“It’s a tough drug to kick”: A woman’s career in broadcasting.

Abstract: Research on creative work typically focuses either on precarious work and employment or on creative workers’ dedication to their work and profession. The account of UK broadcaster and writer Charlotte presented in this article bridges these two foci. Charlotte talks about finding work in the cultural industry she loves, moulding a portfolio of jobs into a coherent creative career, and being a woman and working mother in broadcasting and media. Her account gives rich insight into how creative workers exercise individual agency in the face of their industries’ structural constraints and how they pursue careers both because of and in spite of what the creative and cultural industries offer.

Keywords: broadcasting, creative workers, creative careers, cultural industries, media, precarious employment, women’s work.

Authors: Dr Doris Ruth Eikhof, University of Leicester School of Management

Charlotte York, freelance broadcaster

Corresponding author: Dr Doris Ruth Eikhof, University of Leicester, School of Management, University Road, Leicester, LE1 7RH, UK, d.r.eikhof@leicester.ac.uk
Introduction

This *On the front line* article presents the account of Charlotte, a broadcaster and writer in the UK’s cultural and creative industries (CCI). Academic research tends to foreground either the structural context or the individual experience of work and employment in the CCI. Charlotte’s account builds an important bridge between these two foci: it gives rich first hand-insight into how creative workers exercise individual agency in the face of structural constraints and how they pursue their careers both *because of* and *in spite of* what the CCI have to offer.

The structural context of work and employment in the CCI is dominated by project-based, temporary and freelance employment (Eikhof, 2013; Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013). In film and TV, up to 90% of workers are freelancers and 74 per cent had experienced unemployment, often as longs as 11-29 weeks, in the 12 months prior to being surveyed (Skillset, 2008). Working days tend to be extremely long (exceeding 11 hours) and regularly required overnight stays (Skillset, 2008; 2010). There is no direct pathway from education into employment and industry entrants typically work for no or low pay (Randle and Culkin, 2009). Income insecurity is widespread and many creative workers rely on multiple creative jobs, on non-creative employment in teaching, hospitality and retail, or on support from their spouse (Dex et al., 2000). Contacts and networks are crucial: 78 per cent of respondents to a Creative Skillset survey (2010) had been recruited into their most recent job directly by their employer or a shared contact. Importantly, the key industry networks are dominated by white, middle-aged and middle-class men, much to the detriment of women and workers from ethnic minority and working class backgrounds (Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2011). The all-important networking typically takes places in semi-private settings in which women tend to be judged as females rather than professionals (Gill, 2002). Especially in film and TV, this assessment depends on youthful, sexy looks. The long working hours, geographical mobility requirements and irregular income add further challenges for women with caring commitments. Unsurprisingly, industry statistics show the share of female workers declining markedly from age 35 onwards: only
16 per cent of women in a media-focused survey (Skillset, 2010) were aged 50 or older. Thirty-five years is not only the age at which women are considered to be ‘older’ and around which many women decide to have a family, it also marks the threshold to age bands in which individuals typically hold positions with higher pay and influence.

Individual-focused studies of how creative workers exercise agency in their work and careers emphasise high commitment, even dedication to the CCI. Creative workers pursue “the path with a heart” (Svejenova, 2005) and “care for what they do” rather than for remuneration (Caves 2000: 5). The idea of producing art for art’s sake and doing so as part of a lifestyle that may be precarious, but is also flexible and dynamic and offers opportunities to follow one’s convictions and interests is central to creative workers’ identity (Røyseng et al. 2007). Importantly, the intrinsic work motivation typical for creative workers can be crowded out by more mundane monetary incentives if individuals’ perceive their (self-)exploitation to have reached unacceptable limits, especially in comparison to peers and competitors (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2007).

Charlotte’s story talks about all of these aspects. The anonymised account below was written by herself, reflecting on a handful of thematic prompts provided by the academic author. It answers the original call for contributions to the On the front line-series (Taylor et al. 2009) in a particular way: In Charlotte’s case, a journalist gives a first person account of her own work instead of, like Studs Terkel (1972), presenting that of others. Her voice is her own, slightly edited for brevity but otherwise in the style and tone of her industry, combining critical reflection with enthusiasm for her work and an irreverent presentation of her own persona.

Charlotte graduated from university in 1990 and started work with a major UK regional broadcaster later that year. Her father was an ex-RAF pilot who worked at a bank and her mother was a part-time playgroup teacher. Charlotte grew up without personal connections to the media industry; her desire to work in the media stemmed from a love for writing and performing. She met her partner at university and once they had children he became the main breadwinner for the household. Because
of her partner’s long working hours and frequent travel it was and remains largely Charlotte’s task to combine work with caring responsibilities, for instance through working from home or taking the children on filming location.

**Charlotte’s account**

I always knew I would end up working in the media. I’ve always been an ideas person but I also have a pragmatic streak that thrives on using creativity to produce something more tangible like a newspaper, book or programme. I clearly remember walking to school with my best friend who said she wanted to get married at 22 and have apple blossom at her wedding; all I could think about was that I wanted to be a TV presenter and travel the world doing interesting things and meeting fascinating people. I didn’t know anyone who’d ever gone into the media – it was worlds away from my upbringing. In hindsight, I think being on TV was my way of rebelling, of making myself visible after a lifetime of being told to keep my head down and to “stop being so loud”.

I wrote for my school and sixth form college magazines, and for the University feminist magazine at Oxford and I produced the sports club magazine. However, my real break was after graduation, when due to an admin error, I didn’t get my PhD funding so I had to have a rapid re-think about what I was going to do with my life. I knew I was good at research, writing and telling stories so I started applying for jobs in TV and on magazines while doing a temp job as a hospital receptionist. It turned out one of the patients was a producer at a major regional UK broadcaster and I gave him my CV, had an interview with his partner who was the producer on a popular quiz show and I got a job as the production secretary.

Once I was in the system and making contacts, it was much easier to get re-hired on other jobs through word of mouth or to follow a producer to their next job. I would normally only have a few weeks out of work between contracts and sometimes contracts even went back-to-back. But, I was warned by other freelancers, the employers knew to insert a break to prevent you getting any rights.
I wanted to move into making documentaries and features and was really lucky to have a strong mentor in my boss in the entertainment department – I’m pretty sure it was she who passed me on to my next fabulous mentor who then taught me how to produce and write educational TV programmes. And then she also gave me my first break in presenting. I absolutely loved working in her department, I felt as though I was really learning and growing in skills and confidence. Although I didn’t realize it at the time, the mentoring was especially important as I was not hugely confident and although I clearly had great drive and potential, I was pretty clueless about how to get ahead.

Because I was freelance, I knew I always had to set up the next job. Looking back, I think I was pretty naïve - I thought that because I was bright, hard-working and good at my job, the next job would come fairly easily. But that wasn’t the case at all. Once, early on in my career, I wrote to every single independent production company in the region - I got just two replies, one saying they’d gone out of business and the other offering me the chance to sit in and watch an edit. What happened next was a classic case of making your own luck – a chance encounter and chat over a coffee break led to a permanent job in the newsroom at the other major regional broadcaster. But I should have made more use of my time to network: I didn’t hustle for jobs with key producers in my field of science, environment and history – I was too embarrassed to do that as it seemed too presumptuous. I was hopelessly unstrategic. I knew what I wanted to do – to write and present my own specialist factual programmes – but never once planned how to actually get there and never thought to ask for advice, either. I remember watching one woman probably not too much older than me who dressed like an executive in smart suits and posh designer outfits instead of our normal jeans and “student” wear, even though she was only an assistant producer at the time. Although I knew what she was doing, it never occurred to me to look smart or “dress for the job above”, or to manoeuvre myself strategically into a better position. Even though I was absolutely certain that this was the career for me, I deliberately avoided going to departmental or chairman’s drinks parties to network and promote myself. At the time, it just all felt too pushy and “in your face”. A few years down the line, I did get myself an agent but again, I hooked up with the first one I met and liked rather than thinking
about who was best placed to get me what I wanted. As a result, I ended up working a lot but it was all a bit scattergun. I had some great jobs on national and international series and programmes. By my mid-twenties I had my own investigative science series on prime-time national TV which led to a regular national newspaper column on science and technology. But I wasn’t deliberately constructing my career. I was working seven days a week which was great for adding bulk to my CV but it came at a huge cost in terms of work-life balance: my twenties disappeared in a blur of work.

Because of the typical freelance neurosis that the job offers would dry up, I started branching out into writing for national newspapers and magazines and into presentation skills training. The training bit I loved and it also paid really well. So it was a nice way of supplementing my income. The writing didn’t really pay but it rewarded me in terms of satisfaction and I suppose it was good to have on my CV as it gave me some added gravitas. Again, I didn’t really do it in a strategic way so probably wasted a lot of opportunities, and I would often have to write a column or article for the next day at night after an 18 hour shoot. Most of the work came from people asking me for articles or columns but occasionally I would ring up an editor and offer a one-off feature. However, I would never haggle for more wordage or money, or a longer deadline – I was just grateful for the work. It was also about then that I started doing lectures and talks about my work. Again, these didn’t pay but it was good PR and made useful contacts with the universities and big organisations like the Royal Geographical Society and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

By the time I was in my early thirties, I was essentially burned out from doing about five or six years of non-stop, 7 days a week work, often involving some pretty hard-core international travel. I’d been head-hunted from my job as a national channel’s science correspondent to present on their weekly current affairs series – still freelance but on a yearly contract so I had to rent a flat in London Monday to Friday. I was then headhunted as a correspondent onto an even more prestigious broadcaster’s new flagship current affairs show, working at a ridiculous rate and frequently overseas. I was the team’s youngest correspondent by a long way and there was certainly a
hierarchy where the presenting royalty laid down the law and refused to be mucked about – probably quite rightly on most occasions; meanwhile, I would just keep my head down and get on with my work.

Eventually things came to a head and I handed in my notice on my presenter’s contract. I felt quite calm about this momentous or, according to my colleagues in TV at the time, mad move: I’d always known I’d wanted to write. Another chance conversation had resulted in a book contract with a major international publishing house so I did my last day’s filming and the next day flew to New Zealand to research my first book, a historical biography. I spent the next few years writing biographies and history books which I loved doing but they barely even covered their costs. Luckily, my partner was earning a decent salary so we had enough to live off and at least I wasn’t always away filming. The books also gave me added authority, meaning I could present myself as a ‘proper’ expert rather than ‘just’ a show-and-tell presenter who, in the words of one (female!) commissioner was “too young and pretty to have any authority as an expert.” My historical biography was made into a multi-award-winning documentary series which I wrote and presented. Through my work as a science correspondent and my academic contacts (I’d read Geography at Oxford), I was also invited down the Antarctic on a climate change research project. I made full use of that experience, doing TV news and press articles, a big radio series and another TV documentary. The freedom of being able to go down to the Antarctic for a few months was amazing, but the flip side of freelance life was not having guaranteed paid work for stability. It was up to me to find or generate work. I was still making and presenting television programmes with other broadcasters but had I a bad experience when my ideas were flagrantly stolen by a leading TV commissioner and given to someone else to present. That seriously dented my belief in my chosen career and also the integrity of those above me. I suppose I was learning that you need to be more than just great at your job and a “good” person – you need to be more focused, better networked and perhaps a bit more Machiavellian than I was at that time, or at least more aware of the games people play.
I was acutely aware of being female in the media with all the pros and cons this brought with it. When I first started in regional broadcasting, it was obvious that almost no women at producer level had children. That struck me as extremely curious and also really troubling – it seemed that I would ultimately have to choose between family and career and that seemed outrageous when no man would face the same choice. And despite the department being full of brilliant women at producer level, the one male in the department was the boss – a pattern repeated in many of the departments in which I would work. Quite frequently the men would try it on which I found really uncomfortable, especially when they were in senior positions. I remember thinking that I really hoped it was "just a generational thing" and by the time I got to producer-level, the industry would have become less sexist.

Of course, it never did. By the time I had moved into presenting for the big current affairs shows on national TV, anyone who wanted a family dropped out of production and few ever came back. There were some brilliant women at management level in those days but I don’t remember any of them having children. Working hours were long. I remember working 51 days, having one day off then working 49 days. And these were flat-out – working 18 hour days then jumping on a plane to get the red-eye flight back to the UK so I could edit a story for that evening’s transmission. Yes, it was exciting, but it was also knackering. And it was hard enough to maintain a partner let alone a family.

I look back now with horror at what I endured in silence. When I eventually became pregnant at 35, I didn’t tell anyone in case it put people off employing me. I lined my handbag with a sick-bag so I could vomit as discretely as possible. The film crew just assumed I had bulimia so I got away with it for months. I wouldn’t dare tell my boss, even when asked to do some physically quite dangerous things, as I was terrified that it would be the end of my career. Once I had kids, I took my breast-pump on short trips, kept the milk in the hotel mini-bar fridge and took it home as my babies were all allergic to regular formula. I had so many fights at airport security over taking bottles of breast milk – but no babies – with me...
When I was filming my New Zealand documentary series, my first two kids were aged two years and 10 months. My only option for a year-long overseas shoot was to take a travelling nanny with me. I’d be doing a 13 hour day, coming home to take over the childcare, cook supper, feed and then settle a toddler and a baby. The latter had a raft of medical problems meaning he didn’t sleep longer than an hour and a half at a time. On my one ‘day off’ a week, I was doing full-on single parenting, trying to give my children a nice, ‘normal’ experience of a day-out. I think I’ve been to every transport museum and aquarium in the Southern Hemisphere. I once came in from a night-shoot at 5am to find a row of x-rays on the kitchen counter: my toddler had almost fractured his skull in a fall. The Post-It note from the nanny said, “Not as bad as it looks – see you in the morning!” but you can imagine I didn’t get any sleep for worrying. By the end of that filming I’d lost all my baby-weight plus an extra two stone.

Being freelance, it’s not as if anyone was going to pay for my maternity leave. I really felt the pressure to keep on earning. More than that though, I really didn’t want to be seen to ‘give up’ when I had children. It helped, of course, that (on the whole) I loved my work. I also think that after becoming a mum, there was an even stronger drive not to lose my identity as a television presenter. I think I’d find it really hard being a full-time mum doing the same thing day in/day out, even though on the surface it would make life a lot simpler in terms of stress and organisation. It’s also hugely important for me that my – now four – boys see me being successful beyond my domestic role. I’d hate to think they’ll grow up assuming men do the real jobs and women are ‘just’ the carers. But the reality at least for me is that you have to compromise every step of the way once you have a family. I do envy my partner’s life as that seems very un-compromised by contrast. He runs a large charity but has a PA and IT department and a raft of people who make his life run smoothly. His is a ‘proper’ job whereas in my less robust moments, I look at my career and just see the endless complexities of working from home as a freelancer with no support structures, trying to get commissions and presenting jobs that would make up a meaningful salary while the boys use up my ink cartridges for counterfeiting Pokemon cards. I know I’m not alone. Many talented women still find it just too
family-unfriendly to continue working in the media. A few have managed it but they tend to be the uberpresenters, paid vast sums and also confident enough to call the shots. And the ones I’m thinking of are also married to extremely rich men which makes paying for childcare less of an issue.

When I had my second child, I also finally signed up to do a PhD. I’d written two historical biographies by then which, in many ways, had been the dry-run for going back into academia. It had always seemed like unfinished business that I hadn’t been able to do my PhD on leaving university. At the time my colleagues and even my agent thought it was a bit weird and unnecessary.

Meantime, the whole broadcast industry has changed: there are many academics presenting programmes but the nightmare for me is that things have moved really fast and the commissioners don’t just want presenters with doctorates, they want Oxbridge professors. Sometimes I feel like I’m running just to stand still, or more accurately, fall behind.

Looking back on my career, I’ve had some mind-blowing opportunities and – most of the time – have no regrets at all about choosing the media as my career. It’s hugely creative, I love the teamwork and there’s a genuine thrill about building a programme from an initial concept or fleeting idea. In many ways, it’s my perfect world. But it’s by no means a perfect industry. It’s still riven by the old boys’ network at senior management level – and these are often the people with better political or survival skills than programme-making skills which makes life incredibly hard for those of us at the sharp end. It was well-known amongst the pool of women at one major regional broadcaster that we would all have to leave if we wanted to be promoted and fulfil our potential: there was a very obvious glass ceiling and so we all left and many of those women are now leaders in their field, just elsewhere. The majority of the senior executives are still male. There’s a certain ‘type’ who tend to become commissioners – white, Oxbridge men who are somewhat lacking in social skills who struggle to make eye contact yet clearly adore the power that being a commissioner brings with it.

Most of my older female presenter friends have left the industry now. One very famous woman recently told me, “You fall off a cliff once you hit fifty” – yet she is a superb presenter, clever, witty,
very natural. Her only mistake was getting older. I was going to say that she’s also still stunningly beautiful – but why should that be pertinent? You’d never judge a male presenter by their looks. Bruce Forsyth is in his eighties and he’s no pin-up but he’s highly respected and almost venerated as a TV icon. Where are the eighty year old women? They’ve all fallen off a cliff thirty or forty years before. This makes life scary as you grow older as a female presenter and leaves you facing some stark ‘choices’ (if you can even call them that) to change direction and go into production, or change industries altogether. I’m pleased to have had my children – imagine giving up the idea of having a family, only to have your industry give up on you once you reach forty or fifty. TV is such a hungry beast – it demands that you give it your all and you really do get punished if you try to juggle it with a family, but you’ll probably get punished in the long term anyway if you’re female. I’ve spent a lot of time over the past few months talking with other media women who are five or ten years older than me: only one of them has a career that’s improving; the rest of them are either unemployed presenters in their fifties or jobbing producers, and all have had long periods not working. It’s a tough drug to kick as it shapes your life and gives you a high few other jobs will ever achieve. I only know one jobbing male producer-director who has periods of not working, and that’s often by choice.

When I hear young women saying how they want to get into the media, I always tell them, “Don’t!” – choose a job that is in the creative industries but one that offers more of a career structure that gives you a longer working life. I love working in the media, that is, actually making TV and radio programmes. It’s the best job in the world. But I don’t love all the guff that goes along with that industry, and I hate what it’s done to many of the brilliant and talented women I know. Will it change? I suppose it must do, over time, but that’ll be too late for me. My female colleagues and I were talking about it only a few days ago – it makes us so angry but we can’t give up.

**Concluding remarks**
Charlotte’s story echoes many concerns of the academic CCI literature: navigating nebulous entrance routes, moulding a patchwork portfolio of jobs into a coherent creative career, buffering income insecurity through non-creative work and spouses, and combining work and caring commitments. She emphasizes that mentors and networks are important, and that the decision powers of ‘white, Oxbridge men’ are problematic even for her as a white but female Oxford graduate. Charlotte also talks about her love for her work and the impossibility of giving up a career that is central to her self-understanding. Her account gives insight, firstly, into how individual workers generally navigate temporal employment, network-based recruitment and income insecurities and, secondly, into the specific challenges that women and mothers in the CCI face. It also points towards at least two areas for future research.

Firstly, participation and advancement in the CCI and other knowledge-intensive professions depend on personal networks (e.g. Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2013; Eikhof and Warhurst, 2013; Fraser and Gold 2001). Charlotte repeatedly refers to serendipitous encounters and chance conversations that lead to opportunities. While creative workers tend to deliberately underplay how purposefully they network (Eikhof and Haunschild, 2006), Charlotte also repeatedly states that she did not ‘push’ herself forward because she did not know how to promote herself and because self-promotion felt alien to her. Her story shows that such experiences are not confined to working class workers (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013; Burke and McManus, 2009) and raises questions about how socio-economic background, education, gender and ethnicity intersect to constrain opportunities for participation and advancement. Importantly, Charlotte’s story also illustrates that having good mentors does not guarantee success with the proverbial old boys networks – which begs the question whether mentoring and networking programmes such as those recommended by Randle et al. (2007) will help enhance workforce diversity in the CCI or will simply reinforce the industries’ problematic reliance on personal networks.
Secondly, Charlotte’s story illustrates how work and employment conditions, lookism/sexism and gender discrimination continue to constrain the advancement of highly skilled professional women into positions of influence and leadership (Eikhof, 2012). Charlotte resists retreating into a traditional housewife role but clearly sees and is discouraged by her struggle to successfully balance work and family life – not least in comparison to her own partner. Her story illustrates that the common focus on gender pay gaps is too narrow and that established industry norms and practices need to change to advance gender equality in professional work. These issues are increasingly recognised but more research is needed into how such industry-wide changes can be initialized, incentivized and shaped. Changing recruitment practices, offering permanent employment or shortening working days promises little immediate benefit for individual organisations, so developing collective, industry-wide solutions will be the key challenge for academics, practitioners and policy-makers alike.
Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Chris Warhurst for continuously encouraging them to make Charlotte’s story accessible to a wider audience. The authors would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers and the WES team for their constructive comments and reviewing of the manuscript.

References


Author biographies

Dr Doris Ruth Eikhof is Senior Lecturer in Work and Employment at the University of Leicester School of Management. Her research focuses on work and careers in the cultural industries, including on the links between production systems, employment conditions and opportunities for workforce participation and advancement. Her publications in international books and journals also span work-life boundaries and women’s work more generally.

Charlotte York is the pseudonym of a female UK broadcaster and writer.