Production Culture and the Creative Industries:
Social Mobility and Documentary Camerawork

Throughout this article we will explore how changes and trends in the creative industries shape the lives of those currently working and pursuing a career within it. We will examine barriers to entry in the form of social mobility, calling on the works of academics, industry professionals and publications to form a rounded analysis of the subject.

Firstly we will take a wider look at the factors shaping the broadcast industry in general, from social and humanistic factors to the latest technological development. This century has not only seen the digitalisation processes flourish but also witnessed a reforming of how the ‘labour market’ is defined and valued. Apart from the effects of the democratisation of technological equipment on the creative sector there is also globalisation and government policy to consider. This article will explore how these structures impact on the working lives and output of below-the-line broadcast media practitioners with a particular focus on documentary cameramen.

The broadcast industry on the whole is seen as a ‘glamour profession’; subsequently various creative roles are highly competitive and those looking for work will inevitably face challenges breaking into the industry. New entrants with existing connections and a support network will find them indispensable. This raises concerns over diversity and social mobility, with the financially secure in an advantageous position.

Ross Perlon details how a third of all workers in the western world are ‘contingent’ workers, with the so-called glamour professions amongst the worst for low wages and restricted social mobility. (Perlon, 2012). Comparisons can also be drawn between demands on personal investment, fulfilment and obligation of many creative workers to that of Pro-Am activities. Leadbeater & Miller article on the ‘Pro-Am Revolution’ details the effect that amateur professionals are having on industry has a whole, with ‘the relationship between amateurs and professionals […] becoming more fluid and dynamic.’ (Leadbeater, Miller, 2004: 23). Again it is evident that a majority of those
who take part in many Pro–AM activities come from wealthier backgrounds. However, we must be careful not to detail obstacles that seem insurmountable but give an honest assessment, as the dedicated and resilient can get a foothold in the creative industries.

Social and cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘forms of capital’ offers a model in which to look at barriers to social mobility. Rather than looking directly at an individual financial status he explores inner resources and how these resources can be applied in the immediate and wider society. Bourdieu call this ‘cultural capital’ and it is ‘acquired in the systematic cultivation of a sensibility in which principles of selection implicit within an environment translate, into physical and cognitive propensities expressed in dispositions to acts of particular kinds’. (Bourdieu in Archer, 2007).

Both (Caldwell, 2008) and (McRobbie, 2002) use the term ‘reflexivity’ when exploring working lives in the creative industries, with McRobbie arguing that depending on your personal makeup, a great deal of ‘reflexivity’ will be required as a creative worker. Therefore, we will explore the terms a little further. Archer introduces three forms of ‘reflexivity’; communicative, autonomous and meta, all of which everybody will use to some degree although displaying tendencies towards one or the other. Communicative reflexives ‘complete their thoughts about themselves in relation to their circumstances by talking them through with other people’ and this can hinder social immobility, whilst autonomous reflexives have ‘internal conversations’ and this can lead to upward social movement, with meta reflexives questioning and answering their inner conversations, bring potential social volatility. (Archer, 2007:158-229).

With the majority of successful freelancers vocal about their success it could be argued that the process of ‘reflexivity’ in itself becomes self-fulfilling, not only for individuals but also within the creative industries themselves. ‘Industry has never been shy about underscoring the craft expertise behind the illusions and emotional experience that everyone experiences.’ (Caldwell, 2008: 284). Nevertheless, the reality for some creative workers once the glamour is removed leaves little more than
a desk jobs, with high amounts of personal investment. Therefore, it could then be argued that personal investment in ‘cultural capital’ and an understanding of individual modes of ‘reflexivity’ will improve chances of social mobility in the creative industries, with the ‘glamour industries’ perpetuating their own aura. The isolated and self-managing nature suiting those of an autonomous nature, ‘people as individuals become solely responsible and uniquely accountable for running their own lives’. (Deuze, 2007:85).

Conversely, for those who are successful and enjoying working freelance there are opportunities of great fulfilment and a comfortable wage. ‘It could be suggested that there is a utopian thread embedded in this wholehearted attempt to make-over the world of work into something closer to a life of enthusiasm and enjoyment.’ (McRobbie, 2002:4-5). However, this human relations movement has moved disenchanted and disconnected workers to a form of self-exploitation, where the promise of autonomy, job satisfaction and flexible work hours is traded against low pay, long hours and dispensability. (Ross, 2010). The flood of untethered creative workers has generated a race to the bottom in some below-the-line creative roles. The creation of a cheap to free labour market that in itself has become saturated, offering no guarantee of paid work or opportunities going forward.

In certain professions, the ‘tendency to recruit from within limited cultural circles can result in the exclusion of workers outside of particular social networks’, changing their complexion. ‘(Holgate.(ed), 2007:9). Alarmingly, this nepotism is also evident in larger organisations with ‘freelancers and contractors [reporting] similar themes-including not feeling there was a fair and open process for getting work at the BBC.’ (Stage Screen & Radio, 2015: 5). New creative workers therefore, must then find a balance not only in creating networks and finding employment but also maintaining home lives and livings.

(Anderson, 2010) offers theories and models from the digital economy that new and established freelancers can look towards for guidance. Firstly, Anderson uses the term ‘commodity good’ to describe similar products made by many, leading to competition. Using this term to look at creative sector roles, we can see that there are
similarities with many individuals offering the same service thus creating high competition. An individual working freelance consequently needs to stand out and offer something a little different to their competitors. Anderson argues that the ‘freemium’ model is proving to be a successful mode of pricing in the digital marketplace. A freelancer offering a creative service can then apply the ‘freemium’ model to their approach to working for free or low pay ‘working for free [to] give you a new network’, open doors and create connections. (Wigram, presentation 2015).

Once clients or contacts have been created, keeping them in good order to further a career will be important. This can prove difficult even for established freelancers. Setting a rate for your service can also be a complicated task that is constantly under review, ‘if you're turning down work you can increase your pay rate’ (Wigram, presentation 2015). In a competitive market your ability and willingness to go the extra mile will be key, and working hard relationships is part and parcel of this. However, finding a balance can be hard especially between above and below-the-line workers. ‘What we have in the television industry is people dictating to us what they think we should charge.’ (Young, interview 2015).

When agreeing to a project, many freelancers need to take into account what their bank account currently looks like. Balancing ‘the competing demands of creativity versus commerce, of producing content versus exploring opportunities […] values and ideas that combined would constitute one’s professional identity as a media worker.’ (Deuze, 2007:84-85). Not all projects you work on will be an enjoyable experience but they might lead to something exciting or fulfilling down the line. The nature of working freelance means that people in various roles regularly move on to new projects, hence the need to become a great networker in both industry and social events. ‘The point is that it’s varying degrees of enthusiasm but coupled with 100% professional competence’ at all times. ‘Wow, I’m getting paid to do this, this is brilliant doesn’t necessarily apply anymore to every job.’ (Young, interview 2015).

Surprisingly in many cases, the lower paying jobs can also correlate with personally poor treatment, ‘the less people pay you the worst they treat you.’ (Wigram, presentation 2015). Young would also add to the argument that jobs advertised on social media are ‘usually poorly paid or have some issue behind them.’ (Young,
interview 2015). However ‘social media has become very important in creating new networks’ and ‘being in the right place whether virtual or physical’ is vital when finding work and creating contacts. (Hamilton Brown, presentation 2015). Therefore, weighing-up what you are gaining from working for free is an important skill.

A ‘successful freelancer’ can mean totally different things to different people; financial gain, personal fulfilment and status holding different levels of importance. Young believes, as a documentary cameraman if you charge a premium you had better be ‘damn good’ and “be professional at all times because […] you’re charging a premium for that service; you have a responsibility for that premium.’ (Young, interview 2015). This indicates not only pride in his camerawork but also the rate, which he can secure.

Within cameramen guilds and forums, awards are given and peers and technology are showcased in a number of industry magazines ‘In Focus’ and ‘Zebra’ being two examples. The subject of ‘undercutting’ and camerawork standard stir strong opinions amongst established professionals. ‘The problems is if they get one person for £150 they will try and get another person for £150 and it becomes self-fulfilling.’ For some, the market of technicians for hire has shrunk resulting in a lack of technical camera training that would have previously been delivered through ‘centres of excellent in wide ranging BBC and ITV schemes’. This has meant those wanting to break into the industry as a cameraman must ‘make all the running themselves’. (Young, interview 2015). For some this constant networking and personal investment can feel like an obligation and a necessity, which detracts from the enjoyment of the job but others ‘[…] report being absorbed in their activities, which yield intense experiences of creativity and self-expression.’ (Leadbeater, Miller, 2004: 21).

There will be many pressures that effect you’re working life and the willingness to travel to where the jobs or the creative talent is just one. ‘London is the hub of the UK’s audio visual industries with a quarter of all AV companies based in the capital…’ (Holgate, 2007:12). The role will most likely take over many other aspects of your life and give rise to a number of important lifestyle decisions. Your free time for family members and perusing hobbies will be constantly eaten into. However, this
is not limited to the early years as forming connections will be fundamental in the
hunt for possible jobs, as ‘most good jobs [come] through your networks because you
have a producer, director […] who’s used to hiring you.’ (Young, interview 2015).

There is a trend towards a preference of multi-skilled creative professionals and being
a specialist is seen as becoming generally uncommon, with ‘auteurs becoming
increasingly popular in recent productions’ and applying the creative vision of one
person has proven very successful. (Wigram, presentation 2015). ‘Granted there are
still fashion designers, architects, writers, artists, musicians and other creative
occupations, but being somebody known as a specialist rather than a multi-skilled
'creative' is becoming a thing of the past and a mark of being over 35.’ (McRobbie,
2002:9).

In relation to factual and documentary camerawork we can see the popularity in
Auteurs in the guise of 'shelf-shooters’ and ‘video journalists’. However, some parts
of the traditional industry find this multi-skilling hard to comprehend. Young would
also agree that what we are seeing is the rise of the ‘filmmaker’, an all-rounder that
has sufficient technical skills and equipment but is in some instances lacking an
understanding of television rules, history and tradition. (Young, interview 2015).
Additionally, Young would argue that having a specialism can get you hired over
others, ‘I have already got pre-existing hostile environment training, which means
they don’t have to spend £1500 retraining me’. Following on to detail how the BBC
natural history unit grew from the ‘parsimonious nature of the BBC’, they pick up on
Anthropologists and Zoologists filming animal behaviour and broadcast it. (Young,
interview 2015).

The competitive, freelance nature of camerawork means there is a flood of new
entrants willing to undercut established professionals, while producers with stretched
budgets are willing to take a risk, which opens up opportunities for new flexible
entrants on lower-end productions. ‘Think of yourself as having a toolbox of skills
that are transferable” (Hamilton Brown, presentation 2015). Nonetheless, high-end
productions will call for experienced and familiar hands that specialise in filming
certain subjects. In short we are witnessing a squeezing from top – to bottom for
‘below-the-line’ creative workers, facilitated by the democratization of equipment. Established professionals would draw comparisons when looking at organizations such as the BBC and the trials and challenges they have faced against lower budget competition. ‘In entertainment, leisure and daytime programming, the BBC was faced by a range of low budget rivals whose production values were rapidly becoming established as the norm.’ (Georgina, 2005: 73).

‘It is very clear that technology has an effect on commercial decisions. ‘Dramatic shifts in the dominant technologies of production and consumption are central to the economics of media creative industries.’ (Flew, 2012: 122). Exploring digitalisation and democratisation of camera equipment we can see that barriers to high quality imagery have lowered. ‘There has been quite a lot of democratisation in the lower end equipment.’ (Young, interview 2015). However, this is not without its drawbacks; the cut-price labour economy that is its default mode. The flourishing of self-publication and amateur content is fair to say has been a clear threat to the livelihoods of professional creative.’ (Ross, 2010 2).

However, broadcast equipment still holds a premium, which is still a substantial investment with little guarantee of work. Again it is obvious that an individual without sufficient capital would need some way of financing equipment. With the constant merry-go-round of cameras and formats, your investment only has a limited time to see a return. ‘Now if you buy a camera body on finance you need to have the balance paid out within two years.’ (Young, interview 2015). Andrew Ross gives two main thoughts to consider; the minority view that the digital realm deskills, out-sources and brings work derogation and the majority, ‘techno libertarian’ view, that technology is spreading knowledge and opportunities. (Ross: 2010).

We must also reflect on argument that some established creative workers will protect their profession and equally their income. ‘Some professionals will seek to defend their endangered monopoly. The more enlightened will understand that knowledge is widely distributed, not controlled in a few ivory towers.’ (Leadbeater & Miller: 2004:16). So, there can be a conflict between those established creative workers and new creative workers; those trying to get a foot in the door. Then admits this
confusing scene it could be argued that individuals who are fully autonomous with sufficient ‘cultural capital’ will be best placed to navigate their own path.

The lack of a strong union in the broadcast industry allows for strong and rapid personal progression, however it also contributes to competition and self-exploitation. Nevertheless, the unions are still active and BECTU has recently worked to bring about a pledge on factual TV working conditions.

The pledge not only includes matters such as enforcing legal minimums on working hours and issuing contracts on time, but also a commitment to the CDN Diversity Pledge, the PACT work experience pledge and a clause on bullying and harassment. (Stage Screen & Radio, 2015: 14).

The degree in which this pledge is upheld is open to debate, as the fragmented world of the freelancer means for many roles ‘there is no basic standard that can be enforced’. Young, interview 2015). The scarcity of job security leaves few practitioners who feel comfortable speaking out adding to the isolating environment of the freelance worker. This has given rise to social networking groups where discussions and advice can be had on issues such as low pay and late payment. ‘All kinds of water cooler, coffee machine type of moments you would have got in a crew room when your were staff in a large ITV or BBC operation.’ (Young, interview 2015). These groups can be found for nearly every creative role and can be a good source of information and support. However, they can be strongly opinionated and lacking in empathy of issues surrounding social mobility.

‘Cultural policy as we understand it today […], primarily took shape in the middle decades of the twentieth century’. (Flow, 2012: 159). Traditional media industry and the development of digital content now cause friction in regards to cultural policies leading to calls for ‘media’ to have its own classification. Media policy itself has shaped media in all its forms, with governments fighting to regulate in a battle to achieve agendas. The drive for change in media and cultural policies in the 21st century have many similarities to that of its birth, promoting national identity,
enabling public participation and encouraging innovation. However, the globalisation of the world economy, new technologies and political shifts now need to be addressed.

The digital content industries raise issues for policy makers, as the likes of Google and Facebook do not have to deal with the ‘quid pro quo’ relationship that traditional broadcasters have with government in return for contribution to cultural and social goals. (Flew, 2012: 159-173). The UK government’s most recent policies see globalisation as an opportunity to ‘secure increased economic benefits and cultural influence’. Although, this has the potential to damage domestic broadcast, as ‘in pursuing these objectives governments have embraced neo-liberal globalization, which loosens control over domestic media. (Freedman, 2008: 216). The heightening competition for audiences destroys creative base and shifts output in a crude commercial direction. The ethos of the Jackpot economy and the commercial mining of data are causing academics to examine what labour and enterprise is, in a digital workplace economy. (Ross, 2010).

In conclusion, understanding the inner-workings of the creative industries can prove to be an exacerbating experience. However, an insight of the structures and cultures that govern industry mechanisms and its practitioners can help furthering chosen career paths. An individual entertaining a career in the creative industries would be wise to formulate clear personal goals, which meet current and future lifestyle needs, as pursuing a career in the creative industries could be said to be not only a vocation but also a lifestyle choice. Social mobility within the creative industries is a continuing challenge with issue not dissimilar to other desirable career paths. Nevertheless, the creative industries are in a constant state of flux and enjoy a magnetic aura, which intensifies competition. The watchwords being, ‘adapted’ and ‘survive’.

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Jonathan Young: The question you were asking I would break into two parts. The pressure side in terms of the constant change in the industry constant state of flux. And the other part of the question was how do those changes affect me, as a cameraman. That basically the crux of what you want to talk about isn’t it?

Shaun Taylor: Yes and craft skills across the board

Jonathan Young: I would say in about… just short of twenty years ago about 1996 something started what cameramen of my generation would describe as the format wars. Up until that point there had only ever been one or two strong formats that held their own in a broadcast environment and most of the were made by Sony. Sony were the dominant players in the market. With very specific divisions manufacturing cameras for broadcast use and for consumer use. Very very distinct divisions. And there had always been a history of the broadcast division, not just Sony but all the major manufactures JVC, Panasonic, Ikegami. The broadcast cameras always held a premium, always and it was to do with the amount of research and development that goes into the cameras. Because the major broadcaster led by the BBC the EBU, they had very specific targets that the electronics in those cameras needed to meet.

Shaun Taylor: Yes, OK

Jonathan Young: BBC used to have things like acceptance testing in cameras, so they would have individual cameras come in and their engineers would actually go through them and say actually we don’t want that camera we only want that one. Acceptance
testing became a big thing and it meant cameras had to meet rigorous technical standards, so as part of that meeting of that standard there was a premium attached to those products. In the days when Sony ruled in terms of broadcast production equipment. First of all the days of U-matic, then Betacam and Betacam SP. These were premium products that were typically your one-piece camera body. That as a Betacam/ SP camera that dates back to the very late 80’s and the very early 90’s. You’re looking at about £30,000 for a one-piece camera body and recorder mechanism and a viewfinder.

Shaun Taylor	OK

Jonathan Young So, what happened for a period of about 12 years it was a case of you could buy one camera and it would cover all of your production requirements.

Shaun Taylor Yes, understand that.

Jonathan Young So, BETA Cam SP, using that as the example became the dominant featured format worldwide. That became the overarching format for everyone to use whether it was corporate, whether it was broadcast production. Even if the cameras didn’t have a recorder in, Say you were using it during a studio programme for instance. The recoding would still be made on a Betacam SP recorder. Obviously the cameras were cabled for the studio buildings to the NCR and recorded but still recorded on Betacam SP. So at some point Betacam SP was the default format for a good number of years.

In the mid 90’s the first generation of DigiBeta was introduced. Then you had Betacam SX and also DVcam these three other format running concurrently with Betacam SP.
Sony decided they were going to pigeon hole these formats, so DigiBeta was twice the price of Betacam SP when this all started. You were looking at £70,000 just for a camera body; this was an insane amount of money at the time. But they pigeon holed it saying this was for top end digital cinematography, this will be for top end documentary, even commercials. Then they had Betacam SX which they thought was going to be the replacement for Betacam SP and then they DVcam as what they describe as the education, corporate video format. I remember getting the literature from Sony describing these things. This was Sony’s view of the market; they thought they could dictate how the camera would be used and how people would use them. Rather than the consumer making a choice for themselves, saying actually I think that format suits me and my price point, I’m going to use it for that subject. Sony have always been very much oh why are you using that camera for that? You should be using this camera because you’re in broadcast therefore we should be charging you £30,000 for each camera. They still don’t quite understand the relationship still to this day of how their equipment is used by the end user.

Shaun Taylor

Yeah, alright I’m with you

Jonathan Young

They would claim that’s not the case anymore and it has got better, but it’s still not as good as it could be. So that’s Sony they bring out three more formats, very clearly define and pigeon hole them. This camera will be used for this type of work and Panasonic are the same; they brought out a format called DVCpro, which was an analogue format, a competing format to Beta SP but had the same characteristics as Betacam SX. They pitched it as a general day-to-day video broadcast format and news, so the format wars started. Up until this
point the broadcasters have very close aligned themselves with certain companies, Sony or Panasonic, mostly Sony.

Then with the number of freelancers coming on-board as the BBC started clearing their desks of staff in the early 90’s. You have more and more people coming on steam as freelancers and the perfusion of camera formats were getting bigger and bigger. Then through various deals that are done one broadcaster said we are going to take Panasonic. Then we all go oh. So if you’ve been working a lot of that production company or production house or that broadcaster you have to end up buying that camera as well as the camera you already own to work for everybody else. This started in the mid nineties and since then there has been a progressively bigger number of formats being released by Sony and Panasonic and JVC to a certain extent. The two main players, being Panasonic and Sony, being bigger than Panasonic certainly. Consistently bringing out new tape formats and now new tapeless formats and camera bodies. Now overtime that has grown and it’s literally like an avalanche gathering speed moving down a mountain side. Once it’s started and gathered momentum it gets bigger and bigger.

For instance, when we moved from standard definition whole hearty to HD. I said I’m not going to buy an HD camera body, I will just buy HD lenses and I will hire. By the end of the year I said that remark in 2008, I had brought three HD camera bodies, three. Three different competing formats, to work for three different companies. Because everyone was saying we want this format we want that format. Because if they were a large broadcaster or a large production company they have spent their money. We are going with this format,
Shaun Taylor
were going to buy these tape decks and those tape machines. You have to fit in with us.

Ok, so they are dictating to you

Jonathan Young
The manufactures were releasing all these new machine, devices into the market and you’d find that the market over time has begun to splinter so much you don’t know where to turn.

From my point of view looking in, obviously not being part of it it’s overwhelming.

Overwhelming is exactly the word to use because if you’re a freelancer and need to go a bank and say I need to spend 50, 60 £100,000 on equipment you could have done that under the days of Beta SP because you knew that your camera at £30,000 and ancillary equipment. You could then get a bank loan for it. Then three years later you could trade that camera in to some else in the second-hand market, maybe get 10, £15,000 of it and its still earned enough money on it to pay for the purchasing or leasing costs and still make a profit. You had a return over a three to five year period. Now if you buy a camera body on finances you need to have that balance paid out within two years. Because in two years there will be something else on the market that will supersede that product and become the next flavour of the month.

What I would also say is that the other thing that has changed the market beyond all recognition from the days of the broadcast freelance television people, with their equipment. The classic model of a technician for hire is the introduction of the Canon 5D Mk II. The idea that a DSLR can shoot high
quality video revolutionised the market place. There has been quit a lot of democratisation in the lower end equipment. Were not talking about 2/3 inch shoulder mounted broadcast cameras. I’m talking about PD150, PD170 what people would describe as top end prosomer, with the introduction of the VX 1000 in 1996. I brought one of those because the BBC kept… bring one along to a shoot saying can we use this as a second camera. It was a camera that cost 1500 quid. They would use it for cutaways, for the AP to use or a second camera on a reporter or presenter. It saved them an entire crew and kit day; Ok the quality wasn’t the same but they were prepared to live with that. And that’s the point because of the cost to produce a full size camera kit and crew; they cut their cloth accordingly.

When BBC news took on DVcam as its propriety format, Sony were shocked. They said well no, you’ve always brought our expensive cameras why are you buying our camera that half the price? Because it’s half the price, we are happy with the technical quality for what we want to do on produced production. We get two cameras to product more content for price of one of your other cameras we had previously.

So what’s happening is the constant drive with production budget going thither and thither down as more and more formats become available meant there’s been this convergence of the small cheaper end proSUMER cameras and ultimately they have started producing cinema quality images with the Canon 5D. The argument that we used to use: well we are trained professional with expensive equipment only we can do this. Well now you’ve got college leavers who have a Canon 5D MKII to start with. Who can produce images that actually look better than some of what we can do, out of the box. So,
my £100,000 investment against some guys £5,000 investment is a no brainer when you boil it down to a per day cost to a production manager who has got a stretched budget.

Shaun Taylor

But what about the actual standards though, of the craft involved for the college leavers.

Jonathan Young

That is a big issue. A lot of the media colleges do turnout people that have no real understanding of the history or tradition of why the rule they are trying to break were put there in the first place. Television technicians were originally trained through centres of excellence in wide ranging BBC training schemes at the individual centres especially BBC Wood Norten or television centre. Or the ITV network with their large regional bases. And they trained their own staff. And you went through rigorous training about the electronics the physics, the day to day production management of the equipment, this sort of thing. That has now stopped because the market for the technicians for hire with equipment has shrunk. So, what you’re finding is the people coming out of colleges in the last ten years that have latched onto using the smaller cameras, like you started doing charity videos and what have you. They have learnt for themselves they haven’t been to these training schemes. They have come for a, well I would like to film something; I want to tell a story, how am I going to do it. Rather than down the formalised idea of a producer and director having a story that they want to tell. Then finding people to help them tell it technically. These people are doing it all for themselves because they’ve got access to cheaper equipment. They can edit on their own laptops, so you end up with this sort of view that you’re a filmmaker rather than a technician. The role of calling yourself a filmmaker, so you’re a storyteller, a
producer/director, you are a technical person and you are absorbing all of these traditional roles. You’re doing five or six peoples roles that would have been done twenty years ago by five or six people. Some people are fantastic, they will actually survive, they will rise through, and like anything the cream will always rise to the top. But there are a lot of people that have come through that root and have no understanding of the rules of television. All they see is a high quality documentary go out on terrestrial television and think I can do that. You can’t fault their enthusiasm and excitement but what they are trying to produce doesn’t actually cut it. Because it’s not the same quality, well they don’t realise why it’s not the same quality. They just realise that they have the ambition and the enthusiasm but they didn’t end up with the same product and they don’t know why they didn’t get the same product.

Shaun Taylor

So, is like the understanding of the structures of the programmes, is that what you mean by that.

Jonathan Young

Understanding of production technique, it’s not just all about youth excitement and enthusiasm and waving a camera around and shooting some material and eventually something will be there. Some programmes are made like that and you end up with eclectic, organic programmes, which are a hit but that’s down to the quality of the content. Not just the production technique. The skill lies when you actually have a programme that’s quite a poor subject but you’ve still been commissioned to make half an hour of cogent television for as broadcaster yet the story’s pretty poor. That’s where the skill comes from in terms of not just technical skill because you can do things that make the mundane and uninteresting look more interesting and less mundane, and sometimes exciting.
My background is current affairs; we do that all the time. Very, very dry subject matter. You make a programme about pensions for instance. Pensions are a boring subject; they are something that will affect us all ultimately because we are all putting money in the pot for our future. So, yes it’s a worthy but it’s actually quite mundane for those people that aren’t sixty-five yet and worrying about their remaining future. So, how do you as a programme maker, make a programme about pensions interesting. I’m using this as quite an extreme analogy. You have a whole series of interviews with experts and pensions that have got enough and haven’t got enough money. So, how do you make slow moving elderly people look interesting when they’re talking? And that’s the understanding of production technique and what you’re able to do with choices of film making tools, whether that’s cameras or any of the other associated equipment. It’s knowing what you can do with it. Where as if you give that to someone with no understanding of the background of television all they’ve got is their good looking Canon 5D or C100 or whatever and a whole bunch of interviews. When they cut it all together it looks a bit boring, so the understanding of production techniques both technically and editorial is where people flunk. With the democratisation of accesses to equipment.

Shaun Taylor Would you link that with factual entertainment, from my research there is a big push for that. Could it be linked that you don’t need those types of skills to produce that type of TV?

Jonathan Young No, factual entertainment is based around entertaining people. Making entertainment shows is more expensive than making documentary shows. So, the term factual entertainment comes
out of well... It’s shot in a documentary style there isn’t a lot of lighting. There are smaller crews. Because traditional entertainment shows would have been your Morecambe and Wise, shine floorshows. The genre of factual entertainment is a way of making shows that will entertain people on a cheaper budget. That’s a cost issue, it’s a way of filling screen time and having a greater reward for less spending, less budget. Some factual entertainment shows have very high production actually. Look at the X factor the money that gets spent on that is quite phenomenal.

Shaun Taylor

What about yourself, Return to Afghanistan for example, if you went back or had a similar assignment now, does the equipment now enable you to do more or has that not changed.

Jonathan Young

Yes, the equipment, the range of tools we have available to us now is far greater than it was even ten years ago. What has happened is the tools that were only available to large film making budgets like feature film or high-end TV drama have now become accessible to television programme makers. And its partly down to miniaturisation, partly down to Chinese manufacturing has made a lot of these products more easily available because they’re being produced in China at a lower cost. It’s a consistent democratisation of equipment. It used to be you were in the film game doing feature films or top end TV drama, you worked with certain types of kit that were very very expensive and you only worked with that kit. That kit is now trickling down or has tricked down into regular day to day TV production. And what as also happened is the kit at prosumer level has also come up to meet in the middle ground in factual television production.
Five, ten years ago, you go to a corporate video that would just shot some interviews, look nice that’s it. Now you’ve got sliders, these were on Hollywood film sets ten years ago. You can now go on EBay and buy a slider for a 100 quid and put a 5D on. That wouldn’t have happened before so, top and bottom have now come and met in the middle. The squashing then middle ground, the kinda broadcast market.

Shaun Taylor
Do you think there will be a return to one camera dominating factual TV, is that possible at all?

Jonathon Young
No. no that’s not possible at all. No. Most cameramen would love is a super 35mm sensor like you have in the C300 or the Sony F5 or F55 now. With the ability to have a zoom lens on the front that gives the flexibility of a 2/3 inch ENG camera but still retain shallow depth of field characteristics. We are getting there but its not there yet. It’s partly to do with the laws of physics and you actually can’t change the laws of physics unless you’re on Star Trek.

Shaun Taylor
What was I reading, BroadcastTech they were saying about the Alexa being used in 27 of the top 30 dramas, but that couldn’t happen?

Jonathon Young
The Alexa sensor has now been put into the Amira and the small Alexa and now there’s the Alexa mini as well. But what Arri has chosen to do…the camera I have just been talking about technically is the Arri Amira. Thing is, where as all the other manufactures started…because of miniaturisation and improvements in technology. The cameras that were costing £30,000 well they pretty much now top out at £20,000 but Arri because of its high quality German engineering background and its relationship with the film industry. The
Arri Amira is still pitched at the kinda prising we would have paid for cameras for documentary work fifteen years ago. I mean its €30,000 plus for a camera body. That automatically with its price point rules out a number of people who say yeah it’s a great looking camera, its very robust and has a proven technology and a proven history in motion picture making but its too expensive for what we want to do. When we can get the same type of look out of a camera that’s £10,000 less. Which means you as an individual have paid your money, you don’t have to charge as much or we can tell you not to charge as much. That’s a big issue, a big side bar issue within the industry. You have a plumber come to your house to do some work, you don’t dictate to him how much he is going to charge you. You go to a plumber; you go to a tradesman traditional tradesmen, plumber, builder, joiner you ask them to quote for the job if you don’t like the price you say I’m going to use somebody else. That’s it the quoting’s ended. What we have in the television industry is people dictating to us what they think we should be charging. Could you imagine having a strongly worded discussion over email or plumber who done work on your house fitting you a new boiler and a bathroom suite, and then saying well actually I know you said it was going to be about £15,000 quid to do this but I only really want to pay about £12,000, so can we call it quits and I’ll make sure there’s more work in it for you.

That’s what happens on a daily bases in the film and television industry. You have the market dictating to the provider what the price of that survives should be. Now, alright we live in a competitive market, I make a good living out of the film and television industry and the equipment I supply and the work that I produce. And that’s all down to the added value you think as a cameraman you bring to the production. If someone
wants to say I only got this budget and I’m going to make you fit inside this budget its up to you to accept or not. You never go to your builder and say look; I know its going to be about £50,000 to build this extension on my house but if got £15,000 can we do it for that.

Shaun Taylor

Is that also to do with the way the Industry works with contacts, the freelance nature, you’re always looking for your next job?

Jonathan Young

Because the motion picture industry or the television industry in its wider sense is mostly freelance staff now on short term or non existent contracts it’s purely day by day hire. You have to try and charge as much as you can for your services in the time someone wants to hire you for them. Because of the throughput of people from the media colleges there is a constant pressure. You got established personnel like myself who have come through the old way of doing things where there’s a considered market rate because people understood that you had invested in your equipment and it cost a certain amount of money each month to pay for that equipment and actually maintain it. People understood that, now you have generations of people who don’t understand that but all they see is way are you charging me £1000 a day when I can get someone to do it for £150 a day. Looks the same to me.

Shaun Taylor

They come from a different set of rules.

Jonathan Young

Because you’ve got a large number of people being pushed through the system from the media colleges and what have you, they come from that market they see there’s not many jobs and they want to get a foot in the door they’ll do anything. A lot of people to get in the door undercut. Now, as
soon as you start undercutting you get that days work but you
don’t see the longer term. Realistically say you want to charge
£300 but someone says "I'll give you £150 they have actually
now doubled their shooting budget. They can get an extra day
which they think is great, they’re in a win-win situation. If you
turn out to actually be any good at your job it’s even better.
But if you were poor it only cost me a hundred £150 quid I
can get somebody else. Problem is that rate has now been set
because they’ve got one person that did it for £150 I’ll get
another person to do it for £150 and it becomes self-fulfilling.
There are several points about charging a higher rate but one
of them is you have a responsibility if you charge a premium.
That’s what keeps you as an individual fired-up because
you’re only as good as the last job you’ve done because of
those reasons I just talked about. So if I’m charging £1000 a
day I got to be damn good. I’ve got to go out of my way to
make sure the client is happy, and the images I’m producing
are the best that can be in the time and resources available. If
someone thinks well god I’m only getting £150 and I’m
getting absolutely shoved around here like a lunatic and I’m
being bullied on set you’re going to be less inclined to work
hard.

Shaun Taylor

I’m thinking for someone like myself who wants to be doing
what you’re doing, I’m looking out thinking where can I go.
If, I’m genuinely interested in the skill, and the craft. Where
can you go where is the training for example.

Jonathan Young

Well, that’s the thing. There are a number of seasoned
industry practitioners who now run their own training course
because they haven’t been happy when doing paid jobs with
the quality of the assistance and the junior technical staff.
SkillSet from what I know from the people that have been
through it. They don’t feel that it generally equips them for the modern TV market place. The quality of training, well the industry has relied on people training themselves. You know I do hostile environments work and I have jobs come to me because I have already got pre-existing hostile environments training, which means they don’t have to spend £1500 retraining me. Because it’s an insurance requirement for that production. Same goes for anything, same goes for any areas of continuing professional development. They want people that have already done it for themselves. They don’t really want to pay unless they absolutely have to, to secure someone for that particular product. People take responsibility for themselves and again broadcasters and production companies exacerbate that problem by knowing the fact that people will train themselves or will offer themselves in some way to make them more expectable. Again that goes back to the whole rate cutting thing, well if he’s doing it for that then tell you what i’ll knock a £100 off how’s that. It affects everybody ultimately.

Shaun Taylor

So, really there is a lot of investing in yourself in terms of equipment skills and its all very … there’s no guarantee of a return on that really.

Jonathan Young

The phrase I use over and over again. I tell people exactly how much I’ve spent since 1996 when I went freelance again, and I say bearing in mind I did buy a lot of gear in the days of NTSC and PAL cameras weren’t switchable. They were separate entities to shoot for the American market. I brought heavily into NTSC equipment which doubles the number of cameras that I owned in SD terms. But I have spent close to £700,000 on equipment since 1996, with no contract, with no guaranty of rewards.
Shaun Taylor

That’s a massive outlay, that’s a massive risk

Jonathan Young

I’m probably an extreme example because I’ve had several NTSC cameras, which double the number of cameras I had in terms of the PAL ones. But still at the time there was a premium of owning NTSC equipment in a PAL environment. Especially there was much greater parity between the pound and the dollar, which meant the crew rates were so much higher.

Shaun Taylor

I haven’t asked you about the ergonomics of the new camera, for example you’ve got people shooting on 5D, C300’s and things like that.

Jonathan Young

When Canon entered the video market in HD with the… I’m not talking about the XL1 because again not many people used them. When they entered with the 5D and the C300 the image that comes out of them is great, there is a wow factor. Everything else after that point is oh Christ. The side bar industry that has been spawned out of making accessories and adapters to make the 5D or the range of C300, C100, C500 camera useable in a broadcast run and gun documentary style environment is phenomenal. The money that’s being made by all these other manufactures must be huge. I don’t know what the figures are but it will run into the tens of millions of dollars. The kind of after market accessory, conversion. The C300 is a lovely camera, switch it on and you get a great picture out of it. Its light sensitive, it is a dream of an image. But the practical use of that camera, yeah you can use it but you spend more time trying to build up a camera. We want time code, we want audio, so in some ways the ergonomics are actually not just a retrograde step. It’s like that camera had...
only just been invented when you look at it. The C300 is effectively a medium format camera on steroids. I’ve built two complete rigs and I’ve now built one that I’m vaguely happy with. To turn my C300 in to a camera that I can use on my shoulder in a kind of documentary style way because I’ve had a camera on my shoulder in that form for over twenty years. If you look at the camera history before that, you look at film cameras for the 1960’s certainly they all had a form factor that fitted on the shoulder. What you find is that one manufacturer … going back to the fact they are surprised how cameras are used. One manufacturer brings out a camera it turns out that it becomes quite popular because of its price point because of its image sensitivity. You suddenly find that the manufacturers start producing cameras to compete with that in a similar look. They actually don’t think about the ergonomics of it. When manufacturers do say we speak to cameramen all the time I don’t know who they’re speaking to because they’re not speaking to any of the people I know.

The only thing that’s come about recently is the Sony F5 and F55. Sony in a response to so many complaints about it being a modular system have produced what they call the documentary doc. So you take the F5 or F55 and bolt it into a shoulder mounted, electronic housing a plate that gives you switches back in the same place as you used to have them if you’re using an ENG camera. It gives it an ENG form factor and tried to address the issues of not having enough audio inputs and things like that. But it’s still an after market product it’s not building up from scratch. Interestingly that’s why the Amira should have been the camera that every cameraman wanted because it’s a documentary, ENG style form factor perfectly balanced on the shoulder, with a super 35 mm sensor that gives shallow depth of filed. But
unfortunately they over looked again certain things like audio because that’s what people want if they don’t want to use a sound guy, the cameras got to do the audio itself in a factual way. Factual production. And it was the price point, stuff is 15 to 20 thousand quid they were asking €35,000 for the top end model.

Shaun Taylor  
Will other competitors bring out something to match that at a lower price point or is that not possible?

Jonathan Young  
Well Canon are bringing out the new version of their C300 in April and from what I understand it will look exactly the same in shape and size, roughly as the C300 and C500. Having had three years of people saying to them this camera’s great to look at, great picture to use they’ve done nothing about the form factor. It is a constant source of discussion and disgruntlement from cameramen even though people are actually starting to look at bringing out camera they want in terms of the image they still can’t get the form factor right.

Shaun Taylor  
You mentioned something just briefly about maybe having to record audio yourself and things like that. Is that something that happens over your time in the industry?

Jonathan Young  
For a long time producers, production managers of all types they want to save money they want to save costs somehow. One of the ways they have done that is getting cameramen in factual production to record their own sound, so you do away with the sound recordists. You’re saving £400 up to £500 a day. I’ve had a producer say to me I’m never going to use a soundman again, if I can get a decent cameraman who can do passable sound I don’t need a soundman. I actually get half a dozen more filming days and that’s what I want. Some people
will go down that route, unfortunately I’ve had to accept that and it’s had a knock-on effect there’s a number of sound recordists that don’t get work any more. They have had to leave the industry or for me personally I’m not concentrating as much on the motion picture, the image because I’m dealing with sound.

Shaun Taylor

Do you have to edit on location or anything?

Jonathan Young

I don’t do that anymore, I used to when I was a news cameraman many years ago. That is now the default position if you work in television news you have to be able to edit, it’s as simple as that. Again if you’d been working regularly for a company as a news cameraman they would have trained you up. Now if you go as a freelancer they’ll say we’re not going to hire you until you can edit. There’s no are you going to train me up because you’re a freelancer and there is always someone else coming through can actually do what they want. That comes back to the point of your own continued professional development. The thing about the television industry is that it doesn’t stay still. I’ve seen people make that mistake their going to get their feet under the table and what have you, not a chance. It just doesn’t happen. Every few month there are changes you have to deal and adapted with. The watchwords to use are “adapted and survive”.

Shaun Taylor

We talked about networks and that’s where work comes from in the main. Do you ever go for jobs that are advertised? Do you ever see anything advertised or is it all through connections?

Jonathan Young

Jobs that are advertised tend to be very poor quality or low pay, or have an issue behind them. Most good jobs are through
your networks because you’ve got a producer, director you’ve worked with regularly or a crewing company or something like that who’s used to hiring you. The jobs that get posted up on these various Facebook sites and what have you. I apply for them especially if I’m quiet; I put my name out there purely as a marketing tool. Most of them never even come back to you and give you an answer. Some of them do buy they want to know how much you’re going to charge. Most times all they’re interested in really is someone who will do it for a lower price. Some of these paid website are making good money rebroadcasting what could be described as just garbage rubbish jobs. Younger people coming out of the film and production colleges who want to get into the industry are looking at these jobs saying; well it might only be £100 - £150 and my DSLR but I’ve got rent top pay. I can do that for three days and I can pay my rent.

Shaun Taylor

What about unions and things like that do you ever hear anyone mention the unions?

Jonathan Young

(Laughs…)

Shaun Taylor

I think I got the answer to that one?

Jonathan Young

Yeah um union, I’m still a union member because there are certain benefits for being a union member. The television union, the main one in the UK was smashed by Mrs Thatcher. It all came down to the very famous strike at TV AM in 1989. The television unions used to be very very powerful and it was when there was a large staff skill base. All the ITV networks and the BBC. Television technicians were extremely well paid and you know had strong union backing. But the strike at TVAM and the emergence in 1989 of Sky television in the UK. Bear in mind Rupert Murdock was Australian; he
couldn’t of opened Sky in Australia because even to this day the television unions from what I see in Australia are very very strong, same in the US. The strike at TV AM, Bruce Gyngell, tore open the old union ACCT and it was a game of blink and they blink first and lost. From that point onwards the union lost its strangely hold. I’m still a union member because it’s worth having the public liability cover and the backing of the TUC lawyers; Thomson’s to deal with issue relating to injuries at work that sort of thing. They are a very very powerful union actually; they have had some good successes in terms of negotiation with PACT on the behalf of film technicians and union agreements there. But in terms of the television side of things and for freelancers there is no collective bargaining whatsoever. As a freelance television cameramen you can be a union member but your all on your own, you’ve got to do everything for yourself. I’ve spoken to the union on several occasions along with other people they seem to think there still is this body of staff technicians out there. They only seem to have the ability to deal with large corporate groups of people.

Unfortunately because the freelance television market cameraman market... I use the word “cameraman” because it’s a traditional term not just because it means men. There are camerawomen, it is just a traditional term “cameraman” a number of the camerawomen I know use the term “cameraman”. The market for them is so wide it’s so fragmented, there is no basic standard that can be enforced by union, so they’ve just given up. If you’re a grip for instance you have a very specific defined role within the film and television industry. Whether it’s on a drama set, feature film or commercial. You have a very defined role therefore it’s easy to enforce a standard rate and a standard set of terms and
conditions. Because you’re doing the same job wherever you are. The natural history unit their cameramen managed to pull something off. They again were a very very specific bunch of guys. There have been successes but on the whole in terms of television cameramen, as an industry of freelancers the union is a bit of a damp squib. I had high hopes for the union, I got involved, I’ve been a member since the days of the ACCT and unfortunately their not doing enough for people like me. When I’ve asked them to thing for me they’ve said we can’t.

Shaun Taylor

Ok, so that tells you all you need to know, if they can’t do it.

Jonathan Young

There are informal networks out there of cameramen, sound recordists, other members of production teams. They’ve all got informal networks. The fight back against low pay, low wages, poor conditions is such that people use Facebook or email. Private email groups and what have you, there is a multiplicity of these things out there. Social network forums where people want to discuss poor pay, poor conditions, and terms and condition you know, a production company they are having a particular difficult time with, who to avoid in terms of bad payers. All the kinda water cooler, coffee machine type of moments you would have got in a crew room when you were staff in a large ITV or BBC operation. That’s all now happening online and there are numerous forums and groups with various degrees of publicity surrounding them. Starting with Production Base, TV water cooler there is a whole different bunch of different ones out there if you start digging. With people saying; I’m not happy with this do you know this person, did they screw you over like they screwed me over. That kind of thing.
Shaun Taylor
What do you actually see as camera craft. If you’re booked on a job what should you bring, what should all cameramen bring, what is their job?

Jonathan Young
You could write a dissertation just on that subject alone. What does a cameraman need to bring to location. First and foremost the patience of a saint and a sense of humour. Those two things will see you through most situations. If you’re hiring a cameraman it is a given they have an understanding of or should have an understanding of the subject matter and therefore be able to bring their eye to bear on the subject itself. You’re making a programme about let’s say a particular subject you need that cameraman to say OK, well in the past I made a programme about this before we did this and this. It’s the ability to analyse a scenario very quickly. You walk into a room and you know where are we going to do the interview. I walk into a room for instance my eye has already spotted three potential locations or analysed the room. Where I would want to put someone, I can see the shot happening in my head already. It’s those kinds of skills. It’s the ability to see beyond, to see the production after it’s been shot before it’s been shot.

Shaun Taylor
Has that come to you through experience?

Jonathan Young
Yes, from experience. Yes you can have a sense of what you want to do but a lot of it comes from experience. The more times you turn over with a camera the more experience you’ve got about filming an interview or filming a tricky scenario or filming in certain types of scenario. Quite often a cameraman now will be one of the most senior people on the shoot. And often productions still hire a cameraman because they have
actually got inexperienced production staff. They look to the cameraman to give them some sort of guidance and brief.

Shaun Taylor: OK, some kind of direction from you. Personally do you still enjoy your career, the pressure hasn’t sort of take(n) it?

Jonathan Young: Yes, there was a time when I just started out when just being on location with television camera kit was the be all and end all. That enthusiasm passes but I’ve been lucky with some of the jobs I’ve had. That my enthusiasm hasn’t waned or been doubted because I worked on subjects that have given me the chance to explore the world and produce some quite amazing, stunning images experiences for the television viewer.

Now my enthusiasm for being on location everyday has waned because as you get older life begins to calcify and you know that there are certain thing that you don’t have to be as enthusiastic and as full on with every single shoot. You are 110% professional on every job but the exuberant enthusiasm that goes with certain things because you think wow I’m getting paid to do this, this is brilliant doesn’t necessarily apply anymore to every job.

Shaun Taylor: Ok, yes I understand

Jonathan Young: If you’re interviewing a bunch of lawyers in an office that’s not as exciting, as hanging out a helicopter flying down the Nile gorge through Ethiopia having a crocodile snap at your feet. The point is that it’s varying degrees of enthusiasm but coupled with 110% professional competence. Because if you become complacent; it’s just an interview, well complacency breeds contempt and contempt is a very very poor situation to find yourself in. Then you get to resent why you are there and
what you are doing. That then spreads like wildfire. It’s remaining positive and confident about what you are shooting. You don’t have to be over enthusiastic like Christmas morning for every job.

Shaun Taylor: Yeah, be professional at all times.

Jonathan Young: Be professional at all times because its like I said to you, you are providing a service. You’re charging a premium for that service; you have a responsibility for that premium.

Shaun Taylor: I know you do a lot of hostile environment shooting and things. Is that a way to go if someone’s trying to get into the industry? Should they target, wildlife, hostile environment have a niche something you’re specialised in. Is that going to help you in anyway?

Jonathan Young: Certainly in terms of natural history. The natural history unit in Bristol grew out of the parsimonious nature of the BBC. Natural history grew, started because the BBC in Bristol found out Bristol University, Bristol zoo were sending anthropologists, zoologists and what have you over seas in the 1950’s and they were all taking their own clockwork cameras with them to film the behaviour of animals. Then the BBC thought that’s a good idea I wonder if we could start broadcasting this stuff. That’s how the programmes started. That’s how natural history started; someone discovered that there was all this footage of animals in the wild. As natural history unit developed it were people that were first and foremost zoologist and biologist who then got into filmmaking and started to transfer their skills over. Because they learnt them from the early days of their field trips. Obviously in later years as greater production techniques came around the
natural history unit became the sizable operation it is today applying cinema style production techniques to natural history.

A lot of people don’t actually set out saying I want to be this I want to be that. What they do is find their way into it through another route or get a foothold in the industry first then start genteelly pushing. A lot of people, because there are already large groups of people who can already do the skills, to break into that area you would have already had to do some work on your own. Again it’s the idea of continued professional development. You would of gone out spent three months in a hide in Scotland trying to film stoats or weasels or something, to prove have got the skill base. Because you have a very specific skill that they need and that is a way in. If you are wanting to break in under your own steam, you actually have to make all the running yourself and get yourself the attention of them.