taken for granted. The expectation that entrants should have acquired skills and have practical experience before they start attempting to enter the industry explains young people’s need to do placements. The requirements imposed on entrants compelled them to undertake free work and built some form of ‘pre-entry’ capital. The high number of people trying to enter television put the companies in a powerful position. They could choose whom they give a chance to and the educational requirements were an aspect of this. Strictly speaking, they may not be necessary for the jobs per se, but as in other sectors, too, they were used as a criterion for an initial selection of candidates.

From the company’s perspective, employing a young inexperienced person to do a project carries too big a risk of damaging their reputation. Hence they were very hesitant to entrust a task to someone who has not gotten much experience. Colin, an editor and company owner explained that:

I am not going to give that work to someone who has just left college. I can’t do that. If I could help them out, like I said before, I would, but for that kind of job I couldn’t because if it is the BBC you know, and you have got a series producer and
he is coming in and this person can’t do the job then we are in trouble because we have got our reputation on the line for somebody. And we just can’t do that. And I really think it is all about reputation a lot of the time.

There were two conflicting pressures which lead to this situation. Employers needed skilled and reliable freelancers able to produce good work and competitive commissioning meant they would try and avoid any risks related to the staff they employ. In this situation entrants were competing against the experienced professionals. Because productions and production companies were the potential entry point for a lot of them, that was where they needed to break through. At the same time young entrants had insufficient experience to compete successfully. The needs of the business did not cater for the youngest segment of the freelancers. How to bridge the two was a challenge faced, mainly by the young entrants.

Small companies’ specialisation and entrants’ specialisation

When a company specialised in a certain type of programme, it tended to recruit newcomers with relevant subject-specific knowledge. This was the case of a regional independent producing niche science programmes. The head of production admitted that the founding owner, a scientist himself, distrusted the graduates of other disciplines and whenever a graduate with a different degree was recruited, the head of production had to ‘put up a fight’. This preference for people with subject-specific knowledge mirrored the general industry approach, which Alan, a producer, explained:
From the editorial side if you are making history programming, you want someone to bring expertise on history to bear not expertise on you know, how the television market works. And you have a technical crew to look after the cameras and all the rest of it so you want historians. If you are making a medical programme, you want someone with some medical expertise to come in. Now, very often those sort of people will either come in on a work experience basis or just as general runners.

This approach is not new. An experienced sound recordist also entered in a similar way. Sam had experience in music recording as he was interested in music. When Channel Four had commissioned a music programme, he was in an advantageous position to get the job. In a similar way Amber, a location manager, got her first job with National Geographic Television was, because she had just returned from a year of travelling.

Degrees

Entry to the television industry has always been heavily graduate-focused. Having a degree is amongst the assumed pre-conditions for the aspiring entrants. However, it is still considered an indicator of one’s ability rather than a sign of knowledge about the work and the industry. It may be related to the general rise in the number of people with degrees and hence the changed profile of the young people looking for jobs. Also, it would account for the lack of weight attached to media degrees in particular, as people had not been traditionally expected to learn the job prior to entry.
[T]here are three ways to get in. You can either come through as a journalist in which case you don’t need a degree but you do need proper journalistic training, or you could come through as a researcher. Or you could come in on one of the craft jobs you know, which is what I did actually, I came in as a you know a trainee cameraman and you know, you don’t again technically you don’t need a degree for that although you find quite a few people who go in for it do. Again, it has changed, because there are so many media degrees now, actually when they employ a camera assistant or a technical operator they call them nowadays because they sort of multiskill, they generally speaking get people who have done a media degree so they already know about cameras and editing and so on and so forth. So actually there is probably more people coming in now with degrees because the craft sort of option of not having a degree has disappeared. I mean you still you know you, still get some people coming in without degrees. (Alexander, producer-director)

The most prestigious places such as the BBC are still known to have a strong preference to Oxbridge graduates and a few interviewees commented on this. Employers in this industry have always regarded education as a guarantor of abilities and not as a source of industry-specific knowledge. It is also an easy mechanism for distinguishing between candidates in positional competition. This is not to say that employers did not welcome knowledge about the work. But young people were supposed to have acquired it preferably outside media degrees. Because of the variety of the courses media degrees were said not to be a valuable asset on entry:
[T]he media studies or whatever which I think is probably a better way to get in. I think most people, most of the courses certainly in Britain doing media studies aren’t really worth very much. They don’t actually come to, helping you get on in the industry. (Anna, producer-director)

A major concern for those involved in the industry was the vast number of people who qualify with media degrees and by consequence: those were presumably the ones who would seek entry:

I think one of the crimes of our industry is that, that… basically there are too many people qualifying with a media qualification. We have had no restriction about the number of media places that can be offered by Universities and I felt for a long time that we should have had because what we should be doing is trying to turn out a market which meets the demand or just over, just literally we’re supplying slightly more than to meet the demand on the basis of actually making those people in a slightly stronger position, really. (Kevin, head of resources, broadcaster)

We should be more ruthless saying this is the talent and the people we will nurture: saying anyone can come and do it is a nonsense…. It is the whole issue about access to higher education. (Pamela, producer and lecturer)

The possible reason for the mixed views on media education was rooted in its varied standards. The quality of the teaching in media-related subjects was a matter of concern, and below is a typical account of it. There were two aspects of it: dislike of the large number of the courses and concern about the quality of the overall training.
I feel sorry for them because there are 30,000 media students being taught at the moment and I don’t know what they are being taught but it is nothing to do with what we do…. I think colleges look at it like filling bums on seats to get money to, and they put lots of numbers into places, placements. But no real direction in the teaching. Very disappointing for some of the kids who come out…. Perhaps a degree in English Lit and something else to get into telly. (Leo, sound recordidst)

A company owner had similarly strong views and explained in some detail:

They don’t have an English degree, they don’t have any history and primarily the sort of programming we do is structured story telling, so if I had a graduate for example, that has an English degree and history, well, they know about structure, they know about storytelling, they have read books, they have read and read and read and read. But if they come from a media course they know a bit about magazines, they know a bit about a few classic films maybe, they know a lot about a lot of things and therefore nothing is what I generally find. So, if it comes to taking somebody from a media degree I am not saying… technically they are quite good so they can work on the camera side and sound recording side. (Andrew, company owner of ‘ColourTV’)

As the above quote suggests, skills such as story telling and structure as well as general knowledge is valued much higher than specific technical skills. The distrust of the value of media qualification was somehow more common amongst the more senior professionals. They were the ones who have entered under the ‘previous’ logic and also the ones who were more likely to be in a position to act as gatekeepers. For them, the main problem in this relation was the type of skills graduates were taught in their course: skills which did
not prepare them for the practical aspects of the jobs or were not at the same standard and depth as a more traditional subject would equip them with.

Importantly, it was not degrees themselves (most interviewees did have them) but specifically media degrees that were looked upon with distrust. It was almost suggested that they would be a disadvantage to someone wishing to pursue a career in television. Having a subject-specific degree and expertise, on the other hand, could be a way into the industry. George, a company owner and producer, explained about a recent recruit:

We’ve just taken on someone in here who is working in development for us who has come out of a college course but he was a journalist on a local paper before that. And we’ve got a few current affairs projects running at the moment and you want someone who knows how to work with the police and has experience of the courts, and whatever.

Jessica, a science communications graduate started on a work placement doing science programmes and it was this knowledge that helped her to find a way into the industry. Claudia was bilingual and her knowledge of a second language helped her get her first television job:

I was just lucky enough to have a language and someone was looking for someone to do television as a production assistant but they needed to speak Italian and obviously there aren’t that many co-ordinators, probably… that speak Italian and so I got my first job in proper telly as opposed to corporates. (Claudia, production manager)
Media degrees could serve as a way into certain companies, regional independents and some bigger independent production companies, mainly through work placements, but this link essentially was not a way into the industry. It was a short term opportunity to be around the people who work in the industry rather than a predictable way into an organisation or a paid job. Media degrees were a way into getting a work placement and were sometimes arranged by the college. However, other young enthusiasts, such as English graduates for example, could also do them.

And so media-related degrees did not carry any advantage to the young graduates, but having some type of related degree was necessary. Some of the respondents commented that they were not essential for the work, but companies sought them. The issue of distrust to media education is a significant one and requires further attention. Why is there a dislike for media degrees? Firstly, it is possible that the majority of the decision-makers or gatekeepers within the companies are people from the generation which did not have the option of doing a media-related degree i.e. of before the boom of such subjects. Perhaps in line with the past ways in which television operated, there is a view that the talent within television should be reaped from a variety of background areas and that specific television training can be done on-the-job. With the changes in the industry being relatively recent, the attitudes have still not changed and it will require time to adjust to them. Indicative of this was the fact that some of the younger respondents who had succeeded in staying in work for a few years at the time of the interview spoke highly of their degrees. Also, a director of a regional independent who had expressed a negative opinion of media degrees, did acknowledge that they recruited from the colleges and universities in the region and that some of them were good at what he called ‘the technical side’. Secondly, the distrust
of media-related degrees may be linked to the large variations in the quality of the training under them. Courses have started to build reputation based on the performance of their graduates and, particularly in the regions, this was considered when hiring new entrants. One regional production company, as mentioned above, decided to recruit exclusively from a local course. It can be expected that it would be more difficult for a small independent to do the same in London where the number of courses is much larger, includes institutions from around the country and the supply is so big that companies have less incentive to put an effort in identifying good courses and build partnerships with them.

Youth

It was generally agreed that television was a ‘young persons’ game’. In many ways age is also a major qualification for entry into television. It was suggested by some interviewees that a major reason for this was taking advantage of the young people:

When you are younger there is a lot more opportunities out there to get a foot in the door and as you get older those opportunities get lessened and your reputation becomes paramount. Because, I don’t know, it is a young industry. And I don’t think that you know, walking in now without much experience I would get anywhere. (Joanna, production manager)

I mean, I would say in television particularly it is a pretty young person’s game. It is a young person’s game, it is long hours, it is not very well paid at those sorts of levels. So more or less companies can sort of pick and choose a bit of who they want to get in…. But I think initially there is quite a lot of sense of you know, you
are getting fairly cheap labour. And I think, as I say it depends on the genre. I think it really depends on the company because all of them are very different, they are all very different. (Richard, regional agency)

There were other reasons for the natural selection of the young which are embedded in the labour process, for example, the long hours and the intensity of work. Invariably working in television requires high energy, physical stamina and endurance. Low budgets could not provide fees to match the expectations of the experienced professionals. So younger and less experienced people were being hired. This was clearly an opportunity for the latter and provoked resentment in those who have seen a different face of the industry.

**Entry and subsequent career: entry as a career step?**

There was a contradiction around the issues of entry and career choices. Previously people started in an organisation and only afterwards could move on to a position which they aspired to with the possibility of trying it out and opting for a different career. Now that entrants have to enter as professionals rather than as acknowledged apprentices, this type of link between entry and career is distorted.

The companies complained about students and aspiring entrants not having a clear idea as to what exactly they wanted to do within television. For example, Jim, a company director, spoke negatively of the large number of media graduates who had only general experience of a range of tasks and little idea of what area they wanted to specialise in. He received many e-mails from graduates simply asking for a meeting and admitted that he found it difficult to select candidates because they had done a bit of everything and he felt it really
depended on them how to continue. Respondents from regional screen agencies spoke of young graduates who thought they could start up high in the hierarchy, who thought that they were already producers or directors. Companies also complained about such young people being unrealistic and claiming they were all trained producers or directors.

For the young people it was difficult to meet the challenge of freelance start ups for several reasons. Firstly, they were pressured to have a clear vision as to their professional specialism before gaining knowledge of the industry, which would have helped them in defining it. This lack of exposure to the variety of career possibilities within television pre-defined the entrants’ choices and not surprisingly they aspired to be producers and directors. These high expectations were partly also nurtured by the media education and partly by the lack of transparency and formal rules governing entry and indeed subsequent careers. Secondly, and following from this, the need to respond to commercial challenges i.e. the need to ‘sell’ themselves stimulated their claims to be more experienced than they actually were. Thirdly, the young people who I met and interviewed at industry events were desperate to get in and the fierce competition compelled them to take any job at any conditions often regardless of their career aspirations.

I would have said 70% of them don’t have a focus to what they want to do by the time they come out of the University. They don’t know whether they want to be a sound person, a cameraman. Most of them want to be producers and directors but don’t understand that they have to go through. That’s not where you start. The thing is you almost have to knock them down completely and depress them before you then start to build them up again. Because you’ll get 70% of people saying they want to be a producer or a director and if they say that that in an interview for a
camera job then they’ve lost it straight away. Because they need to be able to show
a commitment to the technical discipline, initially. (Kevin, head of resources,
broadcaster)

Entry could define subsequent career directions but cannot always be controlled in terms of
subject or area. As interviewees admitted, it was common for people to take up a job
simply as a means of getting their foot in the door. And this is exactly how it used to work
in the old days. Any job within a company might lead to progress. Once someone became
a member of the community, s/he would be guaranteed the chance to learn and progress
over time. Nowadays, although the basic mechanisms are the same, there is no link
provided between entry and subsequent development. This traditional approach is not
matched by a long-term orientation. People accept jobs in the hope that they will lead to
careers but the loose structures do not support these careers and mechanisms again do not
lead to their intended goal.

Some overcame the entry hurdles by starting their own company: mainly those in the
regions where opportunities were even more limited. Sarah, a young editor, tried to get into
the industry through the more conventional paths: writing letters to companies or
individuals, but with no success. So she applied for funding and started her own company.

> The outcome of me starting this business is to gain experience. You know, I am not
expecting miracles, I am not expecting somebody to pay me £1,000 just to do
something, straight away. (Sarah, editor and company owner)

Jack also has set up a company with a friend of his, while doing his day job ‘to pay the
bills’. While these can be some form of work in the industry, the limited contacts and
potential commissions introduce higher risk and uncertainly into such business endeavours.
And while they may be successful on a small scale, they are unlikely to constitute a main source of employment for more than the founder, or be a sideline, hobby-like work.

To summarise, entry to the television industry is a process relying heavily on personal contacts and unpredictable occurrences/serendipity. In this they resemble the informality which has always existed in the sector. The informal methods still dominate access to the industry although there are indications of more structured recruitment: through placements and media courses. Although these may be successful, they are still characterised by a large degree of randomness. Hence it may be contended that the logic of their incorporation in the mechanisms for recruitment is the same as the one governing recruitment through personal networks. Placements are a form of reconnaissance between employers and potential employees, but they are also based on the premise that the young people will be able to work for free, show initiative and ‘fit in’. Importantly, their stay with the company should coincide with the company’s winning a commission by means of increasing their chances of an opportunity to work. This is less so in the bigger companies where the programme turnover is bigger. However, even they operate on a project principle and the extent to which an individual will receive a chance also depends, at least initially, on personal contacts.

Placements as a way of selecting candidates (from a company perspective) and gaining a chance to impress and demonstrate potential (from an entrant point of view) raise another potential problem. They rarely provide the breadth of experience for both to asses which job in particular is best suited to the candidate’s abilities. If a student is taken on to do development work, they may never get a chance to work on a production and visa versa. Given the large number of potential recruits it is very unlikely that a candidate will be
Chapter Seven

given a few chances should they fail at the job they have been admitted to. This is in contrast with the times of BBC dominance when, as respondents explained, they could move from department to department for years until they found their niche and the work they enjoyed most. There are exceptions to this, too. A young editor applied for a researcher placement in a small regional independent and after the first few days and a conversation with the manager he decided to specialise in the technical support of the editing suite within the company. This was also a chance to train by working alongside editors whenever there were any working for that company. The choice was motivated partly by the company’s need for someone to work in the editing suite, so in many ways it was a case of someone being ‘channelled’ into a specialism. Small companies can rarely cater for anything but their own immediate needs, however, sometimes there may be a happy coincidence when this turns out to be a suitable opportunity for someone.

The glamour of working in television has perhaps always attracted a large number of people, yet all the more senior professionals, who had entered ‘in the old days’ continuously commented on the increased number of young people who want to start a career in television. A possible explanation could be the changed structures and lack of significant formal barriers on entry, mentioned above. They create a ‘zone’ of intermittent employment whereby young people are continuously in and out of jobs which can potentially lead to a more permanent career. In this sense the new de-regulated institutional environment ‘invites’ more applicants and allows for more entrants to oscillate in and out of this intermitted employment zone. It does not, however, provide a signal of success or failure and the continued practice institutionalises a tenuous notion of entry to the industry.
The large number of aspiring professionals shapes a labour market where employers do not have to look for candidates in any targeted way. The active role falls on the young people. However, selection is problematic as there are no formal qualifications which signal individual knowledge. The number of media-related degrees is considerable and the levels of competence they ‘produce’ are variable. Companies have to build knowledge as to how good the courses are which is based on the people they employ. This in theory has the potential of turning into a pre-selection criterion and help them to identify better the people that suit best their organisation. In practice however one can question whether companies, especially the bigger ones, will go into such lengths given the fact that they already have many candidates to select from. And even if they do, the time which potential candidates spend with them is relatively short so choices will always be contingent of a number of circumstantial criteria. Pre-selecting candidates on the basis of the educational institution they attended is also problematic with regards to avoiding discriminatory practices. And so there is a complicated solution to the issue of recognising expertise and abilities in the young people who aspire to a career in television.

For individuals entry is an unclear process with high risk of failure. The practice of working for free at the bottom discriminates against those from less privileged backgrounds. It introduces the notion of television industry as a hobby rather than a commercial sector. It is also related to an essential characteristic of entry into television: the unclear boundary between being ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the industry. In a project-based environment the entry point is difficult to mark out as the early careers are subjected to the same temporal fragmentation as the rest. However, how many projects actually mean that one is already ‘in’ the industry is a question difficult to answer. Paid employment may
alternate with unpaid work and a lot of unpaid work may not lead to any paid employment. Hence entry should be conceptualised as a process rather than a point for which the term ‘latent entry’ may be used.

In the current matrix there is no demarcation of entry or support during the process which would reduce the pressures. Graduates need a less conditional chance, guidance and space. Companies need output and success. Risks are costly. And so buffers are needed to take the wastage. Big companies and their stable internal labour markets performed this function (Cappelli, 1995; Marsden, 1999). Currently there is nothing to take their place. And the cost of the commercial pressures in the existing structures are easily transferred down the ladder and paid by the lowest unit of operation – the individual.
CHAPTER EIGHT:

LEARNING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

This chapter presents and discusses the findings on the learning and skills development mechanisms and the issues related to them. It starts with a brief outline of the general traits of learning and presents ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ in ‘communities of practice’ as the theory through which the empirical data is interpreted. It then discusses some specifics of television work which are not only important in understanding the learning mechanisms and processes of skills development but also demonstrate the relevance of adopting a community-based perspective in the analysis. The specifics of the work in television are followed by two sections in which learning in different organisational contexts is presented: big vertically integrated organisations and the labour market of the independent sector, dominated by small and micro companies. These are followed by a presentation of the main learning mechanisms which respondents discussed, i.e. the focus shifts to the level of the individual and the community. The chapter continues with a part on the socialisation of novices into the industry, e.g. learning the behavioural norms of the community. It is followed by a section on the learning and skills development of practising freelancers: continuous learning. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some challenges in the process of learning and skills development in the current context of the television sector.
How do people learn: legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice

Most of the learning in television and the type of learning most valued by the industry professionals, is on-the-job. It is closely intertwined with the actual process of working. Being a part of a production, working alongside experienced professionals or being able to observe work brings exposure and through this exposure knowledge and skills are developed. Learning through involvement is learning within a community of practice (Wenger, 2005) or community-based skills development (Crouch, 2005). Wenger (2005:4) defines communities of practice as “[G]roups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”

The social aspect of learning is essential. The process involves not only acquisition of skills but also socialisation into the norms, practices and values of the community. The skills development of a novice takes place through initial engagement with peripheral, easy tasks with little responsibility attached to them. The opportunity of observing other members of the community doing their jobs leads to gradual learning and performing of more and more complex and responsible tasks. This is what Lave and Wenger (1991) term ‘legitimate peripheral participation’. In it learning is intertwined with socialising, observing and simply living as a member of a community. It is dependent on doing, experiencing and aspiring. Understanding is closely related to productive activity. The theory emphasises the context-specific nature of learning and skills development. Much of the skills acquired are tacit and embedded in social practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Competent learners are the ones who not only can perform the work, but also interpret its context and the interactions within it. There is no clear distinction between work and
subsequent professional development (Crouch, 2005). The process is largely informal and there are no clear-cut stages or levels of skills acquisition. Therefore it requires time and exposure. Importantly, it is embedded in power relations (Contu and Willmott, 2003; Lave and Wenger, 1991). They are manifested not only during the learning and socialisation process but also at the stage of entry to the community (discussed in the previous chapter).

A characteristic of such communities is the historic nature of the relations: a notion similar to Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1977; Jenkins, 2002; Özbilgin and Tatli, 2005; Swartz, 1998). Learning through legitimate peripheral participation is learning in the culturally and socially structured world (Lave and Wenger 1991:51). It is therefore linked to both the individual and the context, and looks into the interplay between the two in a non-linear fashion.

In any given concrete community of practice the process of community reproduction – a historically constructed, ongoing, conflicting, synergistic structuring of activity and relations among practitioners – must be deciphered in order to understand specific forms of legitimate peripheral participation. This requires a broader conception of individual and collective biographies than the single segment encompassed in studies of ‘learners’. (Lave and Wenger, 1991:56)

Reproduction of communities of practice is problematic (Lave and Wenger, 1991:57): there is an inherent tension between novices and old-timers. This is manifested especially in the process of ‘taking on’ the roles of the latter by the former and the replacement of the older generations by the younger ones. Another relevant point from the theory which resonates with the findings is the need to ‘legitimise’ participation, as participation only leads to learning if it is ‘sponsored’. Mentor and novice relationships should be seen in the
light of this process. Lave and Wenger even contend that providing legitimacy is a more important mentor’s function than providing instruction (p.92). Learning, on the other hand, can often happen in relation to other novices.

Learning in a community of practice is a socialisation and incorporation of the novice into the social and structural rules of the community. Contu and Willmott (2003:286) point out that this relation between the structural characteristics of the community and the practices within it are under-researched. Further, they emphasise the importance of historical circumstances. Another point which informs the interpretation of the findings is the notion of a coherent community (Contu and Willmott, 2003:287), concealing the ‘fractured and dynamic process of reproduction’. The need to situate the community into the wider institutional context (Contu and Willmott, 2003) has not only been necessitated by the methodological approach here but has also served the analysis in the present investigation.

This was the traditional way of skills acquisition in television, from before the changes in the sector in 1990s. Currently the body of television professionals includes a mixture of generations who have experienced the changes either by being directly subjected to them or by working alongside people with different professional histories. The ‘older’ generation valued their apprenticeship-based learning and their gradual acquiring of skills and identity through participation. They were sceptical and critical of the knowledge acquired under more formal training outside the industry, such as university or college courses. The ‘younger’ ones often valued their degrees more and felt they had learnt useful knowledge. However, they also valued the practical, on-the-job experience.
Specifics of the work in television

Working as a part of a programme-making team has certain specifics, which reveal the social nature and the interdependence of expertise in the project-based television work. It is related to understanding of both the processes of experiential learning and the value which the community attached to it. The two most relevant dimensions, as discussed by the interviewees, were, firstly, the fundamental need for knowing the whole programme making process and the relevant tasks within it and secondly, the centrality of social skills for the creative process. These dimensions are presented in the next two sections.

Knowing the programme-making process and other people’s jobs

Awareness of the whole process of programme making is essential in television. It is closely related to knowing other people’s jobs: being competent about what other practitioners do and what they need in order to perform their tasks well. Making television programmes is a joint effort and an important aspect of it is the interdependence of the jobs team members do. Hence knowledge of the way one’s work impacts on other’s activities is a condition for being a good professional.

And the other really important thing I suppose, which is what I tell a lot of other cameramen and directors, young directors or you know not young but new directors, is to go into the edits. See what shots they are [using], see how long the shots last, see what type of shots that they use, you know. And I did that myself, I sat in, as painful as it was because you are looking at your own filming, you are looking at your own work and seeing how the editor and the director use your
filming to make the programme, to make sense of the programme. And you quickly learn what is good and what is bad, and why on earth did you do that. Because it seems so, when you are in front of the screen it seems so logical that you would have done a particular move or something, you know. (Hugh, camera operator)

This illustrates how the way in which the operator films the sequences impacts on the work of the editor. Bad camera work would put restrictions on the editor’s ability to do a good piece of work. Edward, a sound recordist, explained the direct implications the work of the cameraman and director had on his output:

[Y]ou have got to know the camera operator’s job, what he wants; the lighting cameraman’s job because where his lights are going to go you have got to be able to work out where you are going to go to get the sound. And know what the editor needs in the cutting room when it gets that far. You know, if you see somebody’s back of head, I’m struggling to get that line but it is back of head so I don’t need it. So it is knowing what you can get away with and what will be covered on other shots as well. So it is actually, knowing how a film is going to be put together as you are shooting it. You know well you are not going to need that line because it will be on a close up at that point or a different angle… it is just experience, really, of how people work and how a film is shot and put together. It is just experience that you can only get on the shopfloor, I think. They can’t teach you that in a classroom I don’t think.

The interdependence of television jobs was also confirmed by Colin, an editor and company owner, who reflected on his learning experience:
Chapter Eight

[What I found from an early sort of stage is that I would be working and I would be picking up little bits of information from… just from talking to other people who work in other areas.

Respondents from both the technical and the editorial side pointed out that the programme editing stage was a good learning opportunity. There the whole product is finalised and they can see exactly which parts of the material they have shot, recorded or directed can be used. It is at this stage that any deficiencies become visible: usually through the faults of the footage, as many of the interviewees experienced. Many of the camera operators and shooting directors commented on this. Hugh, a camera operator, defined this as a separate skill to the technical competence he had: knowing how a programme is constructed and delivering ‘usable footage’. As the first quote by him illustrated, the way to learn this was by engaging with the editing process and watching the types of shots the editor uses: their length, type and other characteristics. With time people acquire the knowledge of what is or is not useful and become confident they can shoot good enough material for a programme to be constructed.

Importance of social skills

The second specificity of the work in television is the importance of social skills. The ability to interact with people is considered core to the programme making process. Working on a television production is a joint effort in which ideas are realised through the creative interaction of different people. Hence an important aspect of becoming skilled is learning how to relate to other team members in order to generate ideas, stimulate creativity and produce the programme. Mark, an experienced editor, explained:
The most important aspect of editing is the relationship between the editor and the producer. The film I am doing at the moment I have just started, we haven’t got a script or anything. We are just sitting in making it up, basically.

A camera operator also illustrated the type of ‘creative’ conversation which lies at the core of the process:

So, when I was in that position of camera operator, you know, the director says ‘right, how do you want to do this?’ I would think ‘God, you know, I have got no idea’ I would think to myself and I would say ‘well, perhaps we should start over there and get him to do whatever’, and they would say, you know, ‘yes’ or ‘no’. And then they would come up with an idea, and basically it’s all about, you know, try; it is all about evolving. It is quite organic, really, you know, the thing evolves.

(Hugh, camera operator)

During the editing process of the case study production, a similar process was observed. The director would give general and vague instructions and would ask the editor if he ‘gets his drift’. Then, the editor would cut a sequence and would ask if the director means ‘something like it’, and so the process would evolve. To the observer the amount of specific instructions and the information exchanged was very limited, but the director and the editor were working successfully with each other.

The above two traits of the work in television: the need for holistic knowledge of the programme making and the competence to interact in a particular way with the other team members are necessary for any professional in the community. Their nature is such that to develop them, people need exposure to real work and to be a part of the social process during programme making. Hence by its very nature and specificity, the skills and
competencies in television have a holistic and a social aspect which are developed best through participation in practice. The community-based perspective, outlined at the beginning of the chapter, provides a theoretical perspective which grasps this.

In addition to the issues of specific knowledge and relevant theoretical perspective, the current discussion of skills development requires consideration also of the structural context of the community. The following two sections present the two main settings in which learning and skills development can take place: a large vertically integrated organisation and the independent sector with a high proportion of small companies.

**Learning in a large organisation: a story from the past?**

Learning in a large organisation has the advantage not only of established in-house training courses, but the possibility of getting exposure to a variety of genres and types of production. Importantly, this is done in a ‘legitimised’ role whereby the junior person is employed and expected to develop while helping. It was generally acknowledged to be a very good way to learn as one got a range of experience in a breadth of situations while being involved in actual productions:

> I was working in television so I was learning rapidly about those sort of skills for working in television sound. And it was a great place to learn because in those days, I joined the sound department as a trainee in about 1981, I think… [and] was introduced to a vast and broad range of subjects from studio drama to news gathering to post production and to location filming and got a, you know, a great range of experience in all those over a couple of years. (Sam, sound recordist)
Brian, currently a producer-director, considered himself to be ‘a part of a very lucky generation in television’ because he got exposure and experience of ‘everything: football matches, horse racing, operas, pop concerts, dramas, light entertainment shows in the studio, light entertainment shows …’ and ‘if you stand on the sets of these things long enough and watch, you cannot help but learn how these things are done’. By consequence, the current generation, as Brian pointed out, are ‘narrowed down straight away’ and specialise from a very early stage which precludes wider and broader skills development, the breadth of experience which subsequently helped to diversify one’s work or to ‘pick up’ quickly a new subject or situation.

Another advantage of a large organisation was the availability of in-house training facilities. Equipment is essential in television production, especially in certain job roles which revolve around studio work or camera and sound work. Brian, who did his sound recording training at the BBC, described the first course he did:

It was a three month residential course at a place in Evesham in Worcestershire. A big house called Wood Norton that the BBC owned. It was a stately home and behind it they had built studios, they had got a complete television studio, they had got radio studios, they had got what they call recording channels with tape machines in. They had got literally a mini broadcasting infrastructure.

Another advantage was that a large organisation could afford wastage, slack, which enabled lengthy exposure to the gradual learning that gave breadth and depth of expertise.

You need the time, you need turnover of programmes, you need to do programmes, you need difficult circumstances, you just need experience I think. You just need that experience….. I think it is getting less and less. I think it is probably getting
less because people seem to be getting younger. I don’t know whether it is me getting older, I am not sure, but I think it would be unusual these days to spend the best part of ten years before you start producing/directing your own stuff. (Robert, producer-director)

Nowadays big organisations do run some training courses. For example, regional branches of ITV do recruit trainees. They often are targeted at underrepresented community members and attempt to address structural deficiencies. Even then, many of the young people do not stay on with the organisation. Embarking on a traineeship is not embarking on an organisational career as before. The limited number of in-house training opportunities in the regions is reduced further by the practice to employ freelancers directly by the productions, which limited the range of opportunities for trainees to work on these productions. The regional broadcasters had almost the same problems of retention as the small independents. An interviewee from a big regional company referred to it as a ‘lottery’ in terms of who stays and who goes.

Training is also a financial matter for the large organisations. The availability of in-house development opportunities is nowadays limited because the outsourcing of the productions leads to tighter budgets. The commissioned projects cannot easily take on the training functions of the organisations even if they have the expertise. Lucas, a researcher in a small independent, remembered his relatively recent traineeship in a region outside London where the broadcaster was looking for ‘young, bright, new kids to train, to pay no money and to train’. The trainees received an initial three months of training in a wide variety of areas such as editing, research skills, camera, and then were attached to a production as researchers. From then on, Lucas said, it was like a real job on which he had
an opportunity to do research, a bit of shooting or sound recording. This is typical of contemporary traineeships where people are trained as ‘multi-skilled’ researchers or operators, covering a wider set of skills for a limited time period. This type of training is reminiscent of the old apprenticeships, albeit shorter.

In the past the training institution of the television sector was the BBC and later ITV, too. The different stages of de-regulation and commercialisation of the industry removed that role from them. With the shift from internal to external labour market the incentives to train lessened and so did the resources which they could dedicate to in-house development. In the past the provision of various courses had been robust and there were vast learning opportunities across the organisations. In the BBC this was the system of ‘attachments’ (in-house half a year secondments to various departments). However, the BBC started bringing people in as opposed to using resources to train them up and, little by little, the in-house training provision was considerably reduced. This reduction coincided with the emergence of media-related degrees. As also suggested by the data on entry, professional communities generally distrusted them and many of the ‘older’ professionals elaborated on them being theoretical and not meaningful in terms of acquiring relevant skills. This is matched by their low standing amongst the academic disciplines. However, some of the younger respondents spoke positively about them in terms of learning. A media graduate, currently a researcher, described her degree as ‘absolutely invaluable’, vocational and practical, and reckoned that a lot of the skills she acquired there she could bring and use in the world of work. An established production manager took a career break and went to college in order to learn more about the work. She was also positive about her degree and appreciated its vocational nature. One could speculate that the diversity in opinions can be
explained by the inexperience of the young people who are not in a position to judge realistically the level and types of knowledge and skills acquired through their degrees against those of the older and more senior colleagues. In the above examples the courses mentioned had practical focus of training and so it may also be that it was the vocational emphasis of the education that was valued. It may as well be that the differences in opinions were due to generational or personal career paths whereby professionals evaluate others using their own way of learning as a criterion. The structured learning provision outside the industry, however, had relatively low standing in the sector. Television workers valued practical learning. Locating the process in the educational system is still not established as a viable alternative to the professional development within the large vertically integrated organisations. The other major venue for learning was in the independent sector, and it is discussed in the following section. The focus is on small independent companies due to their importance as a key structural element of the independent sector, the identified gap in the existing research and the sampling limitations of the current study.

**Small independents and skills development**

In the process of de-regulation there was no model or industry experience which could inform the new way in which industry training was provided. With the shift of the actual production to small independent companies, some of the traditional on-the-job learning opportunities shifted there, too. However, unlike countries such as Denmark or Taiwan where small companies do serve as training hubs (Ashton, 2004; Green et al., 1999), in the UK such firms face significant limitations in training people (Matlay, 1998). The first
major reason for this in the television sector is the large proportion of the micro companies. They lack structure, environment and resources to train. Malcolm, a representative of a regional industry training body, explained:

I think the problem with small indies at the end of the day is that they pay a lot of lip service to training but they are not very good at it. Like, small indies are not very good at a lot of things…. mainly because a lot of them still operate on a more or less owner-occupier/owner-manager base. So they are often fairly lacking in skills of how they do it. Again, that is where they then start to fall down with more bigger vertically integrated independents who can afford to get head of HRs in, people with people skills, and have different training arms and so on and so forth.

Another major problem with training in small companies comes from the unstable situation in which most of them find themselves. They are subjected to strong competition and rely on an uneven flow of commissions; experience budgetary pressures and often specialise narrowly. In addition, their operations are usually based on a very limited number of permanent in-house staff with a pool of freelancers brought in as and when needed. Hence training investment is highly vulnerable as by default people do not work long enough to make it viable. Companies were well aware that their investment in somebody’s skills development was unlikely to benefit them in the long term. Elizabeth, head of production in a small regional indie, gave an example:

We have had a researcher who we sent, he expressed an interest in learning how to use a camera and actually he is OK. So we sent him off on a course but he doesn’t work for us anymore and he is now a shooting AP [associate producer] for another company. But we trained him, we paid for him to go on the course but that is the
way it works. Because we wanted him to be able to use, because we like him, we wanted him to be able to use the camera for us so we paid for the course. He then does the project and then goes off to another company. So you can’t really reap the benefits. So he has benefited, which is great, but we haven’t.

And also:

With the BBC, probably not so much now but in the past, and ITV… it was such a big company, people could go off on secondments to learn how to do something, we can’t do that for people. (Elizabeth, head of production in a small regional independent)

An independent company, which had a good reputation as an employer, would occasionally send people on training courses. For example, their ‘technical’ person had spent five weeks on courses; two of their other staff members attended music copyright clearing courses. The company took advantage of the opportunity a regional screen agency provided. However, this type of staff development was not considered to be substantial. George, one of the company owners, explained that the majority of development would be in-house, by sending people on shoots or giving them the opportunity to try different aspects of work. So the core skills development mechanisms have not changed. Small companies rely on and value experience and in many ways try to mirror the situation as it was in the large vertically integrated organisations. It should also be noted that they acknowledged they sent only staff (e.g. people working on a permanent or semi-permanent basis in the company) to formal courses. People who were brought in for a specific production, the freelancers, were not considered for such opportunities as the company did
not have either the time or the resources to provide for them, and, importantly, could not expect to benefit from such investment.

Sometimes an atypical, almost improvised form of training would be applied. Abigail, a young producer-director, experienced this in the beginning of her career when she was working for a small independent:

They sent me on a course…. It was just a one man, he taught me in his like garage, he was like an engineer. And it was quite strange, yes. He gave me training…. I can’t remember it was probably about three or four days, something like that.

Learning and training was most pertinent in the cases where companies employed junior staff. From the small independents’ point of view, employing young people was only worthwhile if there was the benefit of lower costs. They would then be inclined to provide some experience of the industry. But such a basis for hiring could not result in substantial development. This approach seemingly resembles the operation of the strong internal labour markets of the past: companies have long-term intentions and are willing to provide experience on a number of programmes. However, the young people often felt exploited as they were not receiving the breadth of exposure they would have had they worked for a larger company and their position was not going to be an entry to a lifetime career with the organisation: simply because of the structure of the business. Their ‘participation’ was also not legitimate, as they were not employed on a training position, they had no mentor or long-term security. The potential possibility of earning more and being involved in more diverse productions lured many into the freelance labour market, even if they had the opportunity to stay within a company for a while.
The constraints under which small independent companies operated could sometimes turn into benefits to someone who was learning on-the-job. Deirde, a production manager, was very happy about the first company she worked for because they gave her more things to do than she could have done in a bigger company. Abigail, a producer-director, was working as an associate producer while recording sound as well, when she was entrusted to do the camera, too. This was the first time she had to shoot but she gladly took the opportunity and learnt from it. Another example was observed during the case study fieldwork. A part of the shoot of the case study production ‘ScienceDoc’ (see Chapter Ten) had to be done in the USA and the team of a freelance producer-director, an associate producer, a presenter and a cameraman were travelling there. The head of production at the small independent arranged it so that one of the young members of staff joined them, on the pretext of bringing back tapes with some of the footage. Both the head of production and the producer-director regarded this as an experience-building trip and it was done not out of real necessity but with developmental purpose for the young staff member. However, such good examples in the industry were sporadic, unstructured and were not a part of any systemic skills development in television.

Time is also a dimension to acknowledge in relation to the above. Opportunities for varied tasks could exist in a small organisational structure. However, they would be likely to occur over a longer period of time, mainly because of the irregular inflow of productions. Working and learning in a small company may look like a more efficient situation in which exposure is less structured, but more intensive. In practice, however, low budgets and uneven business inflow limited this. The owners and directors of small independent businesses were very honest about their difficult position. The survival of their companies
depended on the quality of the output and commissions were often gained on the basis of the reputation of the team members. Hence young colleagues had little weight in the process of winning business. Even if the company had the intention of helping young people by giving them a chance to learn (as a few of the interviewees indeed had), the lack of experience of the young industry members bore a significant risk for the outcome and so the projects and roles for which companies were willing to use the young people, were limited.

I can see the dilemma and I sympathise with them but I can’t, you see, in my position I can’t say to them ‘I’ve got a three quarters of a million pounds commission for a series of six with Channel Five, and I am going to entrust it to you’. I can’t … it is too much of a risk. (George, small indie owner and producer)

The scale of the projects small independents did and the budgetary restrictions resulted in smaller sizes of the teams than before. Commercial pressures meant that companies would aim to hire as few people as possible and so the number of people who worked on productions has decreased significantly. For the young people this meant less exposure to expertise and put limitations on learning.

[Nowadays, you know, we tend to be working in smaller and smaller crews so you perhaps haven’t got the, you know the breadth of other people to kind of learn different skills from, whether they are technical or whether they are just social skills. (Adam, sound recordist)]

It was not uncommon for teams to have very variable numbers at the different stages of the programme making. In order to save money, companies would hire people often for only a
short output. Hence not only the number of practitioners involved but also the time of
working together was restricted.

This section outlined the main types of organisational contexts for the skills development:
a larger organisation and small companies, and discussed some of the benefits and
limitations these had for learning. The next section will present some of the particular ways
in which people learn, e.g. will shift the attention to the learning and skills development
mechanisms.

Specific learning mechanisms

Learning by watching, asking questions and making mistakes

Most of the specific learning mechanisms in television have not changed. As already
mentioned, the main type of skills development is on-the-job and within a community of
practice. Such community-based learning is informal and skills are acquired through work
experience at the periphery necessary for becoming a fully participating member. One
learns through observation and experience. It is essential that there is a sufficiently lengthy
period of time during which apprentices can be exposed to a variety of situations in order
to develop an inner ability to judge and deliver. Interviewees emphasised the importance of
being able to observe or ‘shadow’, to ask questions, to be involved in practical work, to try
and learn from mistakes. Cameramen explained how they learnt about the interaction with
the director in the creative process, through shadowing an experienced cameraman. In a
similar fashion people on the editorial side learnt about storytelling and directing. Grace, a
researcher, described her learning process:
I think you just need to be around people, you need to be around people making programmes and to listen, you know, listen to the decisions they are making, see the things that get used, see the things that don’t get used, you know, and find out why don’t things get used, why are things bad why aren’t, you know, sort of look at stories and how they are being created and contestants and why they are good and why they are bad and really just pay attention. That sounds, you know, ridiculous, but I do think in my three years my eye for a story and my eye for what makes a good contestant [in a television entertainment show] has literally just come from listening to those above me and seeing what the things that they choose, and the decisions that they make. And now there’s a lot of decisions that I will make myself without even going to someone above me because I know already that they are wrong you know, or the contestant is wrong or the story is wrong. And I feel sort of confident enough now and senior enough now to make those decisions on my own.

Anna, a producer-director, also found watching other directors’ work instructive. She analysed the line of questioning they adopted and thought of better ways to do it. Dorothy, a director, provided a good summary of the process of learning:

They learn the way I am learning, they become researchers, they work at the bottom and they work their way up. You learn on-the-job.

In the contemporary industry context this learning by watching is limited by the possibilities for observing the work of skilled professionals. George, a company owner, expressed bewilderment about how people can learn nowadays:
[M]ost of the editors we work with now used to be assistant editors before… they learnt the trade by sitting at the back of the editor… helping, assisting. And there are no assistant editors any more in fact so I don’t really know where you learn the trade.

Joanna, a production manager, remembered working for an industry body commissioning films from various producers. The small budgets did not allow for anyone with more experience to be hired and so she was assigned to various productions and producers. This gave her the benefit of observing the work of many different professionals. Claire, a production manager, said she learnt from everybody:

I don’t feel like anybody has actually trained me up. It is more to do with having a community of people that you can ask questions, really stupid questions of.

Claudia summarised the factors which were important in the process of this informal learning: an experienced person to learn from with good knowledge and practices who is approachable:

[I]t is not like they gave me official two hours of training a week but there was a very experienced woman who had grown up at the BBC and she sort of ran the production side of things. And she was just easy to talk to and you know they did things properly so you would have to, she would check that things were being done properly. So that way you sort of learnt. (Claudia, production manager)

This can make learning a very uncertain occurrence, which depends heavily on circumstances and which requires availability and ‘good will’ on the part of the more experienced colleague. It is also important that the ‘mentors’ are professional and have
good working practices. Given the variety of productions, the skill levels of people working on them may vary significantly and this is a potential limitation for the novice.

A structural factor, which facilitates the informal learning, is the uneven distribution of work, especially in the filming stage of the process. There is often a lot of time between ‘takes’ which people use to talk and ask questions. This is a good ‘space’ for the junior staff available within the labour process (see also Defillippi and Arthur, 1998). However, working in a smaller team where people do more than one job, restricts these opportunities. Being employed only for a part of the project, as is currently common, also limits the benefits from this space.

There are thus a number of variables in the learning process: length of involvement, availability of skilled team members, willingness of the potential mentors to share knowledge and time to do so in the process of work. There may be coincidence between the ones willing to teach or show younger colleagues practices and those competent and professional but there are no mechanisms for ensuring this. And learners often do not choose whom to learn from. Even if they do, it is unlikely that they would be the best judges given their limited knowledge and experience.

This way of learning puts almost the whole responsibility and emphasis on individual initiative. Abigail, a producer-director, was someone who benefitted from it:

[I]f I didn’t know something I wasn’t going to pretend. So if someone said to me ‘can you go and get that kind of light from over there’, I would be like ‘what is it?’, you know, ‘what is it for?’ And they would tell me.
Taking the initiative in asking questions requires a high degree of self-confidence and an ability to ask useful questions. As one company owner admitted, it is not an industry for shy people. This individual responsibility for development and progression naturally marginalises those who are not self-confident, quick or ‘likeable’. Indeed, all the interview respondents were friendly, quite charming, confident and well-spoken.

Ciru, for example, had been working as a researcher on a show where she was employed before all the other researchers and so she got to help and thus came to know some of the producers. This was the crucial factor which gave her the confidence to ask them questions afterwards and learn during the production stage.

Jessica, a researcher and AP, learnt by asking questions during her work placement not only of the more experienced professionals, but also peers who had done similar tasks:

I would be sort of given a task and then I would sort of ask other people, kind of, how would you go about this or whatever, that was good. (Jessica, researcher/AP)

Such learning from other novices is a way of developing skills within a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Two of the young people at the office of the case study company, ‘ColourTV’ (see Chapter Ten) had learnt in this way. The slightly more experienced one had taught the other, the complete novice.

Learning through observation and asking questions is not limited to learning about the specifics of the job tasks. It is broader and involves norms about behaviours and the business more generally. Oliver, who worked for a few independents before he became an executive producer in a regional funding body, remembered how helpful it was for him to
sit in talks with clients. By being present at those meetings he learned how to talk to them, and what issues were important to discuss.

Learning the details of the professional etiquette was also an essential aspect of the learning of novices in the industry. They acquired them by watching their seniors interact in different situations and little by little started developing similar ways of behaving and interacting. This process of socialisation, being an aspect of learning within a community of professionals, also required time and exposure. Martin, a DoP, gave an example of this in relation to working with actors: a clapper loader may stand in the eye line of the actors who will then stop ‘the take’. Actors would sometimes use this as an excuse, if they have, for example, forgotten their lines. An experienced clapper loader would simply apologise and continue with the work. This ‘protocol’ or context-dependent behaviour is the type of knowledge one develops through exposure and observation.

Hugh, a camera operator, elaborated on how important shadowing was for him in order to learn a lot of the non-technical skills, especially those concerned with building a story or relating to the director in order to find out what s/he required from the camera operator. This is a traditional way of socialising an apprentice into an occupation where an essential aspect of the skills was the way people interact and relate to each other, how they learnt the behaviour ‘expected’ for their role. Hugh explained further:

I used to watch other cameramen do it and think ‘oh, how would I do that, I have got no idea, I will watch them’ and then I think ‘oh that’s quite a good way of doing it’. And so that, I found that being an assistant or an apprentice because it was almost like an apprenticeship, very, very valuable. But I didn’t really, I looked at those skills but I didn’t learn the skills until I was actually forced to do it myself.
It is this tacit development of creative interaction that is best provided for by community-based learning, with extended periods of shadowing combined with practical experience. As emphasised earlier in the chapter, many of the essential skills, even in the most technically demanding jobs such as camera operating and editing, were skills of interacting with other team members. It was an important part of the process of joint programme making and creative endeavour which could be learnt in the traditional apprentice-style involvement in the practice of television production.

Respondents also acknowledged the benefits to learning provided by moving from job to job. Such moves brought variety. Working with different people on different productions helped professionals to build their own skills and knowledge.

You start to see and understand why each camera operator does that and the joy is to work with as many as possible because then you can see how each person does it in their own way. You might learn ‘oh, that is a better way of doing that’ than the last person and you learn that little bit and then another person might have another little trick that you think ‘oh, that is a good way of doing it as well’. (Martin, DoP)

A pre-condition for on-the-job learning is being in employment and also the ability to choose challenging projects is crucial for learning (O’mahony and Bechky, 2006). However, in practice, because of the industry structure and the way employment is found (or not), these choices are restricted to a small number of well-positioned and established people. For those who start their careers as freelancers the first years, the ‘latent entry’ are the most precarious and yet most important for building knowledge. This is a stage at which the new industry structures bring disadvantage to the new starters as opposed to the past prevalence of more organisation-based careers.
A separate way of learning concerned the hobby-based interests which could evolve into a professional specialism. There were two respondents who had started recording sound because of their involvement in a band. Another sound recordist specialised in wildlife recording by developing it as a side interest. He started by doing it at the week-ends and little by little got involved in a group of wildlife sound recordists. Later he made this into his main area of expertise. The case study company, ‘ColourTV’, discussed in the following chapter, was set up by sports enthusiasts who wanted to pursue their hobby. The director shadowed for one day was a keen chef and developed this into a specialisation for the programmes he was making. A regional independent company specialised in space science programmes as its founder was a keen scientist himself. These examples illustrate how the ‘television’ aspect of one’s career can be secondary, based on a hobby or interest which later is transformed into key television skill.

To summarise, the skills development mechanisms in the industry rely on the opportunity to observe professional work, to ask questions, on good will and supportive environment which enables people to try and experiment. The informality and community foundation for all these facilitates the development of social skills and awareness of the holistic process which are essential for television work. In the contemporary context the opportunities to learn depend also on individual initiative and confidence. Importantly, the length and breadth of involvement of novices under the current work organisation varies. On-the-job learning opportunities are shaped by the employment arrangements both of the novices and of the other team members.
Learning also depended on the types of skills which need to be acquired. Broadly, there were two major groups with respect to the specialisms they had. The first was based around job roles requiring more traditional technical skills such as the people involved in camera and sound teams. The second comprised of those working on the editorial and production management side. It is the contention here that because of the centrality of technical skills for those working in camera and sound departments, and especially the more clear-cut stages of mastery associated with them based on the more tangible, measurable levels visible in the output, the learning in these has preserved more of its traditional structural characteristics than in other areas.

The traditional method of apprenticeship-like skills development could be seen in the camera departments. The paths to become a camera operator were either a film school, or joining a crew as a camera trainee (within or outside an organisation), or joining a camera lending company. There used to be sound training within the BBC’s in-house facilities, but most of these, such as the Television Centre, are now closed. That leaves learning and rising up the ranks in a crew whilst shadowing/working as the main path to becoming a skilled camera crew member.

The specific stages and time associated with them have not changed much and therefore the process of moving from one position to another has largely preserved the structure of ‘learning through the ranks’. The difference is that the opportunities are more dependent on the chances to work and are less continuous. The technical nature of the skills has prevented, however, the blurring of the job grades and associated competencies.
Big camera crews usually consist of a camera trainee, a clapper loader, a focus puller, a camera operator and a director of photography. In television (with the exception of television dramas) the technology is lighter, easier to operate and therefore the crews are smaller, sometimes of just one person. The title of the camera professional is usually ‘cameraman’ or ‘lighting cameraman’ to suggest that s/he can light the set which requires higher skills and is more prestigious. Two of the interviewees described the process of becoming one:

You earn your stripes basically, as we call it. You’ve done your apprenticeship, you’ve done your five years focus pulling, you’ve done your five years clapper loading and then step up. Some people will become what we call ‘lifers’, will spend their life being a focus puller. (Martin, DoP)

[I]t is kind of an unofficial apprenticeship, really, so normally one person will know somebody who is trying to get into the industry and who has done some short films as a sort of loader or something and wants to get into slightly bigger projects. And they will just come in to shadow the loader and the assistant, really. And they’ll help, you know, they will help organise the gear and I’ll make sure you know, if someone needs to go sometime and get something he will do it and he will assist generally. But he is very much aware he has a shadowing role rather than anything else. (Arthur, DoP)

Such trainees are rare in television, unless the production is high-profile. It is often a matter of practical difficulties such as lack of funds to accommodate a trainee. Importantly, here television differs considerably from film:
Budgets in TV are very tight and production companies are often unwilling to do that. It is less of a structured environment; in film it is really structured. Also, you know, there is historically much larger crews on film projects. TV is always pared down. (Arthur, DoP)

Apprenticeships were traditionally informal in terms of training, but more often than not they were based on a long-term commitment. They could be regarded as a type of agreement on the effort and opportunity. As in strong internal labour markets, the initial years of training and low pay were a trade off for a subsequent career and higher earnings in the second half of one’s working life (Marsden, 1999). In the contemporary ‘apprenticeship’ type of learning this mutual commitment was missing. The fragmented structure made it very difficult for an individual or an organisation to make a long-term or sustainable commitment to a novice. There could be no promise or guarantee of a return of the initial investment for the companies or of an opportunity to receive training for the individuals. Individual responsibility was bigger: it was almost entirely dependent on the trainee’s effort, persistence and striving to acquire knowledge. The ‘apprentice’ needed to actively display enthusiasm. Senior cameramen commented that it was this manner that influenced them in judging the motivation of the trainees. A DoP explained:

[I]t really depends on how keen they are. You know, if they arrive you know on time, full of energy, looking forward to it and helping, and being proactive and, in what they offer, then I’ll try and invite them back. If they sort of aren’t 100% then I generally won’t, there are different levels of keenness. It is also to do with pro-activeness. You know, if they are shadowing me and just, every time I look round they are sort of mooching around or, you know, not, I don’t know, not paying
attention is the wrong word but you know some people are there without always necessarily being in your face but you know they are learning and they are interested in what is happening around them. And other people will, sort of, go to the canteen truck and have a long cup of coffee or, you know, and aren’t as interested and it is just a, and also, you know, how well I get on with them. If I find them really irritating I won’t ring them again. Which is probably unfair, but, it is the way it is, yes. So it is partly about character as well, you know whether you like the person or not. (Arthur, DoP)

As suggested by the quote, the opportunity to learn was also dependent on the right personality. What constitutes the ‘right’ personality, of course, depended also on those who defined it. So, as had traditionally been the case in television, people wanted to work with people they liked, understood and most probably resembled. What is different from before is that nowadays decision-makers within the team seem to have a much greater power to make these judgements and act on them. As there were neither strong organisational nor occupational (in most cases) norms and related sanctions, people were freer to choose those they liked. Hence, subjective decisions based on personal preferences and character, were reinforced.

Another common way of embarking on a camera operator’s career path was to join an equipment facilities company where future camera operators learnt about the equipment and built contacts with potential clients or cameramen who used the renting facility. Then people might be given a chance to start working on the occasional contract as operators or assistants when they continued to develop their skills.
I was learning as I went along but I knew enough to be able to make sure that the pictures at least were of an acceptable standard, if not a good standard. (Arthur, DoP)

As previously mentioned, social skills are essential to good camera work. The strong reliance on technical expertise, however, made learning to be a camera operator dependent on technology, especially for drama or other ‘higher end’ productions. Camera equipment has become more and more accessible and the level of skills needed for shooting on a vast majority of the lower-budget television productions was not great. The processes outlined above did not apply to the lowest level television productions, programmes made for small community or cable channels. The group of cameramen discussed were the ones who only filmed as their job role. This was not the only case in which television professionals learnt and subsequently did camerawork. It must be noted that shooting was also subject to convergence and it was not uncommon in lower budget productions that shooting was done by the producer, director or the producer-director.

In the regions an interesting case was encountered of a young graduate who started her own company in order to get some work and learn. The keen Sarah who tried various avenues to find any kind of work in the industry finally applied for a grant from the Prince’s Trust and having obtained it, established her own editing studio. “The outcome of me starting this business is to gain experience”, she acknowledged. At the time of the interview the company was really just established so it is difficult to gauge to what extent such entrepreneurial enabling of learning and experience would pay off.
Learning in production and editorial jobs

For the people on the editorial and production sides the dominant skill development mechanisms were also informal and on-the-job. They, too, involved observation, making mistakes and having helpful senior colleagues to observe and learn useful practice of. Most of the interviewees agreed that this was the best way to learn one’s skills, and indeed the majority of them had acquired them in this way. Ciru, a researcher, explained:

And a lot of it is just learning on-the-job really. I tend to learn an awful lot job to job…. every job is quite individual and you just learn from your mistakes as you go along. It is really quite strange because you get, you get a bit of training of the senior staff but then a lot of it is just doing it and learning as you do it. It is quite strange as I say but there isn’t any kind of written, sort of, like, way in which you can do any job, really. I think you very much… a lot of it is common sense as well. It is literally like trying as many avenues as you can and like, talking to as many people as you can. So yes, it is weird, you kind of learn skills as you go or from job to job, really. And you develop yourself from job to job.

In a context where structures are not strict, budgets are tight, teams are small and people were often not spending enough time on a production, or were busy taking on additional responsibilities, it was not uncommon that tasks stretched. For more junior members of the community such as Grace, this was one of the ways to learn:

Quite a few people were actually off in the time running up to the project and so I actually had to take on more responsibility, if that makes sense. There was a lot of things that needed doing and people just weren’t there so I ended up doing quite a lot of reccies. (Grace, researcher)
Anna, a producer-director, was also ‘thrown in the deep end’ when doing her first piece of filming. The footage she shot was not great and the editor was rather grumpy, but she learnt a lot by seeing her own mistakes. As a representative of a regional industry body summarised,

> Once you get past that sink or swim point of view and somebody actually does then cotton on to the fact that somebody has got some talent, then probably you know, the best way they will get it is by mentoring through the actual production process. (Malcolm, regional media development agency)

The ways in which younger editorial or production workers learnt resonated with the ways in which their seniors had learnt. This parallel could be seen through the description of Michael, an established director and teacher, who remembered how he learnt in the BBC:

> [W]hen I first went filming, people like [name] were there for me to work alongside. And [he] who had 20 years experience or something before he met me, I could talk to him, you know, I could say to him ‘what shots do I need, how do I frame shots, what do I need to take back to the editor’? I got it wrong you know, on lots of occasions and I would go back to the editor and I would be working with this editor this week, 20 or 30 years he edited at the BBC and he has adapted, you know. And he is incredibly skilful. I went to him with a pile of tapes and he said ‘well, what is your first shot?’.

Observing, asking questions and making mistakes were the specific ways in which one developed understanding and skill. However, there was an important difference: the issue of the employment uncertainty and community fragmentation. Michael did not hide his
concern about the outcomes of the way people learn nowadays, the variable skills of those meant to teach others as well as the length of time needed to learn in the way he had:

Great, OK, give them a chance but they had no one to turn to, to ask for advice. And a year later they were exec producers or whatever. They had been researchers, producers, execs and then they were training the people that were coming in, how could they do that? They can’t. There is no time for that now, there is no time for that so the skills base of course has been lost.

Another skill relevant for this group of professionals working on the editorial side, which is built through experience within the occupational community was what the respondents called ‘storytelling’.

Nowadays you don’t need to know the technology because you can teach somebody how to use an editing, a piece of editing software in a couple of days. But you still need that turn of mind that enables you to be an editor. It doesn’t make you an editor just because you can operate the software and it doesn’t make you a cameraman just because you can operate the camera. You know, the skill of … there is like, superior skill. (Alexander, a producer-director)

A number of interviewees emphasised that this is a core ability that requires time, exposure and experience in order to develop. The community learning process, as put forward by Lave and Wenger’s anthropological studies, is built upon the understanding of community as stable and participation in it as lengthy and exposure varied and guided. This was not the case in the contemporary television community.
Learning in other areas of specialisation

The other area of specialisation which the sample of interviewees provided was costume and make up. They were amongst the job roles which required a relatively low level of specialised skills. There was just one interviewee from that area, so the analysis is based on this single interview and informed by interviews with trade union representatives. The main issue was that the threshold level of skill was particularly low. People could start working with little or no experience at all. Key aspects of the skills they had to display were related to behaviour and assertiveness. Jane, the respondent, thought that working in costume initially was like working in a clothes’ or a fancy dress shop:

I think having had other jobs maybe did me a favour, I’d worked in shops, clothes’ shops and so I very much sort of involved the same things when I started working in costume as selling people clothes. It is the same as telling people how they look nice in clothes. Because a lot of the stuff you do in costume and make up is involved in telling people how nice they look. So that they feel confident, you know. So the most important thing is that they believe that they look nice, it doesn’t matter really what they actually look like. It is ‘you look great’. The amount of times that you go up to people and you literally do nothing, ’shall I tuck my shirt in or shall I tuck it out?’ and you go ‘tuck it in’ and you look at them really serious ‘tuck it out. No, definitely tuck out, right’. And it doesn’t really matter.

Or, as she admitted, it doesn’t really matter what you know, it matters what you can make people believe you know’. Interestingly, things do not necessarily change with the years of experience. According to the same interviewee,
I had always blagged my way in and I was like always had this sort of sneaking thing that someone was going to suss me out one day…. In costume I am still a bit of a fraud even though I have been doing it for ten years.

Make up is a similar area in terms of the low entry level skills. The above respondent was doing make up as well. Her specialised college studies gave her a lot more confidence in this and she felt they ‘legitimised’ her skills. However, the main learning was again on-the-job:

[A] lot of the make up artists that I knew I started asking if I could come and work with them on things and help them, for example, a quiz show where you have got like ten minutes to make somebody up, just a member of the public, not famous people, not people that would be fussy about their make up just like, I did a [show] with a make up artist I knew and that was like in a sense, I was being paid for it but in a sense it was work experience, it was part of my training because having to do make up quickly on people, on various different types of faces, old people, young people, not just beautiful young 20 year olds, was quite an education, you know. Old men, old women and they weren’t supposed to look made up they were just supposed to look like themselves but they had to be made up for studio. I mean, I made a lot of mistakes but that was part of my training and having done that people started to see me as a make up artist as well and I started to get work that way.

In this area of low skill threshold learning on-the-job was very strongly related to becoming more confident. The training, which was done post-experience, was used for both legitimising the status of Jane and reassuring her that what she was doing was right.
Learning to be a member of the community/television freelancer

Learning as an apprentice through legitimate peripheral participation develops not only the skills immediately necessary for carrying out the job. It also helps novices to become a part of the community through a process of socialisation (as discussed by Lave and Wenger, 1991). Newcomers become competent not only about the ways in which work is done, but about the rules for succeeding, progression, etiquette and ethics. These ‘tricks of the trade’ are not only helpful for the organisation and a smooth carrying out of the work (Bechky, 2006) but are also a marker for the ‘profession’. Robert, a producer-director, gave an insightful example:

I worked with directors who said ‘cut!’, who said ‘turnover!’ to cameraman, he would say ‘camera’, the director would say ‘action!’ , it would happen and you would say ‘cut!’ . I liked that, it worked. I do that, very few modern directors do that but cameramen love it, I know they do because they do, they know, that I am in charge. I will tell them when to do it and I will tell them when to cut, they love it. But that is a discipline I didn’t learn, I picked up, you know, it sounds daft for a documentary director to shout ‘action’, it sounds poncey, and people think ‘oh’, but every one shuts up when you say ‘action’. The presenter knows ‘I am on camera’ and it works and that is a discipline that I was never taught you know, a lot of modern directors don’t do that because they have not seen it ever.

Such distinction between ‘being taught’ and ‘pick up’ a type of behaviour is an outcome of learning through peripheral participation and observing, with the opportunity to ask questions and to seek clarifications from the people whose work they were observing. As noted previously, a prerequisite for such learning was openness and willingness on the part
of the more experienced workers to answer in sufficient detail and in a helpful way. Respondents and observations revealed that there was a strong tradition in the industry of engaging with less experienced colleagues by answering their questions and explaining how processes or specific tasks were implemented. Unlike other project-based industries such as building and construction (Bishop et al., 2008) where there is an established culture and tradition of adversarial relations, television can claim a high degree of cooperation. If approached at a good time, more experienced people were happy to give advice or answer questions related to work and employment, such as career advice or tips for one’s CV. This ethos was a result of a long established practice of on-the-job learning and apprenticeships. Helping novices and being a nice and sociable person is an important aspect of being a television practitioner. This was learnt by the novices through being a part of the social practice in television work.

In addition to developing certain behavioural norms, an important aspect of becoming a part of the community was learning about employment and freelance work in television. This aspect can be interpreted in relation to the occupational career competencies (knowing why, how and whom) suggested by DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) and developed subsequently by Jones and DeFillippi (1996) to knowing what, why, where, whom, when and how. Such competencies are important for navigating one’s career through a project-based occupational environment. For example, knowing what involves being aware of the opportunities and risks of the industry such as the uncertain employment context and the importance of building reputation through good quality work. Knowing whom refers to the importance of social capital and building relationships in order to succeed in the labour market.
In this research, a specific mechanism found for transferring knowledge about some of these properties and competencies was the use of ‘sayings’ or ‘proverbs’ about the industry and about freelance employment. According to a general definition, a proverb is ‘a short saying stating a general truth or a piece of advice’ (Soanes et al., 2005:725). There were a number of such linguistic entities which the interviewees mentioned at different occasions to illustrate and support their points. Their idiomatic nature, singling them out as proverbs, was usually marked by intonation. They were ‘truths’ and ‘pieces of advice’ about the nature of work in television. For example, “It’s feast or famine” suggested precariousness; “You’re only as good as your last job” educated about the importance of reputation; “It’s who you know” referred to the worth of relationships and social capital; “It’s a young persons’ game” stated the age demarcation with the implications it had for working hard, demanding energy, dediating completely to the work; and “To be at the right place at the right time” implied that opportunities in this labour market were often random and serendipitous.

**Continuous learning: learning in the later career**

Most of the chapter discussed the core type of learning in the television: informal, experiential and on-the-job. The main focus so far was on the initial skills development, which takes place around and after young people enter the industry. Learning, however, takes place even after people have established themselves as skilled in a certain area and this is going to be discussed briefly in the following section.

In the freelance world this subsequent skills development was an individual responsibility. It was also done again mainly on-the-job. Freelancers, even established ones, would
usually take on projects in a new area as a means of enriching their skills. Hugh, a camera operator, explained the process:

[I]t’s a mixture of taking jobs on in which you can push yourself. So basically just be honest about it. Say well, someone asks me to do something and I said ‘well OK but I haven’t done, I haven’t done very much of that sort of work before. I would really like to do it and I really know I can do it but you know I have to tell you that I haven’t done, you know, I haven’t got a huge amount of experience in that field of work, but I would love to do it’ you know, and perhaps if I really wanted to do it I would entice them by lowering my rates a little bit or say I will offer you a piece of equipment for half the price or, you know, I would negotiate it, if I really wanted to do it. So I would do it like that. So I’d be coming at it, I would be honest with them and I would be saying well, so they would know that if they were employing me they would think ‘well, OK, he is doing it slightly cheaper, he hasn’t done it before but he has done other stuff which is very similar to this so we’ll give him a chance’. And that’s, and then I would do it and hopefully do it well and then build, you know, build like that.

O’Mahony and Bechky (2006) call this strategy ‘stretchwork’: a tactics for acquiring competencies through bridging the ‘proven ones’ and the new ones aimed at enabling career progression in external labour markets. In particular, the above example is the approach of ‘discounting’ whereby a freelancer accepts lower fees or works for free in order get a chance of being involved in type of work which would enable him/her to acquire new skills. In this case the freelancer not only offered his services for a reduced fee but also employed other cost-reducing incentives such as lower equipment hire rate.
Once established themselves as television professionals, in addition to learning on-the-job, freelancers could also benefit from more formal training. Skillset data (2007) suggests that between 2007 and 2008 more than half of the television workforce has received some kind of training (with freelancers receiving an average of four days compared to the six days which staff members would receive). Such training was however, rather narrow in focus (such as specific software applications and editing). The most common generic training was health and safety (which 19% of the workforce received), which could be explained by legal requirements and demonstrates compliance rather than development. Those working in independent production also scored high on health and safety training: 22%. The figures on the barriers television professionals report are also revealing. 45% reckoned that the fees were too high (a figure even higher for those working in independent production: 54%). Employers not being willing to pay for the training was also a considerable obstacle: reported by 35% of the overall workforce and 32% of those in independent television production. For the freelancers, the fear of losing work through committing to a course is also an important consideration (43%).

The types of courses provided by the regional bodies were usually a few days of ‘updates’ on new technology, equipment or health and safety. Freelancers could claim up to 70% of the course fee and cost of travel and companies could have a subsidy if they needed to send an employee on a course. While beneficial, such training is unlikely to have a wide-reaching impact on the skills in the sector. By its very nature it was not meant to provide the foundation set of skills: it was oriented towards a short-term goal and usually meant to develop specific knowledge needed for a project. Pamela, a producer and writer expressed
her concern over the disappearance of the traditional bottom-up apprenticeships model of the industry:

So that whole notion of training people has just disappeared. And I think what we end up doing in the film agencies and the screen schools at the moment we [are] kind of tinkering at the edges trying to replace that and we can’t do it really, because we don’t have this kind of consistency of apprenticeship and what have you. I mean, it is a big issue for us and I don’t know how we solve it.

She reckoned that the skills development agencies fail to recognise that the training is a long-term process and there are no ‘short fixers’. Although the training available through them was not bad, it was isolated. And the most rigorous and valued skills were those developed through practice.

**Challenges in the process of learning and skills development**

The practice of traditional, practice-based skills development in the context of fragmented structures and professional communities did face some challenges. Below is a discussion of the challenges to mentoring practice, the content and quality of the knowledge and skills acquired, and the issue of unregulated progression as a structural factor in the process of learning.
Mentoring: practices and challenges

In the current industry environment practices are not that clear. Established professionals who had the chance to learn within the BBC were puzzled about the way for young people nowadays to develop skills.

I really actually don’t know how people do do it now. Of course, I am beneficiary of it, the last thing I want is a whole load of young people bursting with ideas and working all night and generally… it has kept me going, but I think it certainly is a lot harder for young people now to crack. Especially offline editing. The online is a different side, I am no authority on it, I couldn’t tell you about that. You know, but the technical skills are far far greater. But I really don’t… I suppose you just hang around and do bits and pieces is what happens. And just sort of, help out a bit and then … and then I suppose people find you… you have to find kind of like more modest projects. It would be very very difficult to edit one of these 60 minute films straight away, you know, without having done quite a few other films. So I suppose you get to edit sort of 5 minute films, sort of all those programmes on Sky telly that you don’t know … you know, the ‘Audi’ channel and things like that. I suppose that is how you start in reality. (Mark, editor)

Some of the interviewees had managed to ‘attach’ themselves to an experienced professional in a way that was reminiscent of the traditional apprentice-master situation. Thus by shadowing and support they would learn about the work. Learning through working requires both the ‘apprentice’ and the ‘master’ to be in some kind of employment. Hence securing employment for both is a challenge to be faced. Previously an apprentice or a trainee would be employed by the organisation, or the budget would allow for a junior
staff member to be hired for a project. Nowadays this is not common, and alternative mechanisms needed to be used, such as working for free or working for a reduced fee. A location manager, Laura, ‘sponsored’ her informal apprenticeships by hiring herself out through a more experienced location manager who ‘took her under his wing’. He trained her, and supervised her work, and took 50% of her fee. Laura thought of it as an opportunity rather than exploitation.

Learning while working alongside more experienced colleagues may involve all the specific learning mechanisms described earlier such as observing their work, observing the way they interact with others or deal with problems and being able to ask questions and have them answered. Interviewees emphasised that being able to ask for advice or just check if they were doing things correctly was very important in the process of learning.

Sometimes a mentoring role could be taken by someone working on the particular project in which case it was restricted to the duration of the specific production. It was not uncommon for interviewees to say that there was a more experienced colleague who helped them learn a lot in the course of their work together. Grace, a researcher, remembered:

I was very lucky in that the DV director I was working with understood that I was new and you know, perhaps didn’t have the confidence and she was very experienced and very familiar with the type of filming that we were doing and so she really helped me out. We literally lived together, we lived in sort of a Travelodge together in [city] for a long time and we would go out to dinner together and we would talk a lot about being researcher and, you know, all the
things you had to do and what I should be looking for, and she gave me a lot of advice and I was very grateful to her for that. Definitely! (Grace, researcher)

Anna, a producer-director, remembered her third job on which she was assisting a director she really admired. He discussed ideas with her, taught her and inspired her at the same time. She learnt a lot by watching him work: what questions he would ask and the way he would listen to people, the way he would interact with them. Once he was busy and sent her with the camera operator to shoot an event. Anna remembered that at the time, she did not know how to direct a sequence, she was only thinking about the content. The cameraman was someone senior and so the risks posed by her lack of experience were compensated for by his experience. She said: ‘I am sure he [the director] had that conversation with the cameraman ‘make sure you get me enough shots’ you know, and sent me off.’ From then on every film this director was doing had a little piece or sequence shot by her. This was a gradual process of learning and it was important to have someone to trust and take a risk with the ‘apprentice’. The process was not smooth and the risk needed to be mitigated by engaging more experienced colleagues to work alongside the novice. The process did also involve mistakes which could be dealt with by both good will and experience. Given this time, chance and environment, the process can work.

In the contemporary world of television programme making particularly, being known or seen as reliable and available is a condition for learning. Susan, a production manager, was trained by her boss to be a production co-ordinator while working as a production secretary. Her description of how it was done is insightful. A facilitating pre-condition for the process was the personality match between the two. The tasks she needed to perform were based on common sense, but knowing how to perform them efficiently, having useful
documents and forms and knowing where to pay more attention to prevent failure required years of experience.

[The production manager trained me] I think because we got on really well… So she took a chance on me and she just sort of like on my first day she showed me her call sheet template which is like, which I think is the perfect call sheet and what I do is I go to this website to look up, you know you always put the local A&E place on your call sheet because I always go to this website to look for that and you know here I always like to put useful, you know, at least three maps where they are going so they really know where they are going and maybe an AA route planner guide and you know she sat me down, she went through everything for call sheets and then she was, like, this is the best place to get hotels and you know, and always make sure you give them labels to label their rushes before they go because they have to label them themselves on the day and she just, you know. She was an incredibly thorough person and she liked everything to be done very thoroughly and she taught me that and actually since I have worked with her I have tried to keep doing the things but you know in other companies you don’t get the time or the money or anything like that to be able to do all those very thorough things, like, she would print all of her purchase orders and save them all so that if she had a query she could go back to her file on them whereas now I never get time to add them so I just scribble them on the purchase order and just shove them in a file. But, you know, she taught me to be thorough and to be really organised and to make logs, that was one of the best things, that I have excel spreadsheets for everything I do. And like you know, I have got a spreadsheet for all the release
ones and a spreadsheet for the rushes and a spreadsheet for the purchase orders and … you know just hundreds of spreadsheets to keep logs of everything so that you know if someone comes back to you and says, you know, you can go back to your log and you know what is there. And that just really helped me and otherwise you know I would probably be more scatty than, you know, I would have been otherwise.

Common sense tasks can be misleadingly ‘easy’. Susan provided a good example of this. She made a lot of mistakes but it was having her ‘mentor’ telling her what and how to do the work that helped. Mistakes were dealt with in a supportive way. Once she had to book taxis to take the production team back to their homes. When she booked ten taxis the company asked for the addresses and she diligently faxed all the ten home addresses of the team members. As a result the taxis went to those addresses leaving the production team on set with no transport. So even if many of the jobs in television require common sense, it is not sufficient to ‘have it’. It has to be acquired through experience in context in order to transform into useful skill. A precondition for it is an environment which does not punish such mistakes but deals with them in a developmental way. This is, however, only possible if the novice is entrusted with peripheral tasks, there is a mentor to observe and evaluate the level of skill and the risk of a mistake is not going to be detrimental to the company or the production.

Another context-dependent skill was predicting possible problems which could be achieved only after numerous repetitions in a variety of situations, i. e. is again a result of extensive experience and is only possible in a real work environment. Nowadays it is a part of actual employment, which entails responsibilities and related risks for both companies
and individuals. Before it was a part of apprenticeships, which both reduced and ‘legitimised’ the learning by doing process.

So that is just where all the apprenticeships have gone. That was very much a kind of core of television training in the old days. You know, the cameraman had, and it always was the cameraman, had a camera assistant, the soundman had a sound assistant and the editor had an editing assistant. And it was a fantastic way for people to learn the trade as it was, you know, those skills. (Alexander, producer-director)

As the equipment became lighter and easier to operate, the need for having an elaborate team of more junior helpers to hold and carry it lessened. This had implications for the size of teams which considerably reduced trainees’ chances to learn and it has changed the work of the more senior cameramen. One such operator who was shooting and recording sound by himself elaborated on the drawbacks of doing without such apprentices and assistants. He used to ‘bounce back’ ideas with his assistant and found the way of working more creative. Not having an apprentice deprived him of this.

Decisions on team composition were interdependent and so lack of sufficient experience of one member could be compensated by hiring a more experienced colleague to work alongside him/her. Productions were often staffed with this consideration in mind. Young producer-directors’ skills were complemented by more experienced technical grades team members. Although not mentoring, such arrangements were developmental for the less experienced person while at the same time reduced the risk of producing poor quality output. For example, Abigail, a producer-director, was given a ‘first time directors’ editor whose experience of dealing with imperfect footage helped secure the quality of the final
product. He was very patient and, as she acknowledged, did the whole programme for her. Such teams of more and less experienced people in order to reduce risks were a good learning vehicle.

Sometimes, however, colleagues of limited experience were preferred. Martin revealed that on his first position as a DoP he purposefully selected a camera operator (the grade below him) who had the basic knowledge but was not too proficient and would hence rely on Martin or at least need his advice more often than a more experienced person would. Also, Martin acknowledged that he would be more comfortable telling such a person they were wrong. This instance shows that there is an important power aspect related to competence in the choices being made and by consequence, people sometimes get a chance for a challenging position (such as this must have been for the camera operator) based on the competencies in the teams and of those above them in particular.

Entering into mentoring or mentoring-type shorter relationships was beneficial for the respondents. The cases of structured and longer-term apprenticeship-like situations were very rare. The current practices are confined to the duration and space within single, often short, projects. There is co-operation in the community which facilitates the process of informal mentoring during projects. The formal or more longer-term developmental association, however, is weakened. Or, as in the case of the junior location manager, requires (financial) compromises.
What do people learn

It is important to assess how the ways people learn and the environment in which they operate impact on the content and type of skills and knowledge acquired. Firstly, there was an awareness that learning around sporadic projects or projects selected with a fair degree of randomness was not comprehensive. Joanna commented on this:

And there isn’t necessarily anything formal that you need to have to prove yourself. It is the type of work that you can learn through doing it but also of course it depends what you are doing. That you know, that brings up limitations. Your experience will only be limited by the types of things that you are offered to do, you know. It may give you the opportunity to be very skilled in one area but not skilled at all in another area. (Joanna, a production manager)

Secondly, learning on-the-job within a certain project was obviously restricted the issues that specific production provided exposure to. Learning was confined not only to the types of projects but also to the tasks within the project.

All of your skills you learn, you learn on-the-job. If you are lucky enough to have a very talented person above you and a production that is, sometimes it is better when a production is frantically busy because then they have got no choice but to give you responsibility. That is when you learn the most. Sometimes you learn the hard way but you learn anyway, God help you. (Sandra, production manager)

Thirdly, there was appreciation of the fact that the quality and content of learning depended a lot on the knowledge of the rest of the production team. Moreover, given the
lack of formal selection or quality criteria the level of their skills was also relatively random.

   It is the luck of the draw whether you get to work with people who are good and have connections and know things. It is the luck of the draw whether you get to work on jobs where they will give you a chance to expand and get trained and get promoted. It is all, you are just like a pin ball on this mad table. (Sandra, production manager)

The concerns for the long-term results for the skills in the industry were voiced by an experienced trade union representative:

   [M]aybe we are living in a sort of period where we have still got enough people who had a rich enough experience in their youth that they are available to us now for a while, and maybe in ten years time we will be thinking actually, you know, we have got now a lot of people who are really good at the technical skills but somehow they have had too sporadic and broken up a career to get the other skills. I don’t know, I mean I hope not. (Simon, trade union representative)

As Robert, a producer-director, summarised, learning as a freelancer is ‘a bit more hit and miss’.

Quick progress and learning

The lack of regulation in the industry was reflected in the lack of standard or expected length of experience for the different positions. There were numerous opportunities to progress in one’s career, in particular as measured by job titles. This could lead to a certain
disconnection between the job title and the level/kinds of skills and experience associated with them (Dex et al., 2000; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2009). There were important implications for learning. In television teams people usually learn the most from those ‘above’ them who have more experience. Occasionally, they learn from their peers. An aspect of the regulated system was the provision of a minimum fixed amount of time at a certain position and hence a fixed minimum amount of learning time. In a system of non-regulated career moves whereby the ethos and expectation is that people move up as fast as they could, learning time becomes compressed while the level and intensity of exposure is rarely adjustable. As a result, the breadth of learning suffers.

There is no formal training in this industry, the only training you get is working on-the-job and you learn from the producer/directors that you work with. You learn how to do things, how not to do things, what you like, what you don’t like. But the longer you are a researcher the more producers and directors you work with, the day you start directing your own stuff is the day you stop working with anyone you can learn off. The day I started directing, I have not worked with a director since. So whatever I picked up, I now use. I don’t learn anything off anyone else or very little because you don’t see, I haven’t seen how another director works for the best part of ten years. (Robert, producer-director)

Genres also play a role for this. In drama, for example, the jobs are more strictly demarcated (just as they are in film) and hence the specialisation is clearer, the career stages more defined and the learning is more structured. Some of the television entertainment shows which are studio-based also have large teams. On the other hand, many of the television productions in genres such as factual and documentaries are
implemented by small teams where job convergence has taken place and one team member often performs two or three roles. This convergence often results in a wider range of skills to be practised on productions with lower standards, which lessens the amount and level of skills available to learn from.

As emphasised in this chapter, the main way to develop skills in television was through practical experience. Learning on-the-job or learning by doing was unanimously agreed to be the best and most common way to acquire skills. This may explain why media degrees were such an uncertain path into television. There was value attached to practical learning based both on the nature of work (with many tacit skills) and on the existing tradition within the sector. The latter has been formed when the television industry was young and no University educational provision existed to prepare people with the skills required. The tradition was strengthened in the time of the big broadcasting organisations which acted as training bodies for television. The current changes have not yet managed to alter the perceptions that the off the job skills acquisition is unsound or irrelevant, despite the ‘external’, forced changes. Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1977) may be helpful in discussing this situation. The mesolevel, where the individual interacts with the deeper structures (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2005), is the space where one can find the contradictions described above. The deep structures, past industry experience manifested in its ‘memory’ and values, have not altered in accordance with the external structural changes. The discrepancy between the two results in tension and produces hurdles to those who want to enter, learn and progress. The issue of power is also relevant here. Many of the more senior industry professionals and people in powerful positions have themselves been trained on-the-job. They both carry and embody the ‘habitus’. Therefore their values create the norms
of the community. One can only contend that it will be a matter of a number of generations of changed social practice to re-create and establish these in accordance to the changed circumstances and the product in terms of skills, competencies and learning paths that it has provoked. At present, however, there is still a mismatch between the deeper values and mechanisms and the surface or externally dictated ways of the industry.

To summarise, learning and skills development in the contemporary industry context displays many of the traditional features of learning on-the-job in a community of professionals over a period of formal or informal apprenticeship. Its particular mechanisms include observing, asking questions, seeking clarifications, trying to do different tasks, making mistakes and learning from them. Such ways of developing skills, however, faces a number of structural challenges. Learning in a community of practice requires a stable context which supports the development process by legitimising the role of a learner, providing structures and support, exposure and variability. There used to be a number of low-risk tasks and projects for the novices to work on in order to ensure the full benefit of the experiential learning. Although the reality of working in a large vertically integrated organisation has perhaps never fully embodied the model in this ideal form, the fragmented context of the independent production sector certainly does not provide such an environment. The general fluidity of jobs and the lack of clear and defining structure translated into incomplete and random learning. In some cases it benefitted the individual, especially when the tensions provided opportunities for gaining experience by personal initiative. In some cases it also limited the choices, breadth and length of exposure. Because of the specifics of the work in television, mainly manifested in its interdependence and social aspects, the limited length and breadth of exposure can be a
serious disadvantage. The lack of comprehensive learning can be translated into a lack of skills to interpret context and the actor’s actions within it – otherwise a main benefit from learning into a community of practice. The new structures produced incomplete communities (a theme continued in the next chapter) and this undermined the viability of the model. Project-based learning may be a good way to learn when the overall environment is more stable, projects are variable and the people engaged can dedicate time to mentoring. But placed into a fragmented organisational environment with serious commercial pressure, it results in disconnecting the process of skills development a step too far from continuous practice, beyond the inter-project spaces and into the vulnerable realities of external labour markets and inter-organisational space of fierce competition.
CHAPTER NINE:

WORKING AND LEARNING IN A SMALL REGIONAL INDEPENDENT PRODUCTION COMPANY

This chapter will discuss the issues of skills development in a specific context: that of a small independent production company located in the North of England. The analysis will present the case study of such company and the making of a one-hour science documentary. The documentary production, ‘ScienceDoc’, was commissioned from the small company: ‘ColoutTV’, and the production office was situated on its premises. Considering the findings presented in the previous chapters, the discussion here will be informed by a specific case study and the interdependencies of the parties involved in it. For ‘ScienceDoc’ these were the two main figures of the company; one senior executive producer contracted by ‘ColourTV’; the four main freelance team members and a few cameramen used for single days of shooting; two members of the company staff who were sporadically involved in helping them, and the commissioning broadcaster represented by the commissioning editor. For ‘ColourTV’ these were the company owner and the general manager, the staff of seven employed on non-freelance contracts, a team of three employed under a regional news contract which the company had at the time of fieldwork, the freelancers employed under ‘ScienceDoc’ and another documentary based in London,
which the company was producing at the time. A list of the people mentioned in the chapter can be found in Appendix Four.

The case study complements the industry-wide data presented in the previous chapters in its focus on the ‘horizontal’ snapshot of work and employment in the industry. While the biographical interviews looked into the processes of entry, learning and skills development in the context of people’s careers (a ‘vertical view’), here they are taken to a specific context of a single project. The viewpoint is from within a company and a production, limited in space and time rather than a cross section of the longitudinal experiences which the individual interviews unravelled. Such data informs the issue of skills development from a complementary angle as it magnifies the details of production work, of labour market and employment in a peripheral case. It discusses the company as well as individual perspectives and considers their situations in relation to one another.

The first aspect of the case study – the making of the science documentary provided access to the small regional indie. As the production, ‘ScienceDoc’, used the premises of the company, the film crew worked alongside the development team of the company. In order to present the findings, firstly, a description of the small indie will be provided followed by a discussion of the employment arrangements and ways of organising the work at the time of the research. Both management and staff’s opinions will be considered and contrasted. It will be followed by a presentation of the regional group or mini-cluster of small production companies operating in the same region. The third main section of the chapter will discuss the production of ‘ScienceDoc’. The detailed descriptions and comments of the above are followed by a discussion on the implications of such arrangements for learning and skills development in the final part (four) of the chapter.
Part 1: The Company

Background

‘ColourTV’ was one of the first independent production companies in the country, established at the end of the 1980s. As with many of the first independents, it was founded as a response to the strong unionisation and (over)regulation of the industry. These restricted the flexibility of teams to make unusual programmes (involving a lot of overtime or high risk) at a ‘reasonable price’. Three friends who were passionate about making programmes decided to use the changes in the sector to establish their own company. One of them, Andrew, the current Managing Director (MD) of ‘ColourTV’ stated,

This company is here because I want to make films. So to make films I have to have a business. It is a drag, but to make films you have to have a business.

The founding members were sports enthusiasts and made a deal with the large regional broadcaster they had been working for. So for the first four to five years they were getting commissions while indulging in their hobbies. They attracted like-minded people to work on specific productions, since membership was based on interests and enthusiasm, and most worked for no or for very low fees. As Nathan, the General Manager (GM) of the company described it,

[Y]ou would get an enthusiastic cameraman, someone like [name], who was a name in the past, who just loves hot holes and loves making films. And you know, you give him a few hundred quid and he’ll be yours for a couple of months.

The founders had complementary skills which enabled them to complete a whole production process and make a film. In the initial stages of the company’s existence they
would also hire themselves out as freelancers to big productions and thus subsidise their own programmes. Because of the strong unions, the founding members were paid well and in this way they could support the new venture and their hobbyist programmes. The indie therefore started as a quasi-hobby kept afloat by other activities. At the same time, there were not many freelance professionals in the labour market and broadcasters would use freelancers only when deadlines were tight and it was impossible for the in-house staff to complete a programme.

With the advent of Channel Four, ‘ColourTV’, which already had a track record of making films, found they were in a strong position. They started winning commissions on a more permanent basis. The Broadcasting Act of 1990 (see the chapter on the industry background) changed the labour market and many ex-staff members became freelance. The company made an agreement with the regional broadcaster for a regular supply of productions and so the business turned from hobby-based club of interests to a more commercially-driven entity. At the time of the research the flow of commissions was unpredictable and irregular: something not uncommon amongst the regional independents.

This precariousness had accelerated in recent years. Nathan reflected:

[W]hat used to happen is that you would probably have three good years and then a bad year. And what has happened is it has reduced now. So now it is either, we are at the level where you have good year followed by bad year. The only danger is that if we don’t have a good year next year, then we are out of business. So that is the end of the road, really.

The year preceding the research had been an unsuccessful one, but the one in which the research was carried out the company had made a profit of £110,000 and had hopes for the
future. Revisiting the office a year later the situation looked precarious again. The company was down by £120,000 and so they had lost all the profit from the previous year. In search of a more predictable income Nathan had directed his efforts into a new, non-television related project: starting-up of a public attraction facility. There were a few of the other regional independents which were also trying to diversify their activities – most often by offering training courses.

At the time of the research ‘ColourTV’ was centred around one of the initial founding members: Andrew. The others had fallen out with him over the years. He was the creative drive of the independent and the one getting commissions and business in. The second key person, Nathan, had mainly administrative and organisational functions. He was the one responsible for dealing with employment and production management issues such as contracts, budgets, logistics. Hiring new staff members was usually agreed between the two, but either one of them could take the initiative to invite a young graduate for a work placement without the agreement of the other. Each trusted the other, and for the lower lever positions there were little consultations. A factor in this ease of decision was also the fact that most of the initial arrangements and work placements were loose, short-term, with verbal agreements, unpaid or at minimum wage. As such they were low-risk and low-cost.

**Working in the office**

‘ColourTV’’s office was located in a comparatively vibrant but not central part of the city, predominantly residential but also with a local college nearby. The company had rented premises near the big regional broadcaster, but having had unstable finances for a while
decided to move out of them. This was not uncommon amongst the independents: a few others had done the same.

The office was a rather large open-plan one with clusters of desks and two meeting tables: one for general purpose and the other near the MD’s desk. At the bottom of the large room there were three rooms with equipment and editing facilities. The development team, i.e. Victoria and Chris were seated opposite each other not far from Jessica and Robert’s desks which were also facing each other. On the opposite side was Andrew’s desk, which was also used by his PA. Further on were Nathan’s and Brianna’s workplaces. Other groups of desks were there for the two researchers on the music series, the news team and a desk for the writer of a London-based documentary. There were also a few other desks made available to people on work placements. William, the junior staff member in charge of equipment, was positioned near the editing suites and was not visible from most of the office. I was situated near the production and development teams and from my position it was not possible to follow any conversation taking place at any of the other workplace clusters.

The rhythm of work was uneven. Sometimes there would be people going to other people’s desks and discussing something. More often however, everyone would work at their own computers. Much of the time the office was quiet. Then the telephone would ring, it would do so at a random workplace and then someone would pick it up. People would have tea breaks and chat while making tea in the nearby kitchen. Tea and coffee were provided. Lunch arrangements varied: some would either warm up the food they had brought and eat it at the meeting table, on their own or in small groups, or eat in front of their screen, or go
out and buy lunch. The office sometimes felt like a house, perhaps because of the food
smell around lunchtime.

There was no specific start or end of the working day but most people would come to the
office between eight thirty and nine thirty and leave between four thirty and six o’clock.
Except for the few days of editing which took place in the office, I did not see long
working days. To an outsider the work in the office of ‘ColourTV’ looked rather
uneventful and even routine. Most of it was done on the computers. People would also use
the phones, but not as much. When meetings were called, only the people directly involved
were invited. During the three months I spent there, there were only two general meetings
called. The first one was to communicate to staff the GM’s idea about having a ‘flat’
organisational structure, something he had learnt about in a University course he did. The
second one was a brainstorming session called by Victoria: she had been on a one day
training course and had learnt the ‘mind mapping’ technique which she used in order to
stimulate ideas about a show. Everyone agreed that such meetings to discuss programmes
were good, but the process was never repeated.

Each day there were an extensive number of newspapers received in the office which
would be put on a table in the middle, in order to be easily available for everyone. Once a
week the MD would go to London for meetings and on those days the atmosphere in the
office was a bit ‘lighter’: the presence or absence of Andrew could be sensed. And so it
was an informally run office, where people worked independently most of the time, and
not many external people visited.
People

Who are ‘staff’?

At the time of the research the company employed two people on full-time contracts. These were Andrew, the Managing Director and Nathan, the General Manager. There were seven other people, six of whom were young, who were regarded as ‘staff’, but who did not necessarily have open-ended permanent contracts (if any). They were employed on a monthly rate but with a peripheral status. There were different perceptions of the meaning of ‘staff’ within the company. For example, Victoria, a young development researcher told me she had a six month contract which was going to become a rolling one after the six months. While the open-ended contract would legally put her in the category of permanent employees, it was interesting how the views on her status differed. Chris, her direct superior who worked as executive and development producer, told me that she has a six month contract only. The accountant told me that Victoria was not staff. The others referred to her as ‘staff’. She was the only one who actually had a written contract, a standard one as she put it, and the one who was most clearly ‘staff’, whether on a six months or an open-end contract. William, the other junior person who was considered staff, had an open-ended agreement, but no written contract.

The difference between ‘staff’ and ‘freelance’ was mainly in the nature of tasks people were expected to do. The ‘staff’ members were encouraged to take part in many projects whilst the freelance were usually working on a specific production. Also, the majority of the tasks staff were expected to do were rather administrative, sometimes related to assisting a production. There was one exception to this: Chris, who was more senior and was involved in various activities but the MD referred to him as a freelancer. Essentially,
the differentiation was between the two principle figures and the rest. Within the rest there were those who were definitely brought in for a specific production, and the six young people working on less clearly defined jobs. In addition to the above, there were three people working on a separate two year contract for regional news coverage. The above shows that the idea of being employed and being staff was peculiar, with six months being long-term and there was a tendency to consider those working on development as staff and the ones working on production as freelance. The ‘staff’ status seemed also to be linked to development as it served the needs of the company for the future, e. g. winning commissions. In this sense it was the immediate business interest that defined the distinctions between ‘staff’ and ‘freelance’. In practice, however, the boundaries were not clear-cut. The certain thing was that the freelancers employed on a specific production were paid more than the ones ‘more permanently’ in the office. And they were more senior than the office staff.

The development team comprised one senior producer, Chris, who was also acting as an executive producer to ‘ScienceDoc’, and a development researcher, Victoria, a young Cambridge graduate in English who was on a six month contract (please see Appendix Four). There were the following staff members as well: Brigit, who was the PA to Andrew (the company owner and driving force); Brianna, a media and arts graduate who was doing the accounts; Britney, a production assistant to a music documentary series which were on-going at the start of the ‘ScienceDoc’. She was occasionally involved in the work on the case study programme. Mary, an arts graduate, was another production assistant working on the music series, who had been a PA to Andrew and when the company got the commission for the series had started as a freelance junior researcher. William was in
charge of the equipment and junior editing work. He had worked in radio and television companies before, at a low level, and had moved to the region because of his girlfriend. ‘ColourTV’ also accommodated a regional news team in their office. The team was producing the regional news coverage for a major broadcaster. Occasionally in the office there were a news producer, a presenter and a camera operator coming in and going out. However, since they were following various news and events, their presence was only occasional. The logic and scheme of the staff structure was explained by Nathan:

[H]ard staff are on the news contract because it’s easy. We know how long they last, we know what roles people have to do, we recruit. We then have the MD, Andrew, then me – Financial Director, although I’m, kind of, General Manager and I get involved wherever I have to be involved. And the MD has an assistant, and we have a technical body who looks after our kit. And that’s basically the core of the company. And then, depending on who we need, and who impresses us, then dictate the size of the company above and beyond. (Nathan, GM)

Two of the members of the news team were directly contracted to ‘ColourTV’ (the third one was a client’s presenter). They referred to themselves as ‘staff’, despite the fact that their work was independent. Still, to contributors, they used to introduce themselves as representatives of the client rather than the company. The employment aspect of their work was managed by ‘ColourTV’ and they spoke positively about the company. For example, Deborah acknowledged:

‘ColourTV’ are very good about kind of assessing you and every year I would get sort of a pay rise and I would get an assessment, and it just came to a point where I had been the researcher for a year and I had proved myself so they said well, it
wasn’t very, a very defined process where they sat me down and said ‘right, we think you should become producer now… I was quite happy with that, that was fine. (Deborah, regional news producer)

The company was flexible in size. Freelancers were brought in for specific jobs only and left when the jobs were over. As Storey et al. (2005) commented, the end of a job for a freelancer is already incorporated in the beginning; termination is an integral part of the process of work. In ‘ColourTV’ this was very much the case. Moreover, it was not only freelancers whose work was considered finite: young staff members or those on open contracts were almost ‘expected’ (although not encouraged) to leave as a part of their natural progression. Andrew, the GM, was very clear:

Well, they have to leave the nest eventually you know, because there are wider opportunities out there.

And also:

But if they want to make very good money, they eventually have to leave because companies, you earn better money if you are freelance; that is just the nature of the business. In the North of England anyway, or outside London.

The above shows that end of the employment relationship was incorporated as an inherent trait since the very beginning of one’s working life, even when people started as staff members. The head of resources of the regional broadcaster acknowledged that the company had retention problems, especially with junior staff. Young people would leave almost immediately after they had completed their training period. It seemed that regardless of where the young people started, within a small or bigger structure, there was
an expected termination of the contracts. It may suggest that the definite end of employment is becoming a universal trait of working in television and spreads beyond the characteristics of freelance life. The young people themselves aspired to work as freelancers, mainly because of the higher wages and the assumption of more varied work. A factor in this were the few other possibilities the region offered.

During the three months fieldwork a few other people occasionally visited or worked in the company for a limited time: a writer working on a London-based documentary drama and a few people commissioned to do development for a potential programme which the broadcaster never proceeded with. They worked and communicated mainly with the people from the company their work was directly related to: the MD or the development team. In addition, there were a few young people on work placements. As a rule, they were working on development. Development is working on ideas for programmes, searching for information mainly on the Internet, and making occasional phone calls. If a programme idea gets commissioned, the person who developed and pitched it would expect to be employed on that project. People usually worked on a large number of ideas. They may discuss them with one of the more senior members of staff, but they rarely proceed with them. Getting commissions was very difficult and highly unpredictable. There was also a high rate of failure; people spoke of more than 30:1 likelihood of idea to attract the interest of a client. Importantly, it also depended on knowing the respective channel and their priorities, information received at briefings or through informal meetings and personal contacts. This lessened the chances of commission for anyone who was not under the close guidance of a more senior person or had no contacts with the client. During the participant observation period there were five people on work placement, all on different
arrangements. The very term seemed to be used loosely and for the candidates it essentially meant having the chance of working for a television company or just being in the office for a short while, usually two weeks. One of the people on placement was a young person from an ethnic minority background who had a job but wanted to start working in television, which had been his dream. He had a conversation with Andrew and spent two or three days in the office talking to people about their work and trying to establish contacts to send his CV to. Another person on placement was a young graduate from a local college who spent about a week developing ideas. She admitted being interested mainly in journalism and discontinued her placement when she was offered a similar one at the local BBC radio station. There was also a young fellow student of Brigit, Andrew’s PA, whom she met at an airport by chance. He said he had been trying to get a job in television after they graduated and she invited him to do a placement. He worked on development, too. At the end of the two weeks he was offered a long-term position, but on the technical side: maintenance of equipment, which he was not interested in. He subsequently went to another city where he had been promised a place on a production. Yet another work placement was someone who had been working for two weeks at the company as a part of her course and started working on a film together with Brigit, featuring her own interesting history of being a war refugee. She spent a few days in the office where the two used the facilities to work on the short documentary. From the above two different aspects require some further emphasis.

The first one is that the company was welcoming to their staff using the equipment and facilities. Interviewees mentioned borrowing cameras and using the editing suite. I did not see them doing this during their normal working time, but equally, if the equipment was
available, they could borrow it without a problem and free of charge. It could be simply a gesture of good will, or a form of compensation for the tedious job in most cases (offered in order to keep people motivated), or support for reliable young people from the region. It can also be interpreted as a potential investment in future project, i.e. if any of the short films or ideas secured funding, the company would be involved in the making of it. It was also more likely that making the equipment available was a form of loose ‘keeping people in the loop’. There seemed to be tolerance for people simply being around in case a project was commissioned or their ideas were very good. These people were generally junior and did not receive any particular guidance or support, but they were also allowed to ‘do their own thing’ and simply exist around the company. For the company owners this was a pool of ‘hands’ and potential creativity demanding little effort and cost. For the young people on placement this was a chance to impress or be available in case a commission came through. However, they had to do this at their own cost. Attachments were loose and noncommittal. The outcome was rarely significant skills development or learning; or greater insights into television. There were too many candidates and too few commissions. The ‘system’ resulted in lack of clarity, much waste and unclear benefits. By contrast, under the umbrella of the large organisations the wastage was accommodated and mutual benefits were ensured. The breadth and length of exposure under the old system were matched by more targeted recruitment. Starting at a small independent company provided quicker progress and presumably more control over work. In practice it also resulted in more people having potential access to television work where their exposure was less varied and experiences mixed.
‘ColourTV’ did however consider itself to be a hub for nurturing talent or at least a discoverer of talent. The principals told the stories of people who had started with the company and had subsequently gone into a freelance career:

I think they like the company, most people feel loyal to the company and I think it has served them well. I think they see that and they see that they have been given a chance. I mean, we have had, I had somebody that was working at a radio station I used to partly own, he is now one of [region’s] best producers. A woman that Nathan met in a bar, who spoke Spanish serving behind the bar, is now one of this region’s, you know, sort of, good directors. (Andrew, GM)

The second issue which can be highlighted was the company’s attempts to find people to work on the technical side, and especially to service and use the in-house equipment. Such people were difficult to find, and William admitted being ‘directed’ to it after his initial interview with Nathan. Taking on the responsibility for the technical work was beneficial for William. He was entrusted with the editing of an archive-based series, the making of which he had been shadowing. Initially it was the freelance editor the company used who was promised the series, but a re-commission at half of the original budget created a chance for William. And so the freelance editor lost the job whilst William gained a chance to work as an editor.

The eagerness of the company to identify a person for the technical duties may be a result of the fact that a lot of the activities which would otherwise be outsourced could be performed in-house. It could also be explained as a cost-saving strategy: it is during editing and finalising of the film when a lot of the expenses occur. At the same time completing programmes on time is closely linked to reputation. And so from a company’s point of
view these expenses are necessary. Being able to do at least some of the work in-house would reduce the risk of the profit being spent on ‘emergency’ measures under the time pressure of a deadline. Such in-house technical arrangements were also made in another local independent. They employed a camera operator/editor. The combination of these, as the owner admitted, allowed the person to be cost-efficient for the company and hence be a full-time staff member.

*People in the office: dynamics*

There was a clear division between owners/managers on one hand and the other employees on the other, much alike in the small companies of the German Internet industry (Mayer-Ahuja and Wolf, 2007). There were three senior people in the office (one of whom was on a fixed-term contract) and six more junior of whom five were young female staff members. A few people commented on the fact that there were so many young females. Brianna, described it as a ‘male-focused environment’ She continued:

The girls never stay, they go on to other things, go on to other companies. Unless they come in as freelancers. You never get women who stay, who come to the office as staff and stay, they don’t seem to be happy. Because, like I say, I think they tend to be kept to a certain level of progression, there is a cut off point.

Mary expressed a similar opinion:

I think it is very hard for you to progress further because at the end of the day it is Andrew’s company and he is very much in control. So I think that especially as a
woman, a lot of women leave and go somewhere else and I think that there are less politics in other places as well.

There was no sense of anything ‘pervy’, as Britney put it, but she felt her confidence had been ‘knocked down’ and that her friendly chats with Nathan did not prevent him from being ‘really really nasty, very nasty’. This gender aspect reinforced the imbalance of power between the junior and the senior staff. It is difficult to state conclusively that there was a causal link between the gender and the seniority element. It is interesting to note that Brianna emphasised that this power imbalance was not so relevant for freelance female professionals. It can therefore be suggested that at its core the problem concerned status and independence.

The case of Brianna was also telling. She was in charge of the accounts and that is how she was introduced to me. Later I found out that she was actually an arts graduate who, having done a placement with the company, stayed on to do transcriptions and then accounts. A friend and colleague of hers commented:

   Oh, yes, she is extremely creative. Both of us love, like, writing and she is really into it.

   It is ridiculous but he [Nathan] talked her into it, he told her that accounts was a creative role. (Britney)

Brianna herself was rather bitter about this:

   It is just one of those places where you know instantly the people who will be pushed for success and the people who they are going to keep… in a certain role and not let them expand or anything, that comes across quite clearly to me…. [she was doing transcriptions] But I was doing that in hope that when a research post
came on or something like that you know, I would just be able to get a more creative role and that has never happened, and I have mentioned it to Nathan and he is like well, we have nothing in production and then he has kind of, somehow got me into doing the accounts which is never… I don’t even want to do that.

Brianna though that the GM had his ‘own little plan’ and wanted everyone to fit into it. From her perspective she had been pushed into a job role she did not want, she had not studied for and she did not see as career path. From the GM’s point of view, someone was needed to perform this role and the junior graduate who did her placement there was a person at hand who could be hired at a low salary to do it. The company could not afford to cater for Brianna’s interests, even if they wished to do so. They could only afford to hire for the positions/jobs they needed to fill. Small independent companies cannot just hire young people for a particular role. In this environment people’s functions have to match the needs of the business because the high risk associated with each production and the lack of space and additional resources does not allow for trainees. And so accounting jobs become creative.

The combination of hiring young, inexperienced females facilitated the ‘flexibility’ of managing them. Britney was one to express strong opinions about it. She admitted,

I got a first in my degree and I am not stupid, but here I do feel like a dumb blonde…. They do knock your confidence, which is not healthy.

Essential in terms of learning was that there was no permanent middle layer in the company: not only in terms of hierarchy, but also in terms of skills and experience. Skilled professionals were ‘too expensive’ for the company to hire and as a result the two types of people employed were representative of the two extremes of the experience scale: either
very senior or almost complete novices. This was another factor that contributed to the
discrepancies in power within the office. It also challenged the continuity of in-house
expertise: the production or organisational side of programme making, which was a
potential threat to company’s ability to function.

[T]hings can get so lean that you take out experience, out of the process of
manufacture. So that, you know, you are doing everything on for the sake of now.
Saving money now. But actually there is a point where you have got to create this
kind of learning environment of enough experience so that in the future if I am ever
to step out of this role or I determine that I don’t want to do it or I kill myself in a
car crash or whatever there is no, there is no one else here to pick up the slack.

(Nathan)

A year after the completion of the case study the company had lost the regional news
contract and the news producer had joined the development team of ‘ColourTV’. All the
junior people had left or were about to leave, and there were only two new people: one
replacing the technical person and the other engaging entirely with the new business
venture of the company. People left for various reasons ranging from a relationship break
up to the end of the contract and lack of another production on which younger staff can be
re-employed. As mentioned, with the exception of the news team and Victoria, at the time
of the research, none of the other ‘staff’ members had a written contract. This most of them
experienced as uncertainty, especially as regards pay and promotions/involvement in
productions. The junior people wanted to know, for example, the review period for their
salaries. The lack of contract meant that there was no clarity of the expectations nor any
official procedures should they want a pay rise or the possibility of progressing to a
different role. Many of the requests for review were driven by the junior people demanding more money and had an informal character.

Pay and money were a recurring issue. The junior people in the office were conscious of the fact they could be paid more, and particularly of the fact that the freelancers were paid more. From the company’s perspective, they were paid low salaries because there was a long term commitment and a chance for the young staff to learn and get exposure to various productions and aspects of the work. This contradiction can be explained by the mixed position in which the junior staff members found themselves. Despite the rhetoric, they were not ‘legitimate’ learning members of the community. Their presence at the company had no element of long-term career commitment. Moreover, the environment they joined was structurally incomplete: there was a considerable gap in seniority and skills between them and the most senior people. Also, the very purpose of their work for the company was not learning or assisting skilled professionals, as would be in a community where young people learn as legitimate peripheral participants. Rather, they themselves were supposed to function as experienced practitioners, being subjected to the similar uncertainties.

One concern of the GM was that the company was a bit too accommodating and ‘nice’, and people took their time to ‘tailor the space to the way they want to operate’. Robert, the freelance producer-director who worked on the case study programme described it as a ‘laid back’ company where people have a ‘hands off’ approach. For example, the researcher/AP on the project was allowed to ‘work from home’ which in this case was in a city a few hundred miles away. Also, in November the contract of one of the junior people working on the series expired but they kept her on for another month to complete the after-
work on the archive clearing: something they could have probably done in-house. Nathan explained this as him being a ‘softie’ and not wanting her to be off work just before Christmas.

The likely reason for these rather loose in-company arrangements, according to Nathan, was that they were learning how to be an organisation working predominantly with freelancers. He considered writing a ‘how to’ manual to be given to each person coming in on temporary basis to explain the systems and methods of work of the company. At the same time they were trying to establish and develop a core set of people (amongst the junior ones) to become versatile company employees. Neither of these worked and this caused frustration. The GM was disappointed with both the concept of multi-skilling and lean organisation which he had learned about and wanted to apply in practice. He blamed the expectations of clear-cut jobs which the educational system had installed into the young people. It was his opinion that newcomers did not perceive themselves as being closely linked to the company and were pursuing their desired ‘specialisation’. These frustrations were experienced also at the ‘opposite side’, by the young staff members, and are discussed further in the chapter.

A few possible reasons for the above issues can be suggested. Firstly, the environment in which the company operated was rather unpredictable and this prevented it from offering stable in-house arrangements for the majority of staff, despite the rhetoric. Hence the verbal and loose arrangements with junior staff. From their point of view it signified a lack of long-term commitment although this was not necessarily the case. This volatile environment also influenced the pay levels. The company was operating on the assumption that junior staff would recognise the benefits of a long term (e.g. three to five years)
opportunity to be involved in many aspects of programme making and would therefore readily accept low pay levels. The junior people saw the company as their main source of income and having been directed into routine office-based work did not necessarily consider the opportunity as a path to full/intensive professional development. Moreover, ‘ColourTV’ had a limited number of projects, all in largely the same genre. The company needed people to facilitate the day to day running of operations at a low cost. Hence it needed people to do things like production accounts and equipment inventory and maintenance. The junior people were eager to work on productions. The clash between the two generated tension. There were attempts to provide wider learning opportunities to staff, such as sending Brianna on an overseas shoot with ‘ScienceDoc’ (discussed in more detail further in the chapter). But these were rather limited as both financially and creatively the company operated in a restricted environment.

Secondly, since the company was centred around two main figures with considerable experience in the industry, the balance of power was always on their side. The junior staff felt rather disempowered as decisions were almost unilateral. This was also reflected in a third factor: the ‘culture’ of the company was one whereby relations were almost too family-like. For example, the MD or Chris (senior executive and development producer) would compliment junior female staff on their new handbags or clothes. On one such occasion the person being complimented swirled around to demonstrate her new outfit. Another example would be the concern of the GM that Britney did not manage her personal finances well and was complaining about the pay rate she was on.

[T]here is a little bit of hardship involved and it is deliberate because I don’t want it to be easy for her. She has to understand, she has to manage her own money as
effectively as she manages the company’s money. So if she is getting seriously overspent, is that the kind of person you want in charge of your programme budgets? If she can’t control her finances. A very paternal thing you know, are we her daddy etc, but actually that is what we are asking people to do because we are bringing people in here to look after the freelancers who are coming in. So we had to take a paternal view. It is a self-interested view then because we want people to work the way we want them to work to make the money. (Nathan)

There was an attempt for the relations between the management and the employees to be friendly and open, but in practice it worked only partially. Brianna, a junior staff member admitted having suggested to the MD to introduce a more formal dress code as a means of bringing in more structure into the office:

I think it is too relaxed.... And I was like well, maybe that is why everything runs as it does it is too, people wander in when they want, they wander out when they want, you can go…. I don’t think it should be like a prison or anything but there needs to be some kind of structure to it.... I think it is a very very relaxed atmosphere and I think that, I don’t think people kind of fulfil the potential that they could be doing.

And

[Nathan] will just say things like oh you, oh you are cheeky, you are cute, but you are cheeky or things like that and it is just little things that aren’t so severe but it is just like crossing a professional boundary that I don’t like. (Brianna)
This contradiction between the informal and friendly tone of the office interactions and the exercise of power to the interest of the company/business when needed confused the junior staff and created resentment.

Finding and selecting junior people

In line with the general approach within the sector, the process of selecting people to join the company was informal. Andrew admitted he ‘would give ten minutes’ to almost anyone who approached him and was clear about his criteria:

And it is a balance of the right kind of person that Nathan or I like and we see something in them. [Q: For example, like what?] I think enthusiasm, I think energy, humility and a work ethic, you know. I think most important is a work ethic. I could teach most people to do most things but you can’t teach somebody a work ethic.

He also gave an example with a current staff member who had started on work experience. He took a note of her punctuality and long hours of work.

Contrary to much of the literature on entry in television revealing the importance of personal connections as well as the findings presented in the previous chapters, all of the junior staff at ‘ColourTV' had started without a personal recommendation. They had started by responding to adverts, or job placements, or simply by contacting the company following a prompt by a regional agency. There are a few possible factors to mention in considering the reasons for this. Firstly, it may be that the company is a good employer which makes a particular effort to recruit and train young people. There was evidence,
although limited, to support this, especially in the attitude of the two leading figures in the company. However, as they acknowledged, although they would always meet a person, they would not necessarily give them a job. What the young people whom they liked could rely on was an opportunity to do a work placement, i.e. spend time in the office familiarising themselves with the work and the people who worked at the office at that time. The second reason was the nature of the company structure. The dominant figure was Andrew. So the selection of predominantly junior people, most of whom were female, could be a way to preserve this dynamics. A third reason, less speculative was the high staff turnover. It was a natural trait of the industry: the size of the company and the project-based organisation of work meant that recruitment of staff was a frequent activity. Fourthly, and related to this was the type of in-house people ‘ColourTV’ could afford to employ, especially with the volatile work flow: cheaply available ones, as junior staff were. Moreover, the labour market in the regions is such that it relies on either new entrants or well-established professionals. It retains almost exclusively those who have an external, personal reason to work in that region and so it is naturally based on the young people living at home, or those who have established their families and have committed to work in the area. Hence the availability of people regionally was also a limitation within which the company recruited. Sometimes even locally established freelancers would charge higher rates and the company preferred to hire entry level staff. In this way the scarce supply created more opportunities for the junior entrants.

Victoria, the development researcher provided some insights on this, especially on the reasons for which young people choose to work for small regional independents. While companies were looking to cut costs, young people were also restricted in the choices they
could make due to financial considerations. Victoria was hoping to work on a production and all the development work she did was in the hope that a commission would come through and she would have the opportunity to work on it.

[T]here is a thing now really where jobs are not permanent, everything is freelance and it is a three month contract, a six month contract. And in a way I would like to take that risk and I think on a personality basis I could probably take that risk. But on a financial basis I just can’t, you know. The only friends of mine who are doing that and freelancing for six months and then two months off or maybe two weeks off if they are lucky, the only way they do that is because they are living with their parents or their parents have bought them a flat. And it is like OK, well, very nice for you but I just you know, it is not possible for me… I came back to ‘ColourTV’ because they were offering me a staff job which means I can make the decision when I move rather than being forced to make that decision. And also, you know, I am doing development at the moment, but, you know, I have sort of sold the job on the idea that I would end up doing production and that is what I want to be doing.

Finding and selecting established freelancers

Hiring other people to work with the company on a freelance basis was dependent firstly on the specific vacancy. Directors were sometimes identified through a London-based agency as their selection had to be agreed with the commissioning editors. ‘ScienceDoc’ was an exception to this with the director identified through the regional informal network and was not a recommendation of the client. In most of the other cases the company would try to ‘promote’ local directors, but more often than not the commissioning editors would
insist on hiring someone who they knew and liked, and so often ‘ColourTV’ had to hire a London-based director. As regards a lot of the other positions, which were more at the discretion of the company, a junior staff member remarked:

I mean, the problem is that somebody will be employed basically on word of mouth and even if they do a bad job, they will be re-employed because it is easier than searching. (Brianna)

Most of the freelancers ‘ColourTV’ worked with were based in the region: the company benefitted from a pool of local labour, it was cheaper to source the staff for their productions from the area, to use their office as a production office and not to pay travel and overnight expenses. They also thought this was better for the local community and giving jobs to local freelancers kept them in the region. This was a notion shared with most of the other regional independents. Most of the freelancers they used were people they knew from the big regional broadcaster, or people recommended by them. Robert, the producer-director of the ‘ScienceDoc’, for example, was known to the executive producer of ‘ColourTV’ from their time as staff. Robert recommended Hugh, a camera operator and commented that it would be good for the company to know a good camera operator in that region.

Nathan was the person in charge of introducing the production teams to the methods of work of the company. If a freelance producer-director, for example, had not worked with them before, Nathan would see the first two or three weeks as crucial for their mutual acquaintance and especially for finding out about people’s personality, which was considered important. During the field work Robert, the producer-director of the show, claimed that until the end he did not know exactly who was in charge of what, and a few of
the ‘girls’ working on a different on-going series were partially involved in the production, helping with specific issues. What Robert saw as his main task was not so much to try and figure out exactly how the company worked but to ‘keep them happy’ and to reassure them that they were going to get a good show.

Working for a small independent company brought definite benefits for the freelancers. Chris said he enjoyed the fact that,

you talk to everybody within it and so it doesn’t matter what job you do… Nearly everyone is freelance rather than just one or two. So, yes, I mean it is more comfortable for freelancers to work with smaller companies.

And that,

in every independent of this size there will be people who are there who are less good than you would ideally like. But they are there because they are nice.

Coming across really incompetent freelancers was not a specific worry for the company. Good cameramen were said to be difficult to get hold of. But because of the ways they would find them – through a recommendation – the risk of getting bad camera work was not a worry. At the same time, getting brilliant camera work was not a particular concern either. The type of shows and clients they had did not require high calibre camera work. Unlike drama, for example, where the camera and lighting need to be at a very high level, documentaries, drama documentaries, and science programmes do not require elaborate artistic qualities. It requires good enough camera work. From the company’s perspective it was more important that a person was a ‘known entity’, as Nathan put it.
Even when they knew that a person’s skills might not be at the level or of the type required, they would still use them:

[B]ecause they live locally, we kind of know they are not quite up to part but we know that and we can build a team around them which will deliver the product. But we do need to have a name and it is better than having somebody come up from London who you don’t know. So it is, you know, just about being flexible, really. Contracts, most people are freelance. They come in, they invoice us, we pay them. If they are good they will come back and work for us again. Particularly with technical grades. (Nathan)

Chris, one of the more senior people, the executive producer on ‘ScienceDoc’ but also working on development, started at the company as a freelancer working on another documentary.

We have got a guy, Chris, who is working with us, we had forgotten about. Hadn’t worked with him for a long time and he came in and he is working on a [series] for us and we just like him. And so we have said ‘stay’. (Nathan)

What was considered important about Chris was that:

he is complementary to our rather you know, eccentric MD. And there is trust between those two so that works. And I have given him now a researcher as a full time member of staff to support him in his role. She is someone we don’t really know that well and I am not quite sure about but they got on well and we will see. So two month trial and if she is good we will keep her on. And I know that she is
getting a good education from him and so you know she might be someone then who sticks with us into the future. (Nathan)

The above also shows how the more experienced are set to work with the less experienced. In this particular case, a year later Chris had left as the company felt they were not getting as much from him and he was not ‘up to it’, and Victoria, the young researcher mentioned was also thinking of leaving. She had worked for the company for about a year hoping that some of the ideas they were pitching to different clients would be commissioned but this had not happened.

The practice of ‘teaming up’ more and less experienced people in the small companies is not without its contradictions. The very idea harmonises with the traditional apprentice-master methods of skills development. The context of the small company, however, makes it vulnerable as its stability is dependent on a number of factors amongst which the work flow, the financial situation of the company, the personal strength of (usually) the young staff member to suffer constant rejections, or not be involved in actual production, and, potentially, on the likes and dislikes of the company decision-maker(s).

*The company: commissioning*

Winning a commission for a programme is the source of work and the means of survival for small independent companies. Commissions, such as many other processes in television, are based on personal relationships and informal mechanisms. Malcolm, a representative of a regional industry body confirmed this:
Because in television and in many creative arts it is 80% relationship/20% idea. It just is, because that is the nature of the beast. And most commissioning in the country is actually determined by the commissioning editors saying ‘oh, I think we should have this’.... So what they are doing is they are saying ‘we need this sort of show for this sort of slot’, and more or less they will say that to sort of six or seven of the companies that they know and those companies will more or less informally tender for that, you know, they will pump in a load of ideas. But unless you are quite close to those people on a regular basis and you have a very good developed relationship with them, it is sometimes difficult to get onto that sort of informal tendering network, if you like.

Companies can rarely plan as commissions are unpredictable. Not only the final result, but the process itself was not clearly defined. Receiving a reply from a client and the time gap between programme commissioning and project start were highly variable.

[It is very hit and miss and that is why you can’t, you can’t predict anything at all.... But you can’t, you know you can’t predict like you know, you are selling bottles of wine. You can’t predict you know into January, February, April next year what is going to happen because you are entirely reliant upon the commissioners commissioning. And you will only get something like every 30 proposals you send in you will get one hit.... So you know, you can send in 30 or you can send in 300 and they could all get commissioned, it is unlikely but …but you can’t forecast. It is impossible to forecast anything. You just don’t know. (Elizabeth, head of production, small regional independent)
The second major concern was the repeat business based on that commission. Common sense suggests that once the client is happy, they will entrust more work in the future to the same supplier. The independent television sector refutes these postulates. Reputation and repeat business do not work in their usual way when it comes to a small independent company getting further commissions from a client.

The really sad thing is that when you do do a show that you like, you still have to go to square one in the commissioning process to get a further commission. It’s never a straightforward ‘what shall we make next?’ discussion. It’s back to pitching and the whole development process. (Nathan)

Nathan also bitterly said that:

[F]or all the talk about supporting ‘indie’s’ etc there isn’t actually any. You are as good as the next idea. You are not even as good as your last film, you are only as good as the next idea. And so every project you start from scratch again at the end… it is the only industry where I have seen it happen because …if you meet your customers requirements at the price that they wanted it at and many times we exceed the requirements by getting them good press etc., one would think you would go back to that supplier again and re-use but they don’t.

and that “a company’s reputation might get you through the door for a chat with the commissioning editor but it won’t get you the commission”.

A third, specific complication in this process was the fact that the company was situated in the North of England: far from London where the commissions were decided upon. The
only way for ‘ColourTV’ to get work was in London. The MD made weekly networking trips there as the only way to maintain contacts and win contracts.

A fourth factor in winning contracts was the client-specific expertise of the companies. Each of the regional independents had built a reputation for doing work for a specific client, particularly the big channels. The history of contracts was based partly on the contacts and also, the past personal employment association of the core staff:

I mean, the thing is we are not ex-BBC people, so we don’t know all the ins and outs of getting a BBC commission. And, you know, the commissioning is done in London. (Nathan)

The regions would also have a reputation for certain genre, based on the programmes which have traditionally been made in it. This, in addition to the legislative requirement of outsourcing production, could bring an advantage to the regional companies:

[A]ll things being equal, a commissioning editor, if they have a proposal from a credible regional company and a proposal for a credible London company, they will give it to the regional company because they need to fill that quota. So in a way it is a good time to be in the regions. (Malcolm, regional skills development agency)

Most of the other regional independents, similarly to ‘ColourTV’, spoke critically about the commissioning process. They had experienced negatively the London-centred practices and talked about the list of preferred companies the commissioners had. Regional independents, even the successful ones, highlighted the importance of ‘insights’ into the client’s preferences and having a good reputation with a specific client. There were cases
when a company could benefit from such a situation, for example, when an individual suggested a programme idea to the commissioning editors which need a trusted company to film it. Commissions are never awarded to individuals and so commissioning editors usually suggest that the individual liaises with a specific company who then gets the commission. Such practice is common in the industry and ‘ColourTV’ had benefitted from it.

*Multitude of opinions, few decision-makers*

Two conflicting structural factors influence the company’s standing with a client: the large number of people who can have a say in defining the quality of the work, and the limited number of people who make decisions about the quality of a programme. The first one is broader in that it is linked to the artistic qualities of films whilst the second one concerns the commercial reputation of the company.

Changes in technology have made film production both cheaper and simpler. They have also made it possible to monitor the output during the process of film-making. Nathan explained that previously the process had involved a high degree of trust and the need for people to be on the same ‘wavelength’: the director had to trust the cameraman to deliver the shots they had discussed. Nowadays material can be seen in real time on the monitor, but as Nathan also insightfully commented,

> No one had actually recognised that actually the process of making a film isn’t about cutting one picture against another: it is about thinking about how you place
one picture. And what they haven’t been able to do is reduce somebody’s thinking
time, that is required in eight weeks to make a quality product into three weeks.

The ways in which the reduction of trust by the very process of programme-making has
influenced the standing of the output is that “if everybody can see, everyone has got a point
of view” (Nathan). This makes companies subject to a number of opinions, many of which
they have to comply with. Whilst this is not an issue in itself, a problem arises when these
opinions conflict. What puts an independent in an even more vulnerable position is that
these decisions and opinions are rarely documented. They are usually communicated
informally, but can enforce formal decisions. Even in ‘ScienceDoc’ the telephone
conversations with the client were rarely followed by a written confirmation of what was
discussed.

[T]oo many people now have access to the decision making and what is going on.
And the trust has completely broken down in the process with the result that you
know, you are changing things. Edits are taking longer and longer rather than
shorter and shorter. (Nathan)

Such changes have tangible financial implications for the companies as well. It makes
them accountable to a number of opinions besides, usually towards the end of the process
when deadlines are pressing and little additional filming can be done. Shortly before the
start of the fieldwork ‘ColourTV’ had finished a film which went £40,000 over budget
mainly due to a last minute legal requirement to change the degree of blobbing (blurring
images of faces in order to preserve anonymity of the people on screen). ‘ScienceDoc’ had
to do an additional day of filming after the first viewing by the client’s commissioning
editor. Having been asked a number of times to change sequences, the editor of the case study production murmured that there were too many bosses.

This blurring of hierarchy is matched by an almost absolute control of clients over the commissions. The following story from ‘ColourTV’’s experience is an illustration of this:

And then we had another big film £320,000 film for [client] to do, documentary. Started talking about it, all set up, the director was a chap in Berlin, been across, set it all up blah, blah, blah, two weeks before shooting [the client] pulled out with no recompense to anybody. They just said and I quote “The needs of [the client] had changed”. And so they then said that they hadn’t received our emails and you know, we got replies from them, you know, it was absolute rubbish, absolute codswallop rubbish. So they turned around and you know, what was meant to be you know, what would that be, that would be nearly 20% of our income was just wiped out in one conversation with no recompense and no kind of sorry or guilt from their part. (Nathan)

The second factor is the more general company reputation which, as Nathan commented, was mainly dependent on the ratings:

So, you’re living for, by the quality of the shows and how they are perceived within [the client]. And that perception in [the client] is very much tied to ratings. So you end up, as an organisation, making programmes for probably about 20 people who are influential over your future. And obviously if you get a supply of rating success – great, that’s a bonus. But at the end of the day, if those 20 people at different levels of [the client] don’t like the show, then you won’t get a commission for some time.
Another point can be made about the ways programmes are approved (or ‘signed off’) by the commissioning editors. ‘ScienceDoc’ had to be re-cut a few times before the commissioning editor signed it off without having seen the final cut simply because of lack of time to view it. The documentary director found this out after waiting for a while on stand-by to do any changes required and calling the editor’s PA. This was in line with the more general company experience with commissioning editors’ feedback:

The problem always then is that when you then take it down to the commissioning editor, they look at it and a) they probably can’t remember what the programme was about anyway that they commissioned, because it was so many weeks ago, and b) it is very much about what frame of mind they are in at that particular time. So if they have had a bad night the night before quite often, and they are feeling grumpy, then you will get the backlash. And if they are feeling grumpy or tired they can create a whole string of work because they are just being penickity and weary. If they are in a good mood, then quite often they will just pass the programme through with very little alteration.

Much of the commissioning editor’s decisions and behaviours are due to the position they find themselves in being an intermediary between the commissioners and companies, while coping with the precariousness of their own careers (Trc, 2003). Their vulnerable situation filters down to the company and can influence its reputation.

We have had you know, instances where we have done major dramas where the commissioning editor has been up here and signed off on the show. And then it is shown to his boss and the boss doesn’t like it, so he then comes back and tells you what a load of rubbish it was. And it needs to have this changed and that changed
and stuff. At the end of the day, we are making programmes not to an audience of thousands or millions. We are making it to one person which is the person who has commissioned it or his boss, his/her boss, they could be the [company’s] head. (Nathan)

The case study documentary was no exception in that the evaluation was done in the same way. Having signed off the programme without watching it, the commissioning editor contacted the company later.

I think at the end of the day what has happened now is there has been emails come through to say how good everyone thinks the programme is. So he has obviously now shown it to other people in the channel and they have liked it. So he is feeling comfortable now about the choices that he has made. So that is fine, so the relationship is good. So one would hope that there will be more commissioning. If he had shown it to people, wives, girlfriends, personal assistants whatever, and they had said oh, it is a bit boring, then he would have probably come back and said, you know, you have let me down on this one, boys, even though he didn’t say stuff at the time. (Nathan)

Unfortunately for the ratings (and the company), the film went out in a poor time slot. It was in competition with a big sports event and so the viewers’ ratings were very poor. And so despite the positive feedback and relationships with the client the case study film never became a first of a series: the company did not get another commission.

As seen from the above, ‘ColourTV’ was a company of variable size which depended mainly on the commissions. The staff was mainly junior people and two senior figures; with no middle layer in between. The company used mainly locally available freelancers
known to them through the regional network and their common organisational past at the regional broadcaster. The business inflow was a result of an informal, London-centred process of commissioning where few formal rules applied. This created a strong feeling of precariousness not only in winning commissions but also in maintaining reputation with clients.

**Part 2: The Other Regional Independents**

‘ColourTV’ was not exceptional in its methods of recruitment, work with freelancers or clients/commissioners. Most of the issues which the company faced were common amongst the other regional independent companies. These are outlined below.

**Common pattern of establishment**

Most of the well-established independents in the region were founded by ex-staff of the biggest regional broadcaster. The founders were trained there, got established while working for this broadcaster and having left it were using the contacts acquired there in order to get work/commissions. Ten years after leaving they were still using these networks to locate freelancers. As most of the successful regional independents were actually generated from this regional ‘hub’, they would know and use other people who had worked for it. Sometimes their partners were also working in the business as, for example, the wife of a cameraman who worked for ‘ScienceDoc’ was doing programme development for a competitor, and the husband of a production manager in another indie was working for the big regional broadcaster. With the redundancies in the industry, every
new wave of freelancers (who were not recent graduates) would be broadcaster’s ex-staff members, and so in order to find out what they were like to work with, people often used their ‘broadcaster-based network’ to find out. Hence over the years the large organisation served as a training body, as a social environment and after the changes: as a source of the first contracts. The companies initially competing for commissions there were insiders: they knew both the systems and the requirements of the client.

A common motivation for the first ‘wave’ of regional independents was creative freedom. In the beginning of the 1990s independent companies used to serve one or a few individuals to provide an unrestrained environment and enable them to make the films they wanted to make. One such person explained:

These are people that invariably a lot of them have left the corporations in the first place, because when you are a big corporation, you’ve got to do a variety of projects…. The thing is they think these people left in the first place because they all wanted to be millionaires and they want to start a business. No! Because they are creative people, they haven’t [a] concept of business. They set it up because they want to make the programmes they want to make…. Those people are driven by their ideas and by the sort of ideas that, by the sort of programmes we don’t see on television. (Aziz, founder and owner of a regional independent)

The figure of the founder(s) is still dominant in these companies. This was the generation currently in their late 40s or older. Being small, they operated similarly to other businesses of their size: it was the owner that took a lot of the staff-related decisions and s/he was often a creatively dominant person. Importantly, s/he was usually the person to secure commissions.
Flexible size

Being centred traditionally around one key figure, the regional independents relied predominantly on freelancers for making their programmes. Staff numbers varied depending on the production and the amount of work they had at that moment. At all times there would be someone, usually the owner, trying to secure commissions for projects. Alan, a manager of the regional office of an independent company summarised the pattern:

I think you will find that with the majority of companies, the staff will be whoever owns it, the senior producer and whoever owns it, the accountant and the receptionist, and pretty much other people, even if they have been there for a long time will be technically freelance and they will just be on fixed term contracts.

An owner of a regional independent company gave some details on the company headcount at the time of the interview:

It really depends. The company has a hard core staff of about seven. At the moment it’s employing about 30 people, just on the last count, actually. So, it’s fundamentally project-based, you know, with good admin support, production management, a managing director, a director of production, a director of programmes, really, hideously grand titles, actually, for people who carry out quite decent projects. And sometimes, development, but development has been difficult. And we employ, permanently I think we employ more than that, because we’ve got [show] which is a very constant contract, but I wouldn’t consider them to be core, you know, they would come and go. And the nature of the people who’d do those jobs might change as well, although the job might still be there. (Aziz, owner of a small regional independent)
‘ColourTV’ and the other independents were trying to build a core staff who would be responsible for winning contracts and subsequently: managing the productions commissioned:

Well, I think the way you manage to keep people is to keep them constantly employed. But because you are project-based, it’s difficult. Or sometimes there’d be periods when you have no work for them, so they will move on. What you really need is, you need a strong core staff. (Aziz, owner of a small regional independent)

All the other people the independents employed were freelancers. Their contracts were fixed-term:

People are usually brought on for the production. So if that is nine months long, they are here for nine months, if it is six weeks they are here for six weeks.

(George, owner of a small regional independent)

So the small companies were trying to establish a structure relying on core and periphery workers. In some ways it resembled the flexible specialisation and firm model (Atkinson, 1984; Piore and Sabel, 1984) whereby the core employees enjoy the benefits of a long term career, development and stable working conditions, unlike the peripheral ones. In the case of the small independent, however, the core staff was not as ‘permanent’ as such a model presumes. Also, there were no lifetime opportunities, due both to the scale and the nature of the business and labour market. To the extent there were such, they concerned the owner-manager. This inevitably led to tensions in the expectations of the two sides.
Unpredictable commissioning: business at risk and resource planning difficult

The flexible size was rooted in another common characteristic of the local television business: the unpredictability of work flow based on the uncertainties of the commissioning process. As with ‘ColourTV’, all similar companies in the region were unable to control or predict their work flow, as the very process of winning projects was random.

Yes well, the thing that, the whole of the independent television business just, you know, it is peaks and troughs and it is very, very difficult. So that is why most of the small independents only have a small number of staff and then you bring in researchers, producers, directors as and when you need them. And then you employ cameramen, sound men and all the rest of it literally by the day. (Elizabeth, head of production in a small regional independent company)

Most of the regional independents faced the same problems with commissioning as ‘ColourTV’. They would usually build a relationship with a particular client and rely on it to attract business. Most of them would specialise in specific programmes, based on the regional specialisms. The commissioning though required constant investment in locating and developing ideas, and lack of predictability which resulted in inability to plan.

Tight network of ex-staff in a big regional broadcaster

Much of the regional network of freelancers, broadcaster and independent production companies was based on the professional and social network developed within the big regional organisation. The links between companies and freelancers and the freelancers
reoccurred throughout the research. Robert, the producer-director of ‘ScienceDoc’ experienced this and explained:

I mean we are in [city in the North], it is not like London. [The city] is a very small media village and in the freelance world. I had never worked for ‘ColourTV’ and I come here and on the first day I see two people I have worked with at [the regional broadcaster] for 15 years. It is very small, so the researchers who work at [regional independent] or [another regional independent], I know them all because, partly because people live in this area, they don’t want to move, so there are four-five companies to work for and partly because freelance rates in this area are obviously far less than in London. So no one is going to move up from London saying oh, there is a great opportunity in [the city]. There is people in [the city] who work in [here] so you tend to know people. So yes, producers, Andrew or whoever will know of, they know other freelance companies/independent companies and they will know who people are and what they are doing and if they can produce. (Robert, producer-director)

Robert was offered his first two projects as a freelancer through his old colleagues from the regional broadcaster. Those connections formed in the course of 15 years continued to be used even after he (and many of his colleagues) became freelance.

There were many confirmations of this, similar to the two below:

Our freelancers would tend to be people who want to stay local to [the city]. And therefore will work on a range of production that we want… we are suggesting that they work on. I don’t say they work for us exclusively, ‘cause some of them don’t. Some of them, you know, work for four or five different companies at any one
time. What is interesting is that a lot of them are ex-staff. A lot of them are people who’ve come through the system, who are trained with us and who like the set-up in [the city] and therefore want to stay. They want the independence to be able to manage their own life rather than having somebody else manage it for them. And I think that’s what it comes down to in the end. It comes down to you as an individual making a choice of whether you feel that you’re comfortable with managing your own career rather than having somebody else managing it for you. (Kevin, head of resources, regional broadcaster)

What I found in [this city] is that a lot of people have worked together in the past. So like Chris used to work at [indie] and so he knows everyone from [there] and likewise a lot of those people used to work at ‘ColourTV’ and other companies. So it is a bit more friendly just because people know each other and so yes, you do talk to each other because it is like you know one of your old friends basically or sort of colleagues. (Victoria, development researcher)

Shared pool of regional talent

In many cases the regional companies shared the same pool of labour. What is more, they were dependent on its availability in order to produce programmes cheaply, without having to pay overnight stay and travel expenses of freelancers coming from London. This meant that the availability of such a regionally available pool of freelancers was vital for the survival of those companies. They were well-aware of this and on many occasions co-operated so their relations were not based on ruthless competition for expertise (although they were competing for commissions).
In many cases, it was the companies themselves which have ‘trained’ people and were subsequently using them in the talent pool.

I don’t know how many people have come through ‘ColourTV’. A lot of people in the BBC, ITV, independents, some independent. I think [regional independent] have of their core staff five are from here, four or five. A lot of people. (Andrew, owner of ‘ColourTV’)

This was so mainly for the more junior people; the senior ones are still from the generations formed under the big broadcasters.

I knew him when I worked at [regional broadcaster] and he was one of the independents in the area. I mean in [city] you do get to know everybody in all the independents as well as in the main franchise companies. (Chris, executive producer)

This close-knit community which shared a common organisational past continued to function in an organisation-like way. As a member summarised,

But like I said in, in this small media village in some ways it mimics the small independent companies together all like a large company because everyone knows each other. It is like different departments. (Robert, producer-director)

All the small regional independent production companies were a target for graduates from the regional educational institutions. They would receive numerous requests for work placements or jobs. The companies did co-operate as much as their capacity allowed them. All of them were taking young people on placements. They would also monitor the quality
of the training people received from the different colleges and universities and would be able to comment on the ones which sent the best prepared students.

*Difficulties in keeping staff in the region*

A common problem the regional independent companies had was that most of the graduates and professionals from the region would go to work and live in London. They all acknowledged that this was logical given the large number of companies and hence potential work there. At the same time they were not happy about the situation as it considerably diminished the pool of locally available expertise.

They’re people, they go where the work is. You know, talent travels to where the work is. That’s my biggest argument. It doesn’t mean that talent lives in London. Talent goes to London because there are based ten of the bloody broadcasters in London. (Aziz, owner of a small regional independent company)

It also meant that the existing pool of professionals in the region would eventually age and disappear, because the vast majority of the local graduates would also ‘gravitate’ towards London.

The difficulty of retaining people in the region resulted in local companies joining efforts to find work for the local professionals. Aziz, an owner of a small independent said it was an unspoken rule to call around a few companies to see if they had vacancies for the people who would be coming to the end of their contract. He stated, ‘It’s all in our interest to keep the staff up here’. His company had a particular relationship with another regional independent with which they shared premises. Despite the competition for commissions,
the indies had to engage in some degree of co-operation as far as the people were concerned. Other independent companies from the region confirmed this practice:

And then we try to encourage a good relationship with four or five other companies in [the region] so that we can say ‘this person is really great but they are coming to the end of their contract, have you got anything for them?’ So we try to work with that, sometimes it works, we get on better with some companies than others. (George, owner of a small regional independent)

But we do have a problem is if we take on new, especially new researchers, young researchers, semi-experienced people they will want to be with us for a while but then they will want to go down to London because they want, you know there are better job opportunities down there and all the rest of it. And the thing is we can’t keep them on. We can’t keep them on staff so we may only employ them for three months, maybe six months if we are lucky. And then we just have to let them go. And of course, they go down to London because there are richer pickings in London. So it just depends, I mean in some respects it worked with [another regional independent] well, because of the Northern people know one another they do, if we are lucky they can move between the companies. So therefore from us they might go somewhere else and then they might come back again. (Elizabeth, head of production in a small regional independent)

Keeping people busy locally because they would be lost for the needs of the regional companies was a motivation consciously leading companies to work together:

[I]f we don’t keep them here they’ll go to London and then they will be lost to us forever, so we try to keep them in the North wherever possible. These are usually
people who want to stay here, their families are here, background is here. And some of them occasionally will go off to London. Our very first researcher who we took on came in last week, she’s been in London for a year and is doing very well. But usually people want to stay here and want to do well in this region. The only place that we can keep a talent pool of people here is to try to keep them working so, [listing regional companies], we try to keep in touch and encourage people to move between them. (George, owner of a small regional independent)

A representative of the regional industry body also confirmed:

And I think you know, good people get passed around. If somebody is good then it is not hard for them to get a job here and a job there. The trick is, the difficulty for regions, is obviously to stop them drifting to London. And that is quite hard to do unless you really do have those relationships in place between companies, between producers, those sorts of things. To basically make sure that somebody is retained in the region by being able to be passed around different companies. (Malcolm)

These attempts to keep staff locally were particularly needed for certain skills: editors and cameramen, as those were acknowledged to be the most difficult to find. This may be because their input in productions was particularly short term and they needed more frequent moves between contracts.

But largely, you know, cameramen and sound recordists would prefer to work in their region. And people will prefer to employ them in the region because I don’t particularly want a London cameraman, just on practical, financial grounds that a) I want him to respond quickly; [b)] I don’t want to pay for his overnights and his
mileage to come up here and partly philosophically. I want to use local people, it is a local company. (George, owner of a small regional independent)

He also summarised:

So I think for practical and logistical reasons its better to have people from here. And I don’t see any difference in talent. I know there is more work in London, I don’t think there is a difference in quality. They just have more people who are good there.

The above quotes show the first aspect of the co-operation: the joint conscious efforts to provide enough work for freelancers and thus prevent them from leaving the region. The second aspect was the communication between companies about the people they were about to hire, especially the junior ones. Companies co-operated also in sharing information with each other.

And quite a few people have moved into [another regional independent] and then they come from [there] back to us as their contracts finish. But equally we will ring a company, ring another company and say you know, do you know of anybody. Maybe somebody that they have used before who has now gone somewhere else that they can recommend. But equally, if get CVs in from people, which we do, inevitably if we are you know, specifying that we want them to be [the city] based or they are [this city] based, inevitably they will have worked for one of the other companies. So it only takes a phone call to check out whether or not… (Elizabeth, head of production in a small regional independent)
The third aspect of the co-operation concerned finding people. It was only done so by a limited extent, but it did exist. Elizabeth explained:

Well, you are a bit protective of your staff because the thing is you really like to keep your staff, but you can’t afford to keep your staff on at the moment. But the danger is that they go somewhere else and they may never come back again because that company has got more work or whatever. But you know, it is a fine line.

The necessity to co-operate was rooted mainly in the inability of a small company to keep people on for a longer time after a project is over. This, combined with the common need of skilled professionals available locally, was a stimulus for the joint independents’ effort. There was no suggestion, however, of co-operation extending beyond employment and the immediate concern of maintaining regional pool of freelancers. Sometimes companies would make specific effort in trying to secure local expertise. An interesting story was told by Robert, a producer-director from the region. It was about an ex-colleague of his who left the regional broadcaster and established herself as a valued freelancer. During her complicated pregnancy the company she worked for at the time continued to pay her for a few months and after the birth of the baby, showered her with presents. A few months later they started putting strong personal pressure on her to go back to work for them relying on the feeling of obligation. So those who were valued were indeed in a strong position due to the scarcity in the local labour market. It also showed that in this strong position where ties can be close, other forms of obligations and pressures may intervene in the choices made.
Regional network?

And so, to what extent can we claim that there was a regional network of companies collaborating and making a joint effort to keep skilled professionals in their region? There was certainly evidence of this, although it cannot be claimed that the network was well coordinated. The closest ties existed between two companies which were sharing offices next to each other. The other similarly close links were again in a case of special proximity: an independent company hiring offices from the large regional organisation. These people were better aware of the latest news about each other. In the first instance the co-operation took a form of trying to find future projects for junior staff one of the companies wanted to keep but could not because of lack of a project.

However, there was a stronger regional network as far as the flow of information is concerned: not only amongst the independent companies but also between the large regional broadcaster and the independent companies. A representative of the former confirmed this:

[W]e would try and talk to people on that that we knew, so we do it on the basis of networking with our colleagues in the indie sector. I’ve just done it this morning, I’ve just been asking two of my colleagues who were in here before you who don’t work here but have experience with that lighting cameraman what he’s like.(Kevin, head of resources, broadcaster)

Much like the social networks functioning in television (see Chapter Four), here they were operating by the same mechanisms: informal, active, socially shaped and economically motivated. Local freelancers were a financially viable option for the local companies and,
facing the peril of not being able to make programmes at profit, the companies made efforts on their own initiative and helped out the local freelancers in their job hunts.

An aspect of the concern that the freelancers and especially the younger ones would leave the region was the skills aspect – the need to have local talent. Training was difficult to do entirely in-house in a small regional company.

[S]o it is a combination of training that we can give people from outside, partly funded by [regional agency] and partly funded by us, because we certainly benefit from it. Even though some of those people will be with us for three months, they’ll learn those skills and then they go away and never come back. (George, owner of a small regional independent)

However, what was acknowledged that training young people and keeping them in the region would benefit the television sector, including the independents.

But in the end of things, I’ve always believed that if you keep them in the area, if they are at least going to work within our working environment it doesn’t matter really whether they’re staff or freelance. I still think it’s money well-spent. And I like the things that people like [regional agency] and Skillset are doing, where they are training people up for the independent sector and some of those people may well end up as staff here long term. (Kevin, head of resources, regional broadcaster)
Part 3: The Production

The freelancers on the production

The production observed, ‘ScienceDoc’ was a one hour science documentary shot over the course of three months on a commission from a big broadcaster. The company had pitched it as a potential series and it was considered a pilot. There were two freelancers working on the production for almost the whole duration of the process: Robert and Jessica. Robert was the producer-director. He was brought in to work on the programme by the in-house executive producer Chris. They knew each other from the regional broadcaster and Chris thought of Robert as someone whose directing style would fit the programme needs: a documentary with a light touch. Before the start of the production Robert had also met with the commissioning editor, albeit very briefly at a film festival.

Jessica, the researcher who was given an Associate Producer’s credit at the end, had been working on the programme idea while the company was developing it. Her science knowledge had led her to one of the other regional independent companies specialising in science programmes and once ‘ColourTV’ decided to proceed with the idea (for which they needed more detailed research on potential stories), they called the other regional company and asked for a recommendation. Jessica recalled:

Nathan phoned me up and said he had been given my name by [regional independent], not in fact this job, like, the first time I worked for ‘ColourTV’ anyway, months ago. He had been given my name from [regional independent], was I available like, next week. I wasn’t available next week but we still chatted for a minute and I said ‘well, you know, keep me in mind’. And he then phoned me back a week later and said well, actually out of all the people whose names I got
you know, you seemed like by far the brightest. And I said ‘I am sure that I am’ because I am quite arrogant. And he said well, so you know, we would like you to do some work for us. So there wasn’t an interview or anything then. (Jessica, Researcher/AP)

There were also freelancers who made short inputs at different stages of the production process: cameramen and an editor. There were four cameramen who did various parts of the filming. The one who did the most extensive shoot: ten days abroad, was Hugh, a friend of Robert. The three others were used for three days of separate shoots when Hugh was not available. The first one was someone Robert booked for a day of shooting abroad. Robert wanted him because of the nature of the shoot: it had to be done in a laboratory and the cameraman was known to be good with technical shots. The company did not particularly like him. He was described by Nathan as a ‘fussy little guy’. But they left the final choice to Robert and took him on for a day’s shoot. The second single day of filming was also abroad and a local cameraman was hired. It was just an interview and so filming did not require special skills or style. For the third single day of filming they hired a cameraman from the region known both to the company and the director. He was an ex-colleague, i.e. they had known him while working for the regional broadcaster. As it turned out, he had been Hugh’s mentor in that same organisation. This older cameraman was suggested for the filming abroad but the director preferred Hugh. Robert explained that on a difficult overseas shoot with much travel and many plane changes it was much better to have a young cameraman who would be fit enough to carry his equipment and would not be grumpy. No one wanted a grumpy cameraman on a shoot. The editor was someone who
lived a bit further away but the company knew him and had used him before. He had done a few programmes for them and they liked his style, described as ‘dynamic and light’.

The employment side

No one on the production had a written contract and no one was concerned about this. Payments to them were made promptly. In certain ways ‘ColourTV’ was acknowledged to be a little too accommodating to freelancers’ needs. For example, most of the time Jessica worked from another city, a few hundred miles away. During pre-production there were no long days in the office. This changed when the editing started. The editing stage did involve long days, especially for the editor, and occasional week-end work. At that time the company was keeping Jessica on a two week development contract so she was both researching future programmes of the same potential series (which never got re-commissioned), and was around in the office to attend viewings. Extending Jessica’s contracts to enable her to do development shows the way and indeed the scale in which small regional independents attempt to keep their staff around. For ‘ColourTV’ this was particularly important as Jessica was the person with subject-specific and programme-specific knowledge. However, two weeks seemed to be the limit to which they could employ her after the end of the production.

The company suffered some small losses during the production. For example, during one of the one-day shoots abroad, a bag with camera equipment was lost. The company was not happy and was actually slightly suspicious of the incident:
Well you don’t know the truth of it, that is the trouble, you have no idea. Because I must admit when I look at the equipment list, I am thinking ‘what the hell was he taking all this stuff for’? So you are never quite sure whether you are just being duped and it is just a big insurance claim because he has actually lost a bag with his overnight, you know, with his shampoo and his underarm deodorant. But it seems to have had £5000 worth of stuff in it too, in the bag, and I find that very strange....

And of course, the insurance claim goes against the company and so it is not particularly good. It means our premiums could be higher on the next shoot. (Nathan)

These suspicions were partly due to a previous incident with the same cameraman. On an earlier shoot his car had been scratched and two months later the cameraman contacted them to claim a few thousand pounds to fix the tracking on his vehicle as he claimed it was the bump that had done it. However, the company paid him. And re-employed him.

There was another incident where the company chose to pay for damages incurred during the ‘reccie’ (pre-shooting location visit) to the US. Jessica had not filled in the insurance form of a hired car correctly and by consequence was liable for $500 after the vehicle was badly scratched. Not being able to claim the money from the insurance, she claimed it from the company, which paid. Such events are perhaps a natural part of the practicalities of sometimes logistically quite complicated arrangements. The ways in which the company dealt with them is telling about their wish not to create hostilities. It may be that in a labour market where labour is not as abundant as in the cluster of London, relationships are valued more both by the company and the freelancers and regional independents needed to be more accommodating.
Part 4: Learning and Skills Development

Learning in a small independent production company

“ColourTV” admitted that they preferred to hire young inexperienced people whom they could train. This was mainly due to the fact that the company could not readily afford to pay a premium for skills, especially in ‘quiet’ times.

Historically, we have always gone for newcomers and training them up. Principally because we found that people who have been trained and come to us will want us more money than we can afford to do. So it would lift our overhead if we didn’t have any work, we then could not afford to keep them, and we then have to make them redundant. [In order to avoid this] we then have to find someone who is prepared to learn at a lower level. (Nathan)

This can be a very positive feature of small businesses as it would give priority and an opportunity to the young entrants for learning and training. In theory, the process of being trained within a company whilst working at a low level is somehow similar to the traditional learning and training process within the industry. The young entrants, however, felt this was not to their benefit. As the GM himself admitted,

A lot of them have fallen out with us because they look back at their early days as being exploitative. They don’t recognise that actually for the training that they’ve got which is a part of where they are today, they couldn’t have gone anywhere else. There is a kind of a general belief that because they are now […] that they always could have had. And they might be right, they might be right.
A cost-saving strategy pursued inevitably by an independent puts in danger the long-term quality of the training. For example Brigit, who started at the company on a subsidised work placement could not benefit from it fully, because the news team she was attached to travelled a lot and neither she nor the company could afford to pay additional transport and accommodation costs for her.

The small independents lack both resources and often expertise to provide substantial learning experience for their junior staff. Britney remembered the first production she was involved in where she was the only full-time staff member, and had to teach herself many of the archive clearance rules and procedures. In addition, once another junior team member was allocated to the production, she had to train them as well. It was only months afterwards that she observed a producer on another show and discovered in amazement that he was actually doing the task she had been doing for her production. This instance illustrates the looseness of the skills and knowledge young people acquire in small independents: not only are they supposed to self-learn but they often do not encounter good examples of the job roles and do not learn about the role they would be trying to perform.

The loose boundaries and arrangements also influenced Mary’s learning experience. She decided to move to a fixed-term contract while working as a PA to Andrew in ‘ColourTV’. Then she worked alongside an inexperienced colleague and learnt as she ‘went along’. Nobody, however, checked her work and she was very anxious about the work she had done. There was no supervision or any form of control from the company. The responsibility she had been entrusted with was bigger. At the same time, she felt positive about her work for the company:
But I think that what ‘ColourTV’ is great for is giving people the benefit of the doubt and kind of, letting them move through the company, you know, I would never, say for instance if I had had a series of short term contracts with various different small production companies there would be no way I would have the level of responsibility that I have now or that I might have in the next series, as quickly. I don’t really know why but they do give you so much experience here. (Mary, researcher)

The junior person responsible for the equipment in the office had a positive view of the opportunities he had to learn. His exposure to new tasks was rather limited but he did understand what the company expected from him and did not want to move up quickly. This is how he described the process of learning from the two freelance editors who had worked on productions while he was there:

I haven’t really formally ever really sat down next to someone and watched them work but I have, yes, every now and then you see somebody work and take something on board and then you know just looking at their end result with them and just analysing what they have done. I think practically I have learnt bits off [editor] by grabbing him and saying ‘how do I do this’ or you know, him giving me advice on how I should stick stuff together. And [another editor] I have learnt from really just by looking at what he has produced and how he assembled it. (William, junior editor)

A practice worth mentioning in relation to the learning opportunities in the company was that on at least two occasions emerging vacancies for production work were not filled in by the existing junior staff. The first was ’ScienceDoc’, where the company wanted someone
with specialist knowledge and so they did not offer the opportunity to any of the in-house staff. The second one was a vacancy related to the London-based documentary which no one of the junior staff knew existed. They heard about it from candidates calling the office with enquiries. Both instances suggest that even when there is incoming business (or potential business) it does not necessarily translate into an opportunity for the junior staff members. This may be lack of specialist knowledge or simply a strategy of keeping them in-house to do the more administrative work needed by the company. Brianna, the arts graduate doing accounts, never got involved in production work as she had hoped to.

_Multi-skilling?_

The company had the philosophy of being a flat organisation. The GM described it as a flat one where a core group of people possessing multiple skills rotated between different job roles. This had implications for the tasks people were expected to perform.

[I]f we like someone and feel that they work for us then we’ll have a crack and see whether they can find a role within. But it’s not a, it’s hierarchical in that there’s Andrew and me at the top of this particular tree but after that we’re trying to run a fairly flat organisation. And we’re not very keen on promoting people into particular roles, because people can’t leave a role once they’ve been given a title.

(Nathan)

One of the big frustrations for the GM was the fact that the young people coming wanted to pursue a specific job role rather than train to become versatile.
I was trying to get a little core group of people who are multi-skilled in the true sense of multi-skilling: i.e. they can do a little bit of editing, if they’re not editing and required they may do tape copying, they might have to do a little bit of research etc., and I tried this for a year and it’s a complete flop…. People can’t multi-skill. It’s not where their heads are. Multi-skill is a kind of fantastic thing that companies want from people but actually it doesn’t make any sense to them because they are trained through an educational system where they have made choices about particular subjects that they liked…. And they’ve all got a very clear idea that they want to be the producer or a director of a TV show. And that’s their hook. And they are completely focused on that. So rather than coming to a small indie like ourselves and saying ‘Right, I’m here, I know nothing about television, therefore I’ll experience as many different facets, build up a skill set which allows me to make choices about where I go later’, they come in and say ‘I want to be a producer’. And they look at the producer on the particular show, and that’s the job they chase. And they’re fairly focused to it. (Nathan)

The young staff members expressed great frustration with the fact that they were not given specific tasks and often would not know they were supposed to be involved in a production. The company expected not only multiple skills but also that their employees displayed initiative developing them. But the young people found this lack of clarity and direction confusing. Britney complained:

You can’t know that you are doing anything wrong if you are not told you are supposed to do it. And that is my big thing with Nathan is, he will be like ‘I told you, you should have’; and he didn’t, he really didn’t…. I can’t stand people you
know, turning round and saying ‘you should have’… because there is lot of the times where I could have!

When starting a job young people would benefit from more guidance. A small company however has limitations in what it can offer both as an environment and as expertise. Few people were asking Andrew or Nathan questions, and Chris was usually focused on the development work with Victoria. The young staff have been told that they were not going to be given a specific role, but they did not feel this was to their benefit. They felt this situation was potentially abusive and the risk of failure was bigger as they were not prepared or mentored for performing a lot of the tasks. Britney also felt that they could not impress their superiors, or surpass what is expected of them which meant fewer chances for promotion.

[S]o Nathan was like well, I don’t like to give you a role because then you just do that role, you don’t do other things and I thought right, well that means that I can be told to do anything. You know, they could be expecting me to do anything and I don’t know, and it is the not knowing what they actually expect of you because you can’t achieve an expectation, you can’t. Like, if you had a job and you do things outside that job, then that is good for you and it is showing that you can do things quickly and you can get on with stuff. But if you don’t know where the barriers are it is kind of like, thinking ‘should I be doing that, should I be doing Rob’s call sheets, should I be arranging hotels or’ … and I don’t think… like I shouldn’t really be taking responsibility for like, going out and getting a visa for her. It is a big responsibility with no one overseeing me because if it goes, the budget is so
tight as well if anything went wrong, you can’t really afford for anything to go wrong. (Britney)

Not having a clear set of tasks and not being sure how to perform the ones given shifts the balance of power to the benefit of the company. As the above quote suggests, it is the lack of tools to progress and surpass the expected that frustrated the young and ambitious people. And of course all their demands can be defeated with the argument of job descriptions containing everything.

Half way through the making of the case study film Britney was sent to the States with the team and brought back some tapes with footage for the editor. This was presented as a developmental task for her and although she was pleased, she also felt unprepared because she was not given any details and she was not copied to the correspondence. Such ad-hoc decisions although well-meant can be an element of uncertainty for the younger and less experienced staff. It may be that this element is also developmental in that it teaches them how the process works, but it did cause frustration, pressure and uncertainty.

The ways in which the company saw their role in contributing to the skills of the newcomers was through guidance and advice. Nathan stated that,

[W]e promote very heavily the idea of individual learning and responsibility, so that people who work for us are responsible for their own careers and they can use us as a benchmark to talk through our experiences although I am not sure whether that is valid for the future anymore. And they can talk to us about, you know, building up their learning, you know, their skill set etc. And we will listen and if we believe it is right, we’ll pay for to bring them forward…. So we’re more articulate I
suppose in talking about the role of employment. I’m not sure whether it makes us that much better as employers.

*Skills development in context*

It is clear from the above that one of the major tensions was the one between the needs of the young graduates and those of the company. The junior people were interested in clear specific jobs which would add strength to their CV and would help them to find a freelance position. They wanted to focus on more creative tasks. The company needed people who could do internal, administrative and support jobs, and perform more than one job role. This tension is rooted in the change in wider industry structures. It had two aspects: the educational and the external labour market. The educational aspect was the availability of university level education which is supposedly preparing people for ‘real’ work in the industry and hence builds their expectation of entry at a higher level. There was also a financial aspect to this:

> What happened is that graduates were coming in; there was this kind of scene change about… debt. So they’re coming with a huge debt from their university education etc and they need to earn money quite quickly, or they want to earn money quite quickly, to feel the benefit of money. (Nathan)

The external labour market aspect of the pressures was rooted in the fact that for freelance professionals, skills and abilities are validated through credits on past projects. Therefore what all entrants aimed for were credits with clear job roles which would add to their market value and help them to find future projects.
Even when companies were prepared to let young entrants try various jobs while paying them a trainee-equivalent rate, they did not have the financial resources and the breadth of programmes to do this as it had been done previously in the large regional broadcaster. From the individual’s point of view this decreased the benefits of staying long-term with a company of this scale as it was only a limited experience they could gain. With irregular commissions even this was not guaranteed. From the junior staff’s point of view long-term commitment was not necessarily beneficial. By consequence, the low payment they received did not bear the rewards of a financially better future. The bargain which was common in internal labour markets was no longer possible. Previously, on entering the professional community, there was an implicit understanding that a junior person would be trained and perhaps underpaid, and once their skills were acquired the organisation would keep them on and pay them accordingly. The current situation seems to have preserved only some of these features which undermined the functioning of the system. Small companies did need young inexpensive people and were at least nominally willing to provide them with opportunities to develop. They operated in a very competitive environment and were not in a position to fulfil their role either with respect to the training/skills provision or any firm long term commitment to their junior staff. The young people were inevitably aware of these limitations and they pursued their own agenda oriented towards a freelance future. As a result the two clashed and created tension. Robert, a producer–director insightfully explained the ways in which the new situation shaped a different, less developmental way of learning:

[T]he pressure to get on to get more money, more career, more credits and not to be a researcher for long. But I was a researcher for about seven years which now I can
get, I know I can get or I know we should get [a difficult interviewee] and we bloody well will get him even if my AP doesn’t want to, which it came down to. But I had that experience which Jessica [the AP] doesn’t have and you need really, I think…. You need the time, you need turnover of programmes, you need to do programmes, you need difficult circumstances, you just need experience I think. You just need that experience.

There was another factor which should be mentioned: the difference in the entrants’ motivations before and after the industry changes. Pursuing a career in television in the past was a choice of the industry rather than a choice of specific specialisation. Many people were hired in administrative or support jobs and it took years before they actually embarked on a professional career in the organisation. But they were relatively sure to. As the sector level data showed (see Chapter Eight), nowadays entrants are expected to have a clear story, and most of them explicitly wanted to work in television, often in a role they have already chosen before applying.

An implication of this could be the exclusion of a large number of people who may not be focused and need more time to decide on their career. And, importantly, it excludes the vast majority of those living in the regions. A producer-director narrated with bitterness:

An editor who has just retired or gone freelance, [name], a little man who talks like this, you wouldn’t think he was up to much and he is just a quiet little man [mimicking] and won an Emmy for his editing, lives in [a local village]. Now how would a little quiet man living in [the local village], a little quiet 18 year old living in [that village] you haven’t got a cat in hells chance of becoming a top flight editor because there is not the centres of excellence you know, to bring people on, centres
of excellence that can bring that type of person. There will be other whiz kids/students out there who talk the talk and might be quite good as well who go to college or whatever, go to London or whatever but if you don’t want to go to London it is, there is not a structured kind of way up anymore. Which is obvious but [the editor] who is 60, who won an Emmy, he won’t happen again. There will not be another [such editor]. There will be someone else who has you know got a different personality but that type of quiet brilliance will not happen in [the city/region]. It is a loss to [the city]. Because everyone is freelance and flitting about and you have to be you know, to be freelance you have to be a certain personality. (Robert)

Interestingly, while the expectation of the benefits of a university education increases the expectations of the young people, the external attitudes and verification of its value may put it down. Again, resonant with the sector findings, this was another paradox which several interviewees mentioned: the mismatch between the desires of the young graduates to be full-fledged (and well-paid) freelancers soon after their entry to the industry and the mistrust of such claims by decision-makers. Pay played an important role into this tension in that graduates felt frustrated that they were not paid as much as their more experienced colleagues, but sometimes, as Britney said, they had been told at University not to expect much and be prepared to suffer underpay in order to have their path into programme making.

I was really frustrated because the whole thing about pay started to come into play because I was on … I think I was on £40 a day while I was at Uni because Nathan had asked me quite fairly, he said “Well, what rate do you want?”. So I said “well, I
am not…” you know, while I was just starting I was like “I am not bothered you know… minimum wage” me, because when we had been at Uni we were told that we had to work a long period of time for free and it is just such a joke. (Britney)

This lack of haggling skills combined with low (maybe realistic) expectations built at the University combined to lead to potential exploitation of the more junior staff members. The young people seemed to be socialised into acceptance of low pay and bad conditions. This, in Bourdieu’s terms, was a mechanism to reproduce the *habitus*. Jessica, who worked as a researcher/AP on ‘ScienceDoc’ also felt she did not haggle well:

> So then at that point you know he said well, you know could you start the week after next or whatever. And then he asked me what my rate was and I told him and he agreed to that. So then I thought ‘bollocks, I should have put on another £50’.

(Jessica)

Some of the more experienced freelancers acknowledged that pay rates can be flexible. A sound recordist (Edwards) said he usually asked how much they had in the budget simply in order not to ask for a sum lower than they already have in mind. A producer-director (Abigail) said she starts from considerably higher than she aims for so that the negotiation process can result in the pay level she wants. This is a skill which people acquire with experience and the lack of clear-cut rules at the initial stages can lead to junior staff being underpaid: both because of their lack of knowledge but also because of their lack of confidence.
Freelancers and staff: the view from the production

Observing how the company worked with freelancers during production, there were a few issues worth mentioning. Firstly, an issue which caused concern for the company was the lack of close attachment of freelancers to it. Secondly, the lack of interaction with the ‘staff’, especially the development team, and thirdly, there were concerns related to the management of the budget. Nathan, the MD was apprehensive of the fact there were no “ColourTV” staff on it and commented negatively on the lack of intensive communication. His remarks concerned also the researcher/AP during her ‘reccie’ in the US. He was annoyed by the lack of daily communication, and by the producer-director who did not call regular meetings:

Because people are fragmented and away each person is just doing their own thing in their own head and so there is actually no benefit in kind of shared information. So unless I call a meeting, a meeting doesn’t happen. I am not the producer-director of the show…. He has got a programme in his head, I don’t know what it is, Andrew doesn’t know what it is. Now, unfortunately we are the people who are logistically helping him deliver that project but he hasn’t communicated it to us. I find that surprising. So the expectation is on us to seek out the information on which to try and offer to help rather than it being put out there…. They actually don’t perceive that communication is part of that job. (Nathan)

Such an attitude may be a result of the feeling the company was not in control of the production, reinforced by the fact that they had not worked with Robert (the producer-director) before. Also, as Nathan commented elsewhere, it may be a part of the process whereby the company was learning to be dependent on freelancers. The second aspect of
the issue was the one of cross-fertilisation between the staff working on development and the production team. There was not enough symbiosis and Nathan felt that the production did not utilise the creative resources ‘ColourTV’ could offer:

I think it is very limiting that people can’t see that you could talk to the development team and just say ‘look, this is what I am planning to do, have you got any ideas to input into it? What do you think about this idea, does this sound strong? If you were watching [the client] would this particular idea make you think this is a great show? There is no shortage of people who can offer ideas here. You don’t have to take their ideas but I see no harm in actually asking for them and involving them in the show. (Nathan)

The third issue was related to the budget. Traditionally, the producer of a show was involved in the financial management. In the case of ‘ScienceDoc’ Robert acknowledged not even to know the exact budget. The company had to manage the budget, both in order to avoid liability for overspending and not damage their reputation, but also in order to protect their profits. This prompted Nathan to remark bitterly,

Most producer-directors feel pretty disenfranchised from the money. They prefer it in actual fact, because then it is not their fault if things go wrong. So all we can do is cost things up and then highlight things but it is usually quite late in the day.

This situation carries a risk for the company and is a potential source of tension between it and the freelancers, especially producers. There is a partial convergence of interests: their interests are the same and divergent at the same time. Both parties want to make good programmes as this affects their reputation and their chances of future work. As far as the logistical and budgetary aspects are concerned however, freelancers do not have a vested
interest in the good financial management of a show. Their main concern is their own reputation with a client.

[I]t is a problem that all freelancers have, is that they can only look at what they are doing. You know, they don’t feel a commitment, they don’t give a stuff about ‘ColourTV’, whether it survives or not. So that is one of the reasons you can’t have them in charge of the budget because that is actually not what their criteria. Their criteria isn’t the survival of ‘ColourTV’, their criteria is to make a big impression to [the client] because they realise that [the client] might give them more work. ‘ColourTV’ can’t guarantee to give them more work… the next [client’s] project could come through [another regional independent] or wherever, and [the client] might say oh, yes, there is this good guy works in [that region], you should use him. (Nathan)

Such a situation potentially threatens the very reason for the existence of the small independent companies. Once their ‘uniqueness’ and expertise are externalised, their value as a provider of unique productions and creative ideas decreases. As Nathan remarked,

[the broadcasters] have created this culture of individuals who they like working with and who they then put into companies and it makes it very difficult for companies to grow because there is no continuance.

And also that

[W]ith the freelance market, it has made everybody become too mobile. So it is very hard to anchor a company down.
The issue is magnified in the regional production companies because in addition to the ‘default’ mobility of the freelancers there was also the major issue of location and distance from the cluster of production work in London. This results in yet another dimension of the disconnectedness between freelancers and the production companies: the existing option of freelancers to move to London.

Theory says if you give the right pay, right conditions, right opportunities, people will stay. Until they are married and have bought a house in [the city] it won’t happen…. And they are not actually worth putting an awful lot of investment into because it is unlikely that we will get a reward from it. (Nathan)

It is so especially for the young ones such as William who was working in ‘ColourTV’ during the fieldwork but had left a year later.

[A]lthough William was you know fast, quick to learn, built up networking and all those kind of systems, those people will always go very quickly because they are ambitious. And they are not tied down apart from love interests and we have no control over that as a business. Well, I suppose we could actually, we could supply women couldn’t we? (Nathan)

This may be a case of ‘traditional’ methods being used in a new context: a de-regulated, uncertain and commercialised environment which cannot provide the space and the supportive environment for learning and skills development to take place.

The issue of young people gravitating towards the industry cluster and the scarcity of skills and talent in the region provides a different dynamics and even contrast to much of the industry reality described in the literature in the first part of the current research. It can be
suggested that the reason is mainly the regional dimension of this local labour market. Discussing the dynamics between employers and employees, Smith introduces the term ‘mobility power’ (Smith, 2006). In a situation of excessive labour supply with little formal barriers to entry to the labour market, the vast majority of the industry practitioners have little mobility power (Smith and McKinlay, 2009a). With the exception of the high-end talent or, for example, commissioning editors; favourite directors, freelancers’ employment situations are characterised by insecurity of movement and the balance of power is shifting towards the employers. In the regions, where companies are threatened by scarcity in the local labour markets, younger employees do have higher mobility power which had a collective dimension. It is the collective mobility power that motivates companies to co-operate and keep skilled practitioners in the region. The situation has another specific, too. The companies themselves, have very little influence over the labour market in any significant way as their resources do not permit them to keep junior staff long after the end of their contracts and the scale of cumulative business of the independents is not sufficient. Hence the collective dimension does not translate to the individual level. The result is that, as Sydow and Staber (2002) claim on the basis of the German television sector, the competition from other networks often threaten to dissolve the regional ones. In the case of the regional network here, despite the attempts of the local companies to keep staff, their own capacity was so little that they could not influence significantly the process. It can therefore be inferred that employees’ mobility power can translate into benefits only if the employer’s side is sufficiently empowered.
Development versus production work

Development work involves coming up with ideas for television programmes, writing up the suggestion and sending a one page summary to a commissioning editor hoping for a reply indicating potential interest and a request for a more specific programme idea with many more details and specific names. This is usually done in the office, in front of the computer, possibly during meetings and telephone conversations with potential contributors. From the position of an observer it looks very isolated. In ‘ColourTV’ the person working on development, Victoria, would discuss ideas with individuals and would send them drafts for comments, but such work was considered only a stepping stone to work on a specific production. It was a currency which a young entrant had to pay in order to do some ‘real’ work. Discussing the interdependence of production and development Victoria reflected:

But then other people say you know, how can you develop an idea for a programme if you have never made a programme, it is just ridiculous! You know, if you haven’t got the experience of what is necessary you can’t work on kind of developing an idea that is actually going to be viable and make-able. So that is why I think actually it is quite good to try and do half and half. You know, if you can do some production but also development you know, because the two things feed off each other, they kind of work in tandem.

And then acknowledged:

I suppose the biggest pressure is to get a commission. And that is as much from myself as from the office…. If I get a commission then I think I will be allowed to work on it. So I am sort of desperate to get something so I can then take it further.
This stage of the television work: the pre-commissioning process of bombarding clients with programme ideas was very important but rather new. Using ideas to buy their way to work on a show in a context of a small firm puts a lot of pressure on novices and most often results in disappointment. It is also not a role in which the majority of the young people can enter and learn. Writing and coming up with ideas is not a universal skill in television. It is just one aspect of the television work. Earlier such skills were required by more experienced staff. With the introduction of the market principles, this changed and now young entrants are required to develop ideas. In ‘ColourTV’ there were a lot of unutilised concepts which people produced in large numbers. Junior staff like Victoria would be expected to produce ideas almost daily, and the people on work placements would often be given this as their first task. For the majority of them this was only a temporary occupation and they all aspired to work on actual production.

In-house opportunities?

Working on a series of shows or a long-running programme could be beneficial for novices learning and career development. In ‘ColourTV’ there was one such show which two of the younger associates and a young staff member were working on. For them: Britney and Mary, working only on this production was a choice between having an open-ended or a fixed-term contract. As the company expected them to be working on a number of projects doing mainly administrative tasks, a commitment to one production only was neither welcomed nor financially justified. The company, as discussed above, wanted to develop people with multiple skills in order to make their full-time status a viable option. And so when Andrew’s PA, Mary, wanted to work on the production, she was contracted only for
the duration of the series commissioned. By consequence, her rate was better than her staff rate. At the time of the field work another set of the series was re-commissioned and Britney, who the GM had long-term development ideas about, also chose to move to a freelance, fixed-term contract. The main reason she gave was the better pay. However, she also wanted to focus on more creative work. At that time Britney and Mary were assistants/researchers doing a lot of archive research and clearance. A year later, when the series commissioned during the fieldwork were just about to finish, the two already had two director’s credits on the same programme. There were four factors which might have influenced this. The first one was that within the company they were the ones most familiar with the programme, as they had worked on the first series. So their knowledge and familiarity with the show was a prerequisite for this opportunity. The second was that their work must have been satisfactory and they were trusted to deliver: the company knew them and their work already. They had learnt their skills mainly working on this programme which was the main industry experience they had. The programme required predominantly interviewing and archive work. This specificity was a third factor. The fourth one was financial: the series were re-commissioned at 50% of the initial budget and hence it would not have been possible to make programmes at a profit by re-hiring the freelance staff who had worked on the first group of shows. Such a move within the course of a series was not uncommon. Other regional independents also mentioned it as a way to make the transition. The continuity of the series allowed for trust to be built up, along with skills and knowledge development and especially programme-specific knowledge which allowed researchers to take on higher level job roles.
This instance illustrates some of the benefits which working for one company, albeit a small one, can bring to young people. It is a case where communities of practice can function well. The above-described production seemed like an ideal situation for the two junior staff members whose expertise grew within the production from young researchers to directors. There are two points which need comment in this context. The first one is the skills aspect of the rapid acceleration in titles and credits. As previous research has also found (see Chapter Four), the two would not necessarily harmonise. The skills acquired by Britney and Mary were essentially skills for work on a specific production. They were limited to the experience of the particular show and hence their value would not be the same as credits acquired under a variety of television programmes. Nathan commented on this from the company’s point of view,

[Y]ou’ve got this very strange set up where you’ve got this freelance culture where people no longer are following any kind of particular path. They are just trying to buy the title as quickly as they can in the hope that it will buy them the income. Which I think from a personal point of view means that you have seen the decline in the standard of a lot of programme making. It’s also cheaper programme making.

(Nathan)

The second point is related to the future career steps of people with these skills and credits. The quick growth limits the options they would have for future work. A logical development would be for them to work on a similar programme or work at an AP level and accept lower pay. On ‘ScienceDoc’ all junior people based in the office were given credits. All of them would have been involved in the production in a very sporadic way, but everyone was credited. This was a sign of the company’s good will and support for
them. Not being able to provide sufficiently interesting or well-paid work, ‘ColourTV’ rewarded their staff by ‘paying them’ in the industry currency: programme credits. Independent companies both suffer from and participate in such inflation of job titles being positioned in the middle between financial restraints and need to hire people who perform.

To summarise, learning in a small regional production company has both benefits and limitations. People can enter without prior personal recommendation, as is customary in the sector. It is an environment where novices can take initiative and approach the more senior professionals easily. Small companies from the regions usually trade the limited range of opportunities they can offer with more favourable arrangements and are more willing to allow people to try and develop their ideas. Faced with the threat of high turnover, they are willing to make longer-term commitments (by the industry standards).

Learning in a small regional independent also has some significant limitations. Junior people are usually sidelined in either administrative or development work, neither of which fulfils their desire to work on programmes. The expectations they come with when joining a company are related to doing creative work, working alongside experienced professionals and acquiring skills, experience and credits: all currencies in the freelance labour market they would expect to join. The company however, needs an inflow of commissions and can only afford to assign staff to business-winning roles. As projects are scarce, the presence of freelancers in the company is sporadic, short-term and often detached from the other activities. In this way the middle layer of the professional community, the layer where novices can expect to find the actual skills and expertise, is missing. Even in the periods when there is a programme being made, the role of junior staff is not one of legitimate peripheral participants. Involvement in actual production work
is a reward. Novices rarely move to being junior team members and such a move is often a trade-off between a job and a short-term fixed contract. This situation challenges the benefits of a community-based learning as it can provide only for certain aspects of this development. The incomplete and fractured community does not have the continuum of skills and knowledge needed. Moreover, mentors cannot legitimise the role of the novices being available only temporarily and often against limited time and resources.

The often narrow specialisation of the independents narrows the type of productions potentially available for junior staff to learn on. Small teams, convergence of job roles and short-term involvement: all features identified in the industry-wide study, were visible at the small regional company.

Small or micro companies are characterised by considerable power inequalities and the owner/managers’ decisions are almost unilateral. This creates resentment in the junior staff. At the same time, the chance to work alongside a senior established filmmaker (such as many of the independent owners are) brings inspiration.

Regional independents are willing and interested in creating a developmental environment in order to keep the staff in the local labour market. However, their precarious existence rooted in the structural limitations of the industry restricts the scope and scale of their actions. And although companies like ‘ColourTV’ were situated in a region with traditional presence and television skills available, the regional companies were not in a position to enrich or renew the skills base.
CHAPTER TEN:

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Having presented the empirical findings in the previous three chapters, this final chapter will discuss the ways in which the new industry structures relate to existing norms, the ways in which they impact on individuals and on skills development and learning in the industry as a whole. The discussion starts with a reminder of the themes and issues identified on the basis of the other studies to date and the main questions which the current thesis aimed to address. It then follows the themes as identified in the empirical chapters by reflecting on the problems related to entry, learning and skills development and the realities of peripheral local labour markets. This discussion is underpinned by a consideration of the academic implications of the findings. The next section reflects on the main contributions and limitations of the research. The chapter concludes with policy recommendations.

Themes and issues from the literature

The research into television and similar environments reviewed in the beginning of the thesis suggested a number of relevant issues. Firstly, it set the current industry scene by outlining a number of regulatory changes imposed on the sector. The result was a
fundamentally altered institutional structure. An important aspect of it was the shift from a small number of core organisations which functioned as a main entry point, training bodies and a career context to a large number of small and a few big independent production companies using predominantly freelance labour. Internal labour markets dissolved and networks of individuals, companies and groups became the ways in which the industry is organised.

These changed structures impacted on the way the labour market functioned. The social mechanisms, which had always been important in this sector, now became the main and often the only way to identify skills and talent. Insecurity for both companies and individuals increased (Blair and Rainnie, 2000; Saundry, 1998). Competition drove pay rates down (Saundry, 2001). Lower budgets led to smaller teams, the convergence of job roles, work intensification (McKinlay and Quinn, 1999), pressures on personal lives (Paterson, 2001; Tempest et al., 2004), worse working conditions (Dex et al., 2000; Sparks, 1994), unpaid work and weakened power of the trade unions (Saundry, 2001). Young people wishing to enter the industry are often expected to subsidise their learning by working for free. These happen concurrently to developments in technology and the growing scale of media education which provide a larger number of people with some levels of skills and aspirations to work in the sector.

Learning and skills development in television has been mentioned in some existing studies but has not been researched as a core issue. Thus while the literature provided insightful observations suggesting problematic mechanisms and individual pressures as well as the related concerns for the longer term industry-level skills renewal, learning and skills development have not been put ‘centre-stage’. Amongst the concerns raised by previous
investigations there were the poor learning experiences because of the financial and time constraints in projects (Thynne, 2000), limited the on-the-job learning because of the smaller teams (Ursell, 1998) and the lack of training comprehensiveness compared to the old apprenticeship-like in-house training (Barnatt and Starkey, 1994; Saundry and Nolan, 1998). The new structures are said to have eroded both the formal and informal skills development methods in television (Saundry and Nolan, 1998).

The literature demonstrates that geographical location also plays a role in shaping the realities of the labour markets. It has, however, been focused on London while other areas remain unresearched. In addition, small independent production companies, which now constitute a large proportion of the industry, have been left outside the analysis.

The present thesis aimed at connecting with the existing literature and enriching the existing body of knowledge in two ways: by linking the findings and issues with the ones already identified, and by filling some of the gaps. More particularly, it set to answer the following questions:

1. How do aspiring professionals embark on a career in television?

2. How are skills acquired in a fragmented industry such as television?

   2.1. What are the learning mechanisms and how are they related to the industry structures?

   2.2. Where and how does learning occur? How is it secured/provided and facilitated?

   2.3. What skills and knowledge do freelancers acquire?

3. What are the realities of work in independent production companies in a local labour market?
In answering the above, three main themes were selected and discussed in separate chapters: the realities of entry to the industry, the learning and skills development mechanisms and the functioning of a small independent production company from the North of England situated in a loose network of other companies spun off from the regional broadcaster. The implications of the findings around these three themes/research questions are discussed in the sections which follow.

**Research question one: How do aspiring professionals embark on a career in television?**

**Unclear entry point in a de-regulated environment**

Compared to the era of the big broadcasting organisations, the new realities of entry differ in three ways: undefined entry paths, blurred entry points and limited link between entry and subsequent employment or career. The unclear entry routes are a result of the deregulation of the labour market, the weakening of the trade unions and professional organisations, and the new institutional environment. There are now a number of ways for people to find their first job in television, including through individual productions or small companies. The lack of entry requirements or regulations make every paid or unpaid job a potential opportunity. Combined with the widespread reliance on social mechanisms, this increases the possibilities for entry and makes entry a seemingly easy process. This situation is exacerbated by the less clear entry points. Being hired by a company previously meant embarking on a career in television. However, nowadays entry is blurred, it is a process rather than a single event or a specific job. Entry is ‘latent’, unclear and conditional. It often results in lengthy and repeated attempts to secure jobs, many of which are unpaid, without having a clear demarcation point. The interviewees of the current
research were all already in the industry so by its very sample and design the study did not reach those failing to enter. However, it can be assumed that such unclear beginning of a career combined with an increased number of paths into the industry leads to a situation where attempts to enter may be both continuous and fruitless. The process can be long and often exploitative as the young people undertake unpaid work in the hope it will lead to a paid job. The lack of regulation and the limited power of the trade unions (which in past safeguarded against this) allows for such as situation. In the end, there is an intermediary zone between employment and attempts to secure one where a lot of young people find themselves. Importantly, the lack of clarity and the lack of regulation make that success determined by subjective criteria.

*Unpaid work with unclear prospects*

Many of the general characteristics of entry are manifested in work placements. Work placements can be regarded both as attempts to support entry and the way in which the above entry characteristics have been institutionalised. They are short-term and do not involve commitment, either to employment or to skills development. Many young people do them in the hope of an opportunity for real work, to be at a company or a set where a vacancy will come up. In this way junior people may have extended periods of unpaid work at the start of their career.

A situation like this puts many of the young people at a disadvantage and reinforces existing inequalities. The often long and unpaid periods of attempts to secure employment can only be sustained by those with sufficient financial resources. The long working days most of them work to prove themselves naturally eliminate anyone with other
commitments besides work, such as family ones. Moreover, the need to actively display dedication and enthusiasm also puts at a disadvantage people whose personal characteristics do not respond to the industry norm of openness and continuous intensive display of ‘soft’ skills.

_entry jobs detached from long-term career_

The third feature brought about by the changed structure is the less clear connection between entry and the subsequent career or employment. Short-term contracts with no long-term attachment require individual responsibility, not only for finding the first job but also to continue the subsequent attempts which at some point will establish the young person working in television. As learning and acquiring credits depend on the early steps, they are significant for the future career. However, as there is no single point of entry, the first project or a first employment does not entail any of the long term career-related benefits which the previous generations had.

There is also the issue of pre-entry specialisation. Previously young people had the opportunity to try various jobs within a big organisation and choose the one which suited them best. Nowadays entrants to television are expected to know clearly what they would like to do, but this is a choice based on little knowledge. A paradox is apparent here where employers seek to recruit young people who have a clear view of their future career while they dislike the fact that the young people consider themselves to be producers or directors. There seems to be a combination of expectations from the past when becoming a professional was a longer process of catered development and the current situation when joining a company means contributing to the productions from the very beginning and
hence being trained for and focused on a specific job role. This paradox may be due to the fact that many of those who hire are the ones who have had organisational careers and still favour the institutional approach to entry and training. It is, however, a paradox rooted in the structural context. As many of the employers do not have designated training positions, they can only recruit for work on actual productions for which they need professionals. So the young people are compelled to present themselves as such in order to be involved in the industry. Companies are in a situation of increased market demands, defending their reputation, and their values do not correspond to the demands the new structures put on them. From the point of view of the young aspiring entrants, the external market conditions require them to be clear about the role they can fulfil. The knowledge and skills they have acquired under a degree further nurtures this attitude.

The entry to the labour market mirrors the social mechanisms by which the industry operates. While such functioning of the labour markets has proved successful elsewhere (Christopherson, 1996; Paul and Kleingartner, 1994), important differences obstruct its efficient and fair results in the UK television industry. Unlike the US industry where trade unions still splay an important role, the lack of strong institutional basis in the UK television sector creates room for opportunistic behaviour which has a negative effect on labour markets (Marsden, 1999).

The educational provision and lack of entry restrictions combined with the abundant supply of eager candidates result in a situation similar to monopsony in secondary labour markets, discussed by Card and Kruger (cited in Marsden, 1999:231-232) in relation to low-skilled labour markets. It gives power to employers to define the employment obligations. Moreover, the current labour market in television does not have the formal
skill indicators of occupational labour markets and so entrants are inevitably positioned at the lowest levels of expertise. From a labour market perspective, the combination of little pre-entry skills recognition, abundant labour supply and unregulated entry result in a labour market of mixed type, with a weak institutional base, in which employers have significant power over potential employees. At the same time, the small companies also do not have much power and cannot successfully exert influence in the market and protect their own interests.

The desirability of television careers and the nature of the creative labour as one with high levels of intrinsic rewards (Smith and McKinlay, 2009a) may therefore lead to self-commodification of the workers not only within the industry (Ursell, 2000) but also in the intermediate zone of repeated attempts to break in. This zone, for which the term ‘latent entry’ is proposed here, also turns into a zone of potential exploitation and free labour (Paterson, 2001; Percival, 2005; Randle et al., 2008). This, in turn, perpetuates and reproduces a number of social disadvantages such as class and ethnic origin (Holgate, 2006; Randle et al., 2008).

Some of the issues identified in the literature on communities of practices are also helpful in discussing this situation: the power relations (Contu and Willmott, 2003) and the tension between old-timers and newcomers in the process of community reproduction (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Situating the community within the wider institutional context contributes to the understanding of some of these power inequalities and tensions. They are also historically formed, representing the ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1977; Swartz, 1998) of this community. The externally imposed changes did not change the logic of entry. Entrants cannot depend on educational qualifications to enter the labour market but have to do it
through socially mediated paths. However, the new context exposed some of these mechanisms to lack of formal regulations and this resulted in blurring the boundaries between work and non-work, between entry and non-entry and between career prospects and lack of such. This can be a confusing factor for both employers and aspiring entrants, but in practice mainly results in greater disadvantage for the latter.

**Research question two: How are skills acquired in a fragmented industry such as television?**

Learning and skills development in television has traditionally been community-based. People have and still learn on-the-job, by participating in the social practice by observing, asking questions and being involved in actual work. The theoretical perspective adopted here to discuss such skills development is the concept of legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2005). The main claim is that the model has been undermined by the different institutional context which introduced commercial pressures and fragmentation.

The changed situation, as the data suggests, brought about some important differences to the model described by Lave and Wenger (1991; Wenger, 2005). The main one is the lack of stability and continuity in the communities of practice. The de-regulated industry structure fragmented and dispersed the once dense and closed community. Previously novices had more structured support and their more comprehensive exposure to practice contributed to better informed career choices. The situated learning approach presumes the existence of such stable environment (Contu and Willmott, 2003) and the incoherence and fragmentation of the current environment creates an inherent contradiction.
Communities of practice are characterised by tension between newcomers and old-timers (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The moves of the newcomers who are potentially displacing the old-timers and are therefore sources of this tension, have become increasingly unpredictable and unregulated in the current fragmented context. As hierarchies became detached from the time and skills basis, seniority becomes a fluid concept (Sennett, 1998). As a result, the displacement associated with the community reproduction suffers from additional tension rooted in uncertainty.

The current professional environment can be considered transitional as the values and expectations associated with the previous lengthy and comprehensive skills development still exist but within the new reality of fragmented, commercialised and limited learning. This inherent contradiction is further complicated by the new technology which can be mastered in a shorter period of time (Langham, 1996). This makes progress from job position to job position easier, especially in the unregulated freelance labour market. There is a broken process of reproduction, and a need for it to be addressed in a different way which is yet unresolved. The changes were externally-driven and so the established practices and social reproduction mechanisms have still not been adjusted or developed. This creates contradictions between the expectations of the old-timers and the needs of the newcomers in the current labour market. The progression structures are blurred, which is based on the lack of skill recognition mechanisms. By contrast, occupational labour market theory postulates that in such environment novices will have a disincentive to train (Marsden, 1999), which is not the case. Work in television and other creative industries has a high degree of intrinsic value attached to it (Smith and McKinlay, 2009a) and therefore such dependency is broken. Despite the lack of stringent seniority rules and structures to
support and enforce them, newcomers do engage in learning and skills development as a prerequisite for their aspired careers. The above also depends on the specialism and genre in which freelancers work. This adds to the complexity of the labour market situation.

A major factor influencing the skills reproduction is the widespread learning through media degrees. The traditionally apprenticeship-like, internally developed skills are now located outside of the community of practice. This creates a tension with the need for socially-embedded skills and knowledge, coherent, comprehensive participation and the knowledge within the community of the levels of individual expertise. In this context, the latent entry phase can be interpreted as a remedial mechanism: newcomers compensate the ‘detached’ character of their knowledge by self-sustained and fragmented participation.

There are however important contrasts with the theory of learning within a community of practice: it is not necessarily peripheral (due to the commercial pressures) or legitimate. The only possible form of being a member of the community is to participate in practice, but as traineeships and apprenticeship-like positions are not common anymore, young people fluctuate in and out collecting the experience, skills and social initiation in an erratic way. The result of this can only be mixed as it is not based on the continuous basis necessary for learning in a socially situated way.

Lack of legitimate and peripheral participants in the ‘traditional’ form can also be discussed in the light of the occupational labour market assumption about on-the-job development. As labour market theory asserts, such skills are essential in occupational labour markets and yet, their development is problematic as employers are afraid of losing their investment in training when workers move to other firms. This problem is particularly acute during the period of traineeship when the costs are high because of the lack of
experience of the trainee and the need for supervision. It is only towards the end of the apprenticeship that employers start to benefit from the process (Marsden, 1999). An assumption of this institutional arrangement is first of all, that there are legitimate traineeships and secondly, that they last long enough for the employers to have an economic interest in training people on-the-job. In the current labour market situation none of this is readily available.

The findings of the current research resonate with Lampel and Shamsie’s (2003) concern for the hurdles to tacit skills development which resulted from the physical separation of community members in Hollywood after the break of the studio system. Moreover, the new fractured community and the commercial pressures it is subjected to, has put the mentoring model under considerable pressure. This creates potential risks not only for the tacit skills development, but to the skills development generally, because it challenges the valued and established models of skills reproduction.

Another effect of learning in such fractured community, also related to the nature of the work, is the lack of clear competence standards. Self-teaching, partial learning and occasional mentoring – all methods through which skills were acquired – resulted in uncertainty for both companies and individuals. The first mitigated the risks through credits and social guarantees, the latter used training courses to reassure themselves of the level and correctness of their knowledge and practices.

The television industry values soft and social skills. It is said to be a ‘people-centred’ industry and the emphasis is on the way people behave, interact and communicate. The respondents from areas which require higher level of technical competencies (such as camera, sound and editing) almost universally claimed that such skills are presumed and
what really mattered were the personal aspects of one’s professional competence. This is related mainly to the nature of the work and the creative labour process (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Langham, 1996; Smith and McKinlay, 2009a). However, it also connects with the new deregulated labour market structures and there is a potential danger in this tendency to focus almost solely on soft skills. It becomes almost a truism that because technical skills are now easy to master it is personality that matters the most. However, technical competence is not less important. It may indeed be easier to master but many of the technological advances are not comparable with each other, e.g. the different generations of cameras, for example, can create aesthetically different pictures. Secondly, technical skills are closely related to the other valuable abilities mentioned by respondents such as the ability to shoot an editable shot or to know how to film or edit a sequence which can tell the story. The danger with the rhetorical emphasis on soft skills is that it permeates the established norms and suggests to young professionals an often misleading notion.

Much of the learning in the industry is on-the-job but jobs are sporadic and random. People only learn what they happen to be involved in and there is lack of breadth of experience which would enable professionals to be versatile and develop in the long term. The commercial pressures further fragment their knowledge, not only because of the looser communities but also because both junior and senior people are usually not hired for the whole project. Therefore they only see and participate in a part of it. As a result, the opportunities to acquire a wider range of skills useful both for their further role development but also for in-depth understanding of the processes are reduced.

Another point to make is that those whom the novices are supposed to learn from are increasingly also people with variable skills as they may have learnt their jobs in the same
fragmented and random fashion. In addition, the novices have to have the proactive personality, the ‘right’ attitude and often the ability to ‘serve’ their own learning needs by asking the right questions. Another complication is the lack of dedicated time for teaching and learning incorporated in the process and so it requires sacrifice from both sides, even if there is a good will.

The industry seems to increasingly value individuals possessing a range of skills rather than the proficiency, which is apparent in the process of job convergence. The source of this is the commercial pressures, the necessity to make programmes with tight budgets. The result may be an implicit disincentive to specialise.

The above issues suggest that the externally introduced change to the industry undermined the skills development and learning within it. It disconnected the knowledge from its practice-based and socially-embedded nature and introduced a new necessary ‘phase’ of post-educational learning and socialisation. It also fragmented the community and the comprehensive character of learning. At the same time, the change being externally imposed did not correspond to the ‘traditional’ attitudes and values rooted in the nature of the creative work. Skills development and learning became a responsibility of the novices, which undermined the traditional model based on security, lengthy exposure, variability of projects and dedicated mentoring. Currently learning is detached from practice but, because learning through practice is essential, an intermediary space of quasi-employment is created where skills development on-the-job is often sustained by additional financial resources. This brings disadvantage to those who cannot afford to work without pay and breeds resentment in those who consider themselves trained sufficiently to be industry professionals. In addition, the lack of clear regulations allows for many random or
exceptional stories which create further confusion, nurture hopes and renew attempts for entry of the novices.

**Research question three: What are the realities of work in independent production companies in a local labour market?**

The insights into the work of a small regional production company raised a number of issues. The precarious existence of such a business did not enable it to provide the breadth and security of employment necessary for professional development like that provided by the big broadcasters. The sense of mission and good will to help novices was restrained by the limits of the company’s operations and immediate commercial needs. The expert labour, brought in on a freelance basis, could not act as mentor to the junior staff members. There was appreciation and support for people taking initiative and working on their own ideas through, for example, lending equipment. However, there was neither structure nor guidance provided. The level of operations of the senior company managers was detached considerably from the basic direction the young people needed. Moreover, management was concerned with day to day business operations and many of the tasks novices were required to perform were related to running the business rather than to working on television productions. The young people however aspired to being a part of a creative process and there was tension between their desires and the provision the company could make for them.

The junior employees were not subjected to the exploitation of young people as discussed in the literature (Percival, 2005; Randle et al., 2008; Ursell, 2000). Nevertheless, they were unsatisfied. Having studied media-related subjects they expected to embark on a more
interesting and a better paid job. They also expected to work alongside professionals and they both enjoyed and valued the sporadic interactions they had with freelancers. This could be the common disillusionment of the transition from school to work, however, in this particular setting, an additional factor requires attention. The most likely career prospects of the novices would be in the freelance labour market. As a result, their stay with the company is pre-set as finite and hence their attitude is instrumental. The management expected the commitment and ‘humility’ of the old days but the novices knew they had no lifetime career with a company. This structural contradiction dictated new priorities contrasting with the old values and perceptions.

Another issue which requires attention is the one of the hopes and expectations built in the system. An aspect of the dissatisfaction of the young people was rooted in their (mis)perception of their own skills. This may be due to the learning detached from practice, discussed above, which disconnects them from the actual measure for competence. It may also be that, once they did not find themselves being subjected to the exploitation the university professors led them to expect, they gained the confidence to demanding full professional status. The fact that their opportunities to actually see experts’ work were limited also contributed to this perception. And also, importantly, most of the jobs they performed were not legitimate learning positions, but actual production work which they were expected to do competently.

**Contributions**

To summarise, this thesis has contributed to the existing body of knowledge in four main ways. Firstly, it enriched the analysis of learning and skills development in television by
focusing explicitly on its mechanisms and associated problems. Secondly, it made a theoretical contribution to the concepts of communities of practice by presenting and discussing a fractured community in transition. In doing so it highlighted the dangers and inefficiencies resulting from fragmentation. Thirdly, it presented and discussed a case of a small independent production company. This analysis is insightful in terms of understanding the contradictions and tensions that entry through and learning in such environment brings to future industry professionals. There is no similar case study in the literature to date although small independent production companies constitute the majority of the independent television sector. Fourthly, the thesis introduced a regional dimension to discussions of the television sector, adding data and analysis of a regional network of companies.

Issues which further research may address are the increased convergence of job roles and their implications for learning and skills. The understanding of the industry would also benefit from a longitudinal study or by a repeat study in the same region. This will be particularly necessary given the recent changes in the role and scales of operations of regional broadcasters. The impact this had on small companies as well as the regional talent pool is an issue of sustained interest. Comparison with other regions could also bring valuable insights.

Engaging with a specific group of freelance workers, the research made a few important methodological contributions. Firstly, it made extensive use of telephone interviews, which proved to be a successful tool for collecting data from such a highly mobile and dispersed respondent group. The process was considerably facilitated by the characteristics of the interviewees and in particular by their pre-interview awareness and analysis of their
employment. As freelancers, this awareness had been developed during their social interactions as the features of their employment and learning had been issues they had to confront. Hence they were already familiar with the problems discussed and they had reflected on their implications. Moreover, the group was accustomed to work-related telephone interviews. All these factors jointly supported the fruitful application of this method.

The issue of access also requires reflection. Television is an industry where a large number of young people are proactively seeking work with companies including unpaid work. A researcher seeking access is perceived as one of the aspiring entrants which disempowers him/her by association. The difficulties of entry for research are very much like the difficulties of entry for work. And so the researcher is compelled to experience personally this aspect of the labour market realities. A successful approach would require the use of personal recommendations, e.g. alignment with industry practice.

**Policy recommendations**

The sector and the types of questions asked within the present thesis revealed a number of points which can be informative for policymakers. Creative industries have been considered as the model for future knowledge-oriented and project-based employment (Blair and Rainnie, 2000). Hence research-based insights which draw on a solid empirical basis can be helpful in unveiling some issues from which policymaking can benefit. In considering those it is important to note the characteristic of the television industry as a much desired occupation with high levels of intrinsic benefits attached to it.
Firstly, the industry actors can benefit from enacting entry rules or regulations. Unregulated access gives prominence to informal social mechanisms. This leads to confusion both for employers and potential employees and makes it difficult to judge skills levels. Besides, novices are being judged alongside established professionals, which puts them at a further disadvantage. Social mechanisms alone can also be exclusive and reproduce social inequalities. The current situation also does not send out clear signals of entry and can result in prolonged self-subsidised attempts to entry with no guarantees of success. The availability of such large numbers of aspiring entrants willing to work for free is attractive to employers and hence they are likely to use them. This has implications not only for employment conditions but also for learning and skills development. It reduces the skills base of those working in the industry and creates a false conception of expertise.

Secondly, the industry needs reliable indicators of skills to the benefit of both entrants and employers. Formal qualifications have little standing, especially among employers. The abundance of media-related degrees has exacerbated the issue. There has been a recent attempt to create the so called ‘Film Academies’: educational centres of excellence for the film industry and they are being followed by ‘Media Academies’. The effect of these initiatives is still to be evaluated, but their success lies mainly with the ways in which employers perceive them and the recruitment strategies they adopt in response. The present research demonstrated that the industry professionals still highly value the in-house practice-based education and skills. It may therefore be pertinent to explore the possibility of subsidising some of the BBC or ITV training functions and orient them towards training for the industry more generally. The skills and expertise available within these organisations are still highly regarded and considered leading. Using such organisations as
a training provider for the wider labour market and industry and not just for their in-house needs, can therefore provide a more acceptable and recognised within the community standard of skills learning.

Thirdly, support or subsidies for specific projects within the regions may be a successful complementary means of using the actual programme-making for renewing the skills base of the industry and thus not break from the traditional industry mechanisms but adapt them to the current institutional environment. These projects may be a part of the regional quotas and requirements on the team compositions oriented towards training. Two further points should be made in this respect. There would be a danger in transforming these into ‘surrogate labour markets’ (Lee et al., 1990) and so regulations should explicitly aim at mitigating against displacement mechanisms. Also, the length and nature of such projects should be motivated by the needs of the learning process they are supposed to facilitate and not by the targeted output.

Fourthly, support is needed for professional bodies so they can successfully enforce industry standards. A good example encountered during the present study was the Production Management Association which had managed to establish simple membership rules and enforce them as the standard in production management. The members benefitted in many ways, including the use of the association website as a source of reliable professionals.

An overarching concern for all these recommendations would be the support for quality all-round skills development. In an industry like television, as highlighted throughout the thesis, high level of skills denote high levels of tacit skills and these can only be acquired through experience. The implication of this is that any successful system for skills
development would need to combine both involvement in real production and long exposure. Hence, fragmenting labour market and production structures is potentially contradicting the very logic of learning presumed by the nature of creative labour. There should be an embedded inefficiency in the process. Hence commercial pressures should be removed as far as possible from the areas of learning and skills development should any policy interventions aspire to producing quality sustainable and generally appreciated results.
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APPENDIX ONE: INTERVIEWS SCHEDULES

FREELANCERS

[University Research]

[Data anonymised]

[Output: academic articles]

[Can I record?]  
[You can ask me to stop at any time]

**Background**

How did you enter the industry?

What was your first job?

How did you find your second job?

For how long were you working as a [~]?

How did you move forward?

Do you have any formal qualifications?

**Labour market**

How do you find out about new jobs?

[How many projects do you do at a time?]
Have you had to refuse a job and why did you do it?

**Working conditions**

What percentage of the time are you working approximately?

Do you do work outside the industry?

How are the pay rates determined?

Have you worked for free?

**Skills**

What are the most important skills that you have?

How did you learn them?

Do personal qualities matter and if yes which ones? Why?

How can you say if someone is good at their work?

[How do you judge other people’s work]

Have you ever worked with really difficult people? Tell me about it. [not contributors]

**Networks**

Do you belong to any formal networks?

Are there groups of people with whom you work regularly?

[if yes: Why? How did you start working with them?]

**Reputation**

How important is the reputation?
Appendix One

[Why? How does it matter?]

How do you build your reputation?

How can one lose it?

How do you find out about someone’s reputation?

What about company reputation?

[Do companies also build reputation?]

[What is important for you in your relations with the companies]

What are the most formative or influential projects you have participated in?

[in terms of meeting people, learning skills, building up reputation?]

Is it beneficial for someone like you to take time off work?

How do you balance your personal and professional life?

Have you helped people get into the industry?

Exit

What is the next step (in your work/career) you’re hoping to make?

How can you do it? (what are the preconditions for it)

How do you see yourself in your 40s/50s?

Do you think you’ll be working in television?
In what capacity?

Why?

Do you know people who’ve done it?

What other options do you think you’d have?

*For camera and sound*

Do you have an assistant?

[elaborate on pro-s, cons, opinions]

Do you have to record the sound yourself (for cameramen)

[Access]

[Further contacts]
TRADE UNIONS

Size of organization (e.g. how many members)

Members’ profile

Why do professionals join the union?

[follow answers]

Members’ qualifications

Training within the industry

Entry within the industry

How do people move from project to project?

Are most of the people making their living on their work within television?

[follow answers: what do they do, what percentage of time they are out of the industry; what else do they work; why do they stay]

When they are out of work: how do they keep up to date with the technology? (training?)

In what cases members use the organisation?

[follow answers]

[Any secondary data on the industry]

[Further contacts]
PRODUCTION COMPANIES

Themes

Finding people

Finding work

Skills: acquisition // assessment: skilled/unskilled//

Employment patterns

Entry

Career paths

Role of reputation

Terms and conditions (pay rates, finding work, working hours)

Trade Unions

Creativity

Questions

How can one start working for your company?

- on a permanent basis

- on a free-lanced basis

If there is a vacancy/a position, how is it usually filled?

What are the issues around finding work?

What skills are the most difficult to find?
Role of qualifications// training//

Role of recommendations// portfolio// reputation

How do people keep up with the changing technology?

How do people enter the industry?

How do people move from one job to another:

- upwards

- from one project/company to another

Have you hired somebody whom you did not know? [follow answers]

How long does it take for the people to learn what they are doing?

How are they usually learning it?

What skills are most difficult to find?

Are there typical career paths in the industry?

What is the balance between the soft and technical skills?

How are ideas generated?

When a function or a (part of a) production is outsourced, how is the quality of it ensured?

How can we tell if someone is skilled?

Is there a link/ how do/ building working relations influence creativity?

OR

What are the most important factors which have an impact on the creativity in the process?
How are the pay rates determined?

How do people gain/lose reputation?

Location of projects // travelling

Family/friends relations (in connection with the above)

Do people usually work together from one project to another?

[What part of the time are they working on average?]

[What are they doing in the periods between projects?]

Are the staff employed members of Trade Unions?

[Access]

[Further contacts]
SCREEN AGENCIES

Themes

Training, skills acquisition/development/update within the industry

Career paths (including entry and role of reputation)

Terms and conditions (pay rates, finding work, working hours)

Creativity

Questions

What are the main activities of [your agency]?

(what is their role in the industry; links with Indies and with other bodies)

What training courses do you provide?

(subject and length of courses; skills levels required for attendance; who pays)

What type of people attend your courses?

(follow in order to understand the profile(s))

How do you identify the training areas?

Which skills are most difficult to find on the market at present?

Tell me more about the types of people working in that industry?

How do people usually enter the industry?

What qualifications or skills do they have to have prior to entering?

How do people progress in their careers following the initial employment?
How do they find work subsequently?

Is it common for the people to change their specialisation, to move from one position to another?

Are there typical career paths in the industry? What are they?

What would be the usual length of employment under a project?

What, in your opinion, are the main factors as regards creativity within the industry?

(building long-term relationships; cost cutting pressures; insecurity; uncertainty; nature of competition…)

How do people gain/lose a reputation?

How are the pay rates determined?

What would you say are the main benefits and the main drawbacks of working freelance in television?

(What are the main challenges freelancers face?)

[Access]

[Further contacts]

[Useful documents]
SKILLSET

Skillset as an organisation

Tell us about the main role Skillset plays in the industry in the region?

What services do you provide?

Whom do you work with?

Do you work with independent production companies?

Do you work directly with freelancers?

Skills and qualifications generally

What are the most important skills in the industry?

What are the skills shortages?

Are formal qualifications and/or degrees important?

How important are communication skills, interpersonal skills in the industry?

Are technical skills or soft skills more important for one to progress in the industry?

Can you give me examples?

How important are contacts and networking in the industry?

Why is it so, in your opinion?

How important are they in comparison with skills: more, less, equally?

Entry and job progression

What kind of people work in the industry?
What are the typical entry paths?

At what levels do people usually enter the industry?

How do people find out about job vacancies?

**Careers**

What are the crucial career stages in the development of (a cameraman)?

How do people make the transition from one stage to another? What are the prerequisites for this?

What do people do at the late stages in their careers? Do they leave the industry or take different roles? What?

**Reputation**

How do people gain reputation?

How is reputation important in one’s career in the industry?

How do people lose reputation?

How can one find out about someone’s reputation?

**Skills and policy**

Are skills such as communication skills, interpersonal skills incorporated in the industry skills development agenda? (yes/no: Why?)

What are the main challenges which the industry skills development faces in your region (the North)?
[Access]

[Further contacts]

[Useful documents]
REGIONAL BROADCASTERS

Themes

Types of employment patterns in the organisation

Skills acquisition, skills development and skills update within the industry

Career paths (including entry and role of reputation)

Terms and conditions (pay rates, finding work, working hours)

Trade Unions

Creativity

Questions

What types of employees does your organisation have?

How can one start working for your organisation?

- on a permanent basis

- on a freelance basis

What are the issues around finding people?

If there is a vacancy/a position, how is it usually filled?

What skills are most difficult to find?

Role of qualifications// training

Role of recommendations// portfolio// reputation

How do people acquire skills?
Appendix One

How long does it take for the people to learn what they are doing?

How are they usually learning it?

How do people keep up with the changing technology?

How do people enter the industry?

What, in your opinion, are the main stimulators and the main hurdles freelancers face as regards creativity within the industry?

(building long-term relationships; cost cutting pressures; insecurity; uncertainty; nature of competition…)

How do people gain a reputation?

How are the pay rates determined?

What are the issues freelancers face in finding work?

Do people often perform multiple roles at work?

What would be the usual length of employment under a project?

What are the typical career paths in the industry?

How are ideas generated?

When a function or a (part of a) production is outsourced, how is the quality of it ensured?

Are trade unions recognised? Scale of membership in your organisation

Why?

[Access]

[Further contacts]
**APPENDIX TWO: RESPONDENT NUMBERS BY CATEGORY**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS</th>
<th>71</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER OF FREELANCER’S</th>
<th>43</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondents from the case study working at the company</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDUSTRY RESPONDENTS</th>
<th>27</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>of which companies (all)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONDENTS FROM BMES</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company owners</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Camera | 6 |
| Sound  | 4 |
| Production (production manager, assistant) | 14 |
| Creative/editorial (Researcher, director, producer) | 22 |
| Location mangers | 2 |
| Costume and make-up | 1 |
| Editors | 5 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE (freelancers only)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20s</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* numbers may not add up as in a few cases there is an overlap between the different roles, i.e. a company owner is also an editor
APPENDIX THREE: PROJECT LEAFLET

OUR PROJECT

This research project focuses on skills and organisation structure. It explores the way that both technical knowledge, and soft or generic skills are used and developed within complex occupational environments and specific organisational forms such as TV and film productions. The researchers will study the skills development in the TV and film industry: the ways in which different types of skills are developed and employed in the work process.

FIELDWORK

The project will take the form of a number of detailed case studies. The researchers would hope to be able to observe the work within an organization or a project. We would also like to conduct interviews with different categories of film and TV professionals.

THE RESEARCH TEAM

Prof. Irena Grugulis, Head of the Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour Group at Bradford University School of Management. Prof. Grugulis is an Associate Fellow of SKOPE: an ESRC research Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Performance at the Universities of Oxford and Warwick. Prof. Grugulis has published extensively on the area of human resource management and is currently writing and editing work on skills and human resource management.

Ms Dimi Stoyanova, Research Assistant at Bradford University School of Management. Dimi has extensive experience working under EU funded projects and is currently a Doctoral Researcher at HRM/OB Group at Bradford School of Management.

CONTACT

We would be happy to provide any further information or to discuss further any practical or theoretical aspects of the project. You can contact us at:

Bradford University School of Management
Emm Lane, Bradford BD9 4JL
D.Stoyanova@Badford.ac.uk
Tel. 01274 23 4367 or 4346
Dimi Stoyanova
## APPENDIX FOUR: PEOPLE IN THE CASE STUDY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>POSITION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Managing Director of ‘ColourTV’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>General Manager of ‘ColourTV’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Development Producer for ‘Colour TV’ and Executive Producer of ‘ScienceDoc’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Development Researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>Junior Editor at ‘ColourTV’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Researcher at ‘ColourTV’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britney</td>
<td>Production assistant/ Researcher at ‘ColourTV’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brianna</td>
<td>Accountant at ‘ColourTV’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigit</td>
<td>Personal Assistant to Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>News Producer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Producer-director of ‘ScienceDoc’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Researcher/Associate Producer of ‘ScienceDoc’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugh</td>
<td>Principal Cameraman of ‘ScienceDoc’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>