



# Let's fix it in post

**Why broadcasters and production companies can and should address human rights risks in post production**



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## **Table of Contents**

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>SUMMARY OF HUMAN RIGHTS RISKS IN POST PRODUCTION</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT: SEISMIC SHIFTS AND INDUSTRY CHANGES</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>RESEARCH FINDINGS: LIFE IN POST PRODUCTION</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>1. Finding work: informal processes and illegal practices</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2. Insecurity: gratitude, blame and fear</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3. The schedule: unrealistic demands, unsustainable hours and incompatible lives</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>4. Working conditions: unhealthy rooms, problematic attitudes and traumatic content</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>5. Unsustainable terms of trade: a business model that relies on exploitation</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>6. Privacy and security: risks to subjects, contributors and participants</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>CONCLUSION: THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF COMMISSIONERS AND PRODUCTIONS</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>41</b>
Broadcasters, commissioners and productions	41
Post production facilities	43
<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>A: Understanding post: processes and people</b>	<b>44</b>
Post production coordinator	44
First assistant editor	45
Sound editor/designer	45
Visual Effects (VFX) artist	46
Colourist / grader	46
<b>B: Methodology</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>C: Bibliography and references</b>	<b>48</b>

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## **Disclaimer**

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## Executive summary

Post production is an essential part of making all TV shows, sitting between (and sometimes overlapping) production and transmission. It includes data storage, editing, picture grading, visual effects (VFX), sound, quality control and mastering. Post production is a combination of both highly artistic and technical roles, sometimes done by the same individuals.

Broadcasters and production companies depend on good post production, without which they cannot complete their shows. They also have a responsibility under international human rights frameworks, and increasingly under legislation as well, to take responsibility for human rights risks to workers in their supply chains and to prevent, mitigate and remedy any impacts.

Human rights are basic minimum standards which belong to every individual and which were first set out in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948. They include the right to health, the right to non-discrimination and the right to just and favourable conditions of work, amongst others. In the UK, they are legally protected through the Human Rights Act (1998), as well as legislation such as the Equality Act (2010) and the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974). This research has taken a human rights lens to post production, using an international human rights framework to identify human rights risks in the way that post production takes place. Any broadcaster claiming to respect human rights should consider the findings and recommendations of this report.

### Summary of findings

The research found that those working in post production have their human rights adversely impacted in a range of different and sometimes very troubling ways, and that the responsibility for these impacts often sits with commissioners and productions.

1. In terms of labour rights, the research found widespread examples of **illegal or barely legal practices**<sup>1</sup> including lack of contracts, below minimum wage work, inappropriate payment terms, non-compliance with health and safety regulations and a failure to make reasonable adjustments.
2. Due to current shortages of available work and the large number of people who are self-employed or on fixed term contracts, the sector is riddled with **insecurity**, causing high levels of stress for those finding work and leading some to accept poor terms or working conditions. Those that do have work are grateful or expected to be grateful, even when that work does not meet any reasonable definitions of ‘decent’ or ‘good’.<sup>2</sup>
3. There is a lack of formal recruitment processes, employment practices, training and career paths. Post production roles may be hired by productions, contracted by post production facilities or subcontracted through companies and individuals, creating **disparities and lack of transparency over employment relationships** and where duty of care lies.

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<sup>1</sup> Self-employed workers are not currently entitled to minimum wage and other protections for contracted workers, but the line between worker and self-employment is grey

<sup>2</sup> See for example *Job quality in the Creative Industries*, by the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (2023)

4. Insecurity is also a driver of **bullying and blame culture**, with blame frequently pushed down the chain to junior roles, while the fragmented hiring practices and widely freelance nature of the sector means that there is a lack of clear management, accountability or channels for reporting issues.
5. Post production conditions involve **poor labour practices**, including excessively long working hours, a lack of rest days, high pressure to deliver, insufficient breaks, a lack of daylight (especially in winter), working in small, dark and airless rooms and an expectation to remain available when projects are postponed.
6. These working conditions also impact on the **health, safety and family lives** of those working in post production. Interviewees reported being unable to make healthcare appointments, experiencing repetitive injuries, lacking opportunities for healthy eating, driving home after long shifts when exhausted and being unable to establish and maintain relationships with family and friends. Some felt that working in post production was **incompatible with having children**.
7. Those experiencing poor working conditions reported feeling **unable to raise concerns** because of fears of blacklisting in an industry that relies heavily on word of mouth, damage to their reputations if they are seen as not coping, a lack of clarity about how to raise concerns and an expectation that nothing will change.

While some experiences are the same as those working in other parts of production, there are some unique aspects of post production that compound issues and make them particularly challenging or different.

- Work in post production tends to be done by individuals or in very small teams (with the exception of some VFX work), and also often in small rooms. This makes it harder to organise; harder for people to know what a realistic workload is or what basic minimum standards should be; harder to call out poor behaviour; and leaves people more prone to intimidation. With fewer opportunities for camaraderie or communications between workers, together with a different physical space from the production office, there are greater risks of isolation and loneliness.
- Post production also happens at the end of the TV making process and the sector must often make do with whatever budget or time is left over, rather than having adequate amounts ringfenced.
- Current budgetary pressures are leading to underbidding by post production facilities fearful of losing work, and with few options to deliver profitably without resorting to exploitative labour practices.

Many of the issues identified result from the way that commissioners and productions operate.

- The initial schedule is sometimes unrealistic in terms of its expectations; for other projects it is the delays or last-minute changes to the schedule that results in problems for those working in post.
- Late decisions, notes and approvals from commissioners can have significant knock-on impacts for post production workers and make tight budgets even more challenging. Such impacts are rarely acknowledged by those responsible.
- Poor communication and consideration for those in post production can result in last minute cancellations or the failure to provide appropriate warning and support for those working with traumatic or sensitive content.

- Late payments from the commissioner or production company can lead to delays in payments to freelancers.

These issues seem to stem from a combination of limited understanding as to what post production involves, a lack of transparency in relation to projects, and a general lack of understanding, consideration or care for the consequences of actions and decisions, which end up being felt most by those with very little agency for the way projects are planned and executed.

In conclusion, producers, directors and commissioners can adversely impact post production workers through a range of factors: their demands for work that is cheap, fast and high quality; poor budgeting and purchasing practices; and their failure to require and monitor good practices of post production suppliers. The results are the problematic working practices described in this research; the significant impact on family life experienced by those working in post production; and the substantial impediments to a diverse workforce, to the detriment of creative achievement.

The approach used is not cost effective: poor planning and inadequate communications waste time; and long hours and unhealthy working environments reduce productivity. At the same time, budgets appear to be shrinking while demand for quality stays constant, suggesting that broadcasters are not bearing the true costs of their productions. In practice, this means that some of those costs are increasingly borne by individuals least able to afford it who end up providing their labour below cost or for free.

### **Summary of recommendations**

Fixing the situation in post production will require systemic change and an industry-wide approach. There is a need and an opportunity for broadcasters and production companies to lead this change by:

1. increasing the understanding of post production processes among commissioners and production teams;
2. resetting expectations on the amount of budget and time required to meet demands for high quality work, together with acknowledgement of and responsibility for financial and resource implications of late changes; and
3. changing their own practices in order to incentivise and enable better working conditions so that the post production industry can thrive. This includes committing to prompt payment, rewarding post production facilities that have good working practices and supporting better diversity monitoring of post production workers.

There are also opportunities for post production facilities to improve the situation by:

1. providing structured training opportunities and paths for progression;
2. proactively addressing stigma around accessing mental health support;
3. ensuring written contracts and prompt payment for freelancers; and
4. being proactive in reducing the working hours of all those involved in projects.

Together, broadcasters, production companies and post facilities should work with industry bodies to:

1. clarify job descriptions and career paths in post;
2. support an industry-wide channel to report poor working conditions; and
3. provide training opportunities on management, business skills and self-care.

## Summary of human rights risks in post production

Potentially affected group	Issues identified in this research	Human rights at risk	Potential causes
All workers	Excessively long working hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to just and favourable conditions of work</li> <li>• Right to rest and leisure</li> <li>• Right to health</li> <li>• Right to family life</li> </ul>	Schedule, budget, limited understanding of processes, late/ unrealistic demands, poor equipment, industry norms, lack of planning
All workers	Insufficient rest days: inability to attend medical appointments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to health</li> <li>• Right to non discrimination</li> </ul>	Schedule, industry norms
All workers	Insufficient rest days: exhaustion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to rest and leisure</li> <li>• Right to health</li> <li>• Right to family life</li> </ul>	Schedule, industry norms,
All workers	Insufficient breaks: unhealthy eating, repetitive injuries and mental health issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to health</li> </ul>	Long working hours, industry norms
All workers	Lack of warning about sensitive or traumatic footage and lack of follow up support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to health</li> </ul>	Poor communications; lack of transparency
All workers	Lack of ergonomic equipment, causing injuries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to health</li> </ul>	Budget, lack of diversity
All workers	Fear of raising concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to justice</li> </ul>	Lack of lines of accountability; lack of channels or process to raise concerns; reliance on word of mouth for work
All workers, especially those working with one or two others at a time	Bullying behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to just and favourable conditions of work</li> <li>• Right to health</li> </ul>	Insecurity, hierarchies, norms, lack of management training for those in roles that include managing others, fear of raising concerns
All workers, especially junior roles	Blame culture where accountability is not taken by those in senior positions but passed down to junior roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to just and favourable conditions of work</li> <li>• Right to health</li> </ul>	Insecurity, fear, lack of management training for those in roles that include managing others
Freelancers <sup>3</sup>	Lack of contracts leading to last minute cancellations, ghosting, no overtime payments and no right of remedy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to just and favourable conditions of work</li> </ul>	Lack of financial and business skills; among artists; gratitude, fear, precarity
Freelancers	Expectation of availability, sudden changes to schedules, including hiatus or extra work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to work</li> <li>• Right to just and favourable conditions of work</li> </ul>	Schedule, industry norms, fear of raising concerns, lack of contracts
Freelancers	Poor payment terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to just and favourable conditions of work</li> <li>• Right to health</li> </ul>	Lack of prompt payment, from commissioners downwards
Freelancers and junior roles	Accepting below minimum wage work or working for free	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to just and favourable conditions of work</li> </ul>	Gratitude, fear, precarity

<sup>3</sup> Note that the term ‘freelancers’ used in this report is taken to mean self-employed sole traders and those trading through Limited Liability Companies without employees. Those on fixed term contracts (sometimes known as “PAYE freelancers”) are treated as a distinct group as they experience a different set of vulnerabilities.

Potentially affected group	Issues identified in this research	Human rights at risk	Potential causes
People working on 6-day fixed term contracts	Workers told not to work weekends and then told that those weekend days count towards their holiday allowance, which they have therefore already used up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to rest and leisure</li> <li>• Right to just and favourable conditions of work</li> </ul>	Schedule
Workers in roles only advertised on social media	Inability to avoid unhealthy social media networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to health</li> <li>• Right to work</li> </ul>	Schedule, industry norms
Junior and mid-level roles	Unclear avenues for progression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to non discrimination</li> <li>• Right to just and favourable conditions of work</li> </ul>	Informal career paths and progression opportunities; ill-defined roles
Runners and junior roles	Very low paid entry level roles that are only open to those with other means of support and to those physically able to do runner tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to non discrimination</li> </ul>	Industry norms
Studio / facility workers	Late night finishes: safety getting home	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to life</li> </ul>	Schedule, long working hours
Remote/hybrid workers	Inadequate equipment, poorly defined working hours and fewer training opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to just and favourable conditions of work</li> <li>• Right to rest and leisure</li> </ul>	
Workers in machine rooms	Work often takes place in small, airless, dark rooms with inadequate temperature control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to health</li> </ul>	Budget, Industry norms
Workers on set (esp. client-side VFX)	Safety of post production workers on production sets or locations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to life</li> </ul>	Lack of training and support
Disabled workers	Lack of reasonable adjustments, inaccessible post production facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to non-discrimination</li> <li>• Right to work</li> </ul>	Lack of diversity (esp. in senior roles), lack of awareness, lack of management training
Female workers	Misogyny and sexual harassment		
Workers from a minority ethnic background	Racism		
Outsourced workers	Poor working conditions that are hidden and sometimes highly exploitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to just and favourable conditions of work</li> <li>• Right to rest and leisure</li> <li>• Right to health</li> </ul>	Budget, industry norms and business models
Subjects, participants and contributors	Privacy risks if pre-edited footage is shared or used for other purposes by workers, especially intimate or personal footage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to privacy</li> </ul>	Lack of standard safeguards
Participants and contributors; post production workers	Safety risks if identities of whistleblowers / informants are known to workers, in case they experience retaliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Right to life</li> </ul>	Lack of standard safeguards



## Introduction

This research takes a human rights lens to post production, using an international human rights framework to identify human rights risks in the way that post production takes place. Human rights are basic minimum standards which belong to every individual and which were first set out in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights in 1948. They include the right to health, the right to non-discrimination and the right to just and favourable conditions of work, amongst others. In the UK, they are legally protected through the Human Rights Act (1998), as well as other legislation such as the Equality Act (2010) and the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974). The majority of this research took place in the UK but given the transnational nature of post production, it also seeks to bring in experiences and perspectives from elsewhere in the world.

Under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, unanimously ratified by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011 and now underpinning current and emerging national and international legislation, all companies have a responsibility to respect human rights, regardless of national legal frameworks. Companies have a separate duty to identify and assess human rights risks in their operations and supply chains and to take effective actions to prevent, mitigate and remedy their impacts. For broadcasters, production companies and studios, post production is part of the supply chain of a TV show and it is therefore important to understand the nature and severity of human rights risks to those involved in and affected by post production.

Broadcasters and large production companies may already be subject to relevant legislation, such as Germany's Supply Chain Due Diligence Act (LkSG) or the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). These require companies to undertake human rights and environmental due diligence, which includes demonstrating how they are mitigating risks of human rights harms in their supply chains. In the UK, there are several employment law reforms that impact post production, such as 2024 obligations for employers to take steps to prevent sexual harassment, and the Labour Government's 'Plan to Make Work Pay'.<sup>4</sup>

As expectations increase on broadcasters to understand where human rights risks lie and to conduct effective human rights due diligence, turning their attention to production supply chains, including those 'outsourced' to low cost countries, will be essential.

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<sup>4</sup> Gov.uk (2024) *Next steps to make work pay*

# Understanding the context: Seismic shifts and industry changes

Post production has undergone seismic shifts as an industry and at a rapid pace, some of it driven by technology, some by external factors and some by broader industry challenges.

## Technological change

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, **digital video editing** replaced videotape editing, which had itself replaced the need for camera film to be physically cut and spliced together. This enabled editors to work with greater speed and efficiency, giving them flexibility.

The subsequent shift from **tape to tapeless** (film to digital cards), which became widespread by 2010, has reduced costs as film used to be very expensive, while data storage has become cheaper and data processing faster. However, the variety of digital cards, cameras and software means there are many more types of workflow to understand than had been the case with tape. In addition, as screenwriter Steven Bernstein remarked, “the tendency is to just let the cameras run, because digital is cheap compared to film.”<sup>5</sup> The consequence is that the post production team has considerably more footage to ingest, label and review, and it can be challenging for an editor to watch all the material that has been filmed.

Since the rise of computer-generated imagery (CGI) in the 1990s, **visual effects (VFX)** have permeated across all types of TV and are now present in almost everything. For example, “1993’s *Jurassic Park* had 63 VFX shots. In 1997, *Starship Troopers* made headlines for having almost 500. Today’s blockbusters routinely have over 2,000 VFX shots — and far less time to complete them.”<sup>6</sup> The technology continues to evolve at speed, with new techniques developing in VFX. This requires artists to adapt and develop new skills almost continuously, alongside their regular work.<sup>7</sup>

Another shift has been from standard definition (SD) to **high definition (HD)**, which was in its infancy 20 years ago and is now a minimum expectation. Consequently, “The line between television series and movies is practically nonexistent in 2022, with many series matching or exceeding expectations of the quality found in feature films. However, that expectation of quality doesn't always translate to more resources.”<sup>8</sup>

The technology is now swiftly moving to the **cloud**, allowing much more remote working and collaboration. High-speed data networks mean that work can be done almost anywhere in the world, which has increased the pace of **outsourcing** and globalising of post production work, especially VFX work<sup>9</sup>. The current revolution that is **artificial intelligence** is also having a rapid impact on post production, likely both to free up people and replace them, particularly in VFX but also perhaps in relation to dialogue and sound. It is already in use and developing fast but without a current ethics framework around it and a lot of uncertainty about the impacts on jobs.

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<sup>5</sup>Adobe: *Assemble and refine footage with post production*

<sup>6</sup>Turney, D (2022). *The VFX Industry is trapped in a downward spiral*

<sup>7</sup> Sola, J (2023). *Industry insights: Trends and challenges in VFX production*

<sup>8</sup>Plant, L (2022). *Pressure, crunch, blacklist*

<sup>9</sup>Maddeus, G (2023). *IATSE accelerates VFX industry*

## External factors

A wide range of **economic factors**, including deregulation, the opening up of national broadcasting systems to competition and global financial trends have all contributed to a rise in post production talent becoming freelance, particularly in the UK, where many have set up as limited companies and sole traders or rely on fixed-term contracts.

The **Covid 19 pandemic** in 2020 led to an increase in remote or hybrid working<sup>10</sup>. This opened up opportunities to people who had previously been locked out of craft roles that required long hours in a facility. However, one downside has been fewer entry level runner positions available than when everyone was office based.

Most recently, post production facilities have faced **rising fixed costs** in terms of rents, electricity and equipment, but the rates they have been able to charge productions have stayed the same or fallen, while turnaround times from shoot to transmission have tightened. As a consequence, profit margins in UK post production facilities have reduced to an estimated 3-5%, down from 8-10% a decade ago.<sup>11</sup>

## Industry challenges

The screen industries as a whole have undergone rapid transformation in recent years, but this appears to be especially acute in post production. Post production seems particularly vulnerable to **cycles of boom and bust**, which periodically reorganise the roster of corporate players and leave a trail of disillusioned post production talent in their wake. Most recently, the industry has experienced the Writers' Guild and SAG-AFTRA strikes in the USA and a commissioning slowdown in the UK, driven by factors including drops in advertising revenue and a backlog of post-Covid commissions to air. During the pandemic, VFX houses reportedly laid off 23% of talent and they are now predicted to lay off 40% of the pre-strike workforce.<sup>12</sup>

This combination of factors has led to what UK trade union Bectu declared a **crisis in early 2024** as “[a] slowdown across film, TV and commercial production and commissioning in the UK is leaving huge numbers of people out of work”.<sup>13</sup> The unscripted sector seems to have been particularly badly hit and Bectu’s research found that “more than half (52%) of those working in unscripted TV say they plan to leave the film and TV industry in the next five years”.<sup>14</sup> A skills drain would have further impacts if the boom comes again because, as one interviewee explained, “We’ll be back in that vicious cycle where the inexperienced people are way out of their depth having mental breakdowns”.<sup>15</sup>

The industry changes means that there are fewer permanent positions available and a large percentage of those working in post production are freelancers or on **fixed term contracts (FTCs)**. Our research identified two particular issues with the latter of these. Firstly, workers on FTCs have neither the flexibility and higher rates of those who are self-employed nor the benefits and security of full employment and are in an unsatisfactory middle area. Secondly, those on fixed term contracts are sometimes

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<sup>10</sup> Creative Industries Federation (2020) *Written evidence submitted by the Creative Industries Federation: Impact of COVID-19 on the creative industries*

<sup>11</sup>MPTS (2024) *State of the Nation: Post production*

<sup>12</sup>MPTS (2024) *State of the Nation: VFX*

<sup>13</sup>Bectu (2024) *UK film and TV industry slowdown: a sector in crisis*

<sup>14</sup>Bectu (2024) *UK film and TV industry slowdown: a sector in crisis*

<sup>15</sup>Interviews 2024

offered 6-day contracts although work rarely happens at the weekend. They are then deemed to have taken the weekend days they haven't worked as 'holiday' and are not entitled to any additional days off or holiday pay. This is one way that legal attempts to improve conditions for those on fixed term contracts have been undermined.

There have also been deliberate strategies to address **diversity and inclusion** in the post production workforce, although there is still a way to go. A decade ago, there were reportedly far fewer leading creatives who were female, with women mainly in administrative and coordination roles.<sup>16</sup> This is improving although some areas are moving faster than others. In post production sound, there are still significant gaps with recent research identifying a lack of racial, gender and disability diversity.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the Film and TV Charity's surveys on mental health have found that for post production respondents.<sup>18</sup>

- 37% experienced bullying behaviour, harassment or discrimination
- 69% did not think the industry was a mentally healthy place to work
- 32% would not report a mental health problem
- 55% thought about leaving the industry during the past year due to mental health concerns
- 50% felt that there needed to be better line management

The rapid shifts in post production described here have had significant impacts on working practices and of those experiencing them.

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<sup>16</sup>Interviews 2024

<sup>17</sup>Butt, E (2020) *Diversity in post production* sound roles in UK Television Production

<sup>18</sup>The Film and TV Charity's 2022 Looking Glass survey 2022 data, based on 294 post production respondents

# Research findings: Life in post production



# 1. Finding work: informal processes and illegal practices

Those working in post are either self-employed, on fixed term contracts (FTCs) where a production or post production facility puts them temporarily on PAYE, or directly employed by a post production facility. Individuals may move between these different types of employment<sup>19</sup>.

## Human rights at risk:

- Right to non-discrimination
- Right to just and favourable conditions of work
- Right to rest and leisure
- Right to health

For those regularly having to find work, the industry relies heavily on word of mouth, which connects with the theme of insecurity, contributes to high levels of stress around finding work and leads people to accepting poor and sometimes illegal working conditions. There is also a lack of formal recruitment processes, employment practices, training and career paths.

## Word of mouth

A significant proportion of work is found through word of mouth, either via recommendations or existing networks. This is particularly the case in sound, but also editing. Agents may play a role but many freelancers do not have agents. A significant 91% of post production respondents to the 2022 Looking Glass survey agreed that “it’s harder to secure new work or progress into senior roles in this industry if you don’t have strong connections”<sup>20</sup>. Reliance on word of mouth has particular implications for diversity as recruiting from closed networks can be hard for outsiders to break into.

One interviewee for this report said that assistant editor roles were advertised on social media, including Facebook and Instagram, but that everything moves very quickly, sometimes with a requirement to start the following day. Consequently, if you’re not on social media it can be very difficult to find work for some positions.

**“I want to leave social media for my own mental health but if I do, I’ll never find work” – Assistant editor**

## Lack of contracts

The informality extends from recruitment to engagement practices. For self-employed freelancers, particularly those working in sound, there appears to be a widespread lack of contracts or written terms and conditions.

- “80% of the time I don’t sign any paperwork.” – Dialogue editor
- “I didn’t always have a written contract or it would come after starting. I’ve never had a formal offer of work.” – Post production supervisor
- “I’ve never had a contract, always a verbal agreement so there are no terms to refer back to.” – Sound
- “For a lot of us freelancers – certainly for sound in TV drama – there’s no agreement, no contract, no Ts & Cs; just, do you want the work?” – Sound editor
- “It’s rare to get contracts. We present our terms and conditions when we present our invoices. But there’s nothing there to enforce it.” - Sound

The lack of contracts, together with the informality that characterises the industry leads to impacts on individuals’ labour rights, increasing the chances of last-minute

<sup>19</sup> Interviews 2024 and Looking Glass 2022 data

<sup>20</sup> 2022 Looking Glass survey data

cancellations and ‘ghosting’<sup>21</sup>, which can have a significant impact on a person’s mental health and affect their ability to find alternative work.

**“So often I will get a project cancelled the night before and I wouldn’t even be contacted by the client to check. It gives you false hope and then makes you feel disposable” - Sound**

A lack of written terms is also illegal in most circumstances. By law and since April 2020, all UK workers, should receive written terms and conditions on or before their first day of work.<sup>22</sup> Bectu has stated that, “When you or representatives of any company are not confirming these terms in writing upon engaging workers, then the law is not being complied with.”<sup>23</sup>

Those that did have contracts credited their agents for ensuring that contracts existed and were properly written. One said, “If I hadn’t joined [the agency], I’m pretty sure I’d have been exploited”. Another commented that, “[My agent] did the contracts and made sure I got paid on time and they could negotiate a higher rate”.<sup>24</sup> However, few freelancers in post production have agents and there are costs and trade-offs associated with working through them.

### **Late payments**

Late payment is a particular issue for freelancers who may have rent, mortgage payments or other regular costs to meet. It is also more likely to affect those in post production because they are at the end of a long chain of payments, with 30% of those responding to the 2022 Looking Glass survey agreeing with the statement that “late payments for completed work are making it harder for me to manage my money”.<sup>25</sup> Late payments occur despite there being a legal requirement for debts to be settled within 30 calendar days under the Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act (1998) and for interest to be charged for payments that exceed this time.<sup>26</sup>

Interviewees described different techniques that companies use to avoid prompt payment, including referring to 30 *working* days rather than *calendar* days and not accepting an invoice without a purchase order (PO) number but then taking a long time to issue the PO number. As one said, “Every time there’s something in our favour, they find a way to get round it”. Several gave examples of not being paid at all for work. This is also an issue that was highlighted in an open letter sent by Bectu on behalf of the UK post production sound community.<sup>27</sup>

The Film and TV Charity’s ‘Mind-Craft’ Report identifies ‘Struggling financially’ as a key factor in shaping the mental health of film and TV workers. “‘Struggling financially’ captures several financial issues, from cashflow, to income uncertainty, to feeling compelled to take on any kind of work that comes along, all of which are recognisable aspects of freelancer working life.”<sup>28</sup> However, productions and post production facilities may have problems of their own waiting for payment from further up the chain.

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<sup>21</sup> The TV Mindset (March 2024)

<sup>22</sup> Stuart, P (2020) *Employment Law Changes*

<sup>23</sup> Bectu (2023) *Open letter on behalf of the UK post production sound community*

<sup>24</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>25</sup> Looking Glass 2022 data

<sup>26</sup> HMRC (2024a). *Late commercial payments: charging interest and debt recovery*

<sup>27</sup> Bectu (2023) *Open letter on behalf of the UK post production sound community*

<sup>28</sup> Steele, D. (2022), *Mind-Craft: What shapes the mental health of UK film and television workers?*

This is why it is vital that broadcasters, commissioners and production companies pay promptly and require their suppliers to do so too, because it is the most precarious individuals at the end of the process that suffer if they do not.

### **Stress of finding work**

When the supply of work through existing clients and networks dries up, there are limited options for post production workers because of the informal nature of recruitment. The 2022 Looking Glass survey found that 73% of post production respondents agreed with the statement, “Uncertainty about future income often makes me worried”, with 24% saying that, “I sometimes have to take work outside the industry to make ends meet”.<sup>29</sup> Towards the end of 2023 and the first half of 2024, the availability of post production work has slowed down considerably.<sup>30</sup> This makes it even more likely that those in post production are experiencing stress around finding work and concerns about their finances. Example comments from interviewees included:

- “It’s that thing that even when you don’t think about it, it’s always at the back of your mind.”
- “I’m paranoid about being out of work and not being able to afford mortgage payments.”
- “I’ve just gone through a 6 month very dry period and I have a baby on the way so it adds more stresses in other places.”<sup>31</sup>

Such uncertainty has other human rights impacts such as the right to a family life, with one interviewee saying that, “Insecurity over money, cashflow issues, the sense of no protection or increasing job security over time – it’s a factor in not having children”.

### **Informal career paths**

The informality that characterises post production also underpins challenges reported by individuals in finding paths to progress in post production.

Trainee and assistant roles are often very different to the craft roles many people want to achieve but seem to be the only way in. For example, someone wishing to become an editor is expected to go through a pathway of runner – second assistant editor – first assistant editor. These are all technical or administrative roles rather than craft ones. However, there is no guarantee of exposure to the craft side of editing in any of these positions. Interviewees reported it being down to ‘luck’ whether an editor spent time with their assistants providing any training at all. As one interviewee said of a facility, “The technical people were kept underground in the machine room, while the creative people were above and client-facing so there was a huge disconnect.”

The informal progression paths and lack of defined training also mean that people may not have the skills needed for all parts of their job role. For example, they may end up managing people but without having had any management training or even recognising that their role requires it. This has knock on implications for the mental health and wellbeing of those around them and for being able to support colleagues appropriately. It is perhaps one of the factors that led to 48% of post production respondents to the 2022 Looking Glass survey disagreeing with the statement that, “People working in this industry have positive attitudes towards people experiencing mental health issues”.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Looking Glass 2022 data

<sup>30</sup> MPTS (2024) *State of the Nation: Post production*

<sup>31</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>32</sup> Looking Glass 2022 data



In addition, the expectation that everyone starts out at a runner can also disadvantage some disabled people. As one interviewee said, “runners are essentially waiters”, with post production runners doing tasks such as making cups of tea, organising rooms, cleaning kitchens and taking out the bins. Those physically unable to perform such tasks are essentially denied access to entry-level roles, even if they are capable of learning and executing on the craft side of the industry.

Finally, transferring skills and changing paths within post production seems to be subject to considerable gatekeeping. Skills are not seen as transferable from TV to film or from unscripted to scripted, and credits from one country are not seen as transferable to another. One editor remarked that, “You’re desperate to get your first credit so you take the first opportunity. If it’s a documentary and you do that first, you’re pigeon-holed and then that’s all you get afterwards”.<sup>33</sup>

When there’s no transfer path, the requirement for people is to start at the bottom, which is frustrating and off-putting. New entrants to the industry may therefore find themselves competing with experienced professionals for junior roles, limiting their opportunities. It is unclear what rationale there is for these barriers to exist and it is likely to contribute to talented and trained individuals leaving the industry altogether.

From some facilities there was reluctance to invest in training someone if they might then leave, with training described as a ‘burden’ on those that provide it.<sup>34</sup> However, supporting employees with training has benefits to organisations whether they stay or not. It increases retention, is cheaper than recruiting a replacement, helps organisations stay up-to-date with industry developments and maintains good relations with workers across a relatively small sector.<sup>35</sup> Given the low margins within facilities, there is a need for all those working with post production to come together to define career paths and establish training opportunities that benefit the sector as a whole.

### **Competition for roles: Exploitation and discrimination**

Compounding challenges in finding work is the current shortage of projects in post production. The pandemic, strikes and commissioning downturn in unscripted has led to a dramatic reduction in available work.<sup>36</sup> This means there is considerable competition for each project. The result is that individuals report they are accepting below minimum wage work:

- A sound editor reported accepting 5 days of work to do a dialogue edit, knowing in advance that it was likely to take twice that long.
- An experienced editor reported being offered an £800 flat rate for a project, estimated to take 2-3 weeks to edit, working at least 10-hour days. If the film took 2 weeks, that would equate to £8 per hour. At 3 weeks, it is £5.33 per hour (compared to a National Living Wage of £11.44 per hour – April 2024).
- A dialogue editor reported working weekend days that they did not invoice for because the role was paid Monday-Friday without overtime covered.
- An editor reported a client request for preliminary pro bono work for a project due to start more than 6 months later. The editor completed the work and the

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<sup>33</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>34</sup> MPTS (2024) *State of the Nation: Post production*

<sup>35</sup> Willard, J (2023) *Employee training*

<sup>36</sup> MPTS (2024) *State of the Nation: Post production*

potential client then requested further pro bono work to which the editor was worried about saying no in case the project ended up going to someone else.<sup>37</sup>

Self-employed workers are not entitled to minimum wage and other protections for contracted workers, but the line between worker and self-employment is grey. Those interviewed felt that companies knew full well that they could get work out of people for less money, with one saying, “Some people feel obliged to say yes to everything because of the uncertainty”, and another saying, “When there’s not so much demand, companies low ball the offers because they know people are desperate and willing”. By some definitions, this would be deemed **exploitation**.

**“We’re so easy to be taken advantage of because everyone knows we’re worried about the next job” – Sound editor**

While freelancers are at immediate risk of accepting very low rates, the problem also applies to those at entry level where there are high levels of applicants. Glassdoor estimates post production runner salaries at £17-£22k per year, with a median salary of £19,152<sup>38</sup>, equating to £11.64 per hour. This is slightly above the legal National Living wage of £11.44<sup>39</sup>, but should average hours exceed 35 per week, which reports suggest they regularly do, employers will be breaking the law on National Living Wage if their employees are 21 or over.

Competition for roles and low pay also have a detrimental **impact on diversity** in the industry. At entry and junior levels, pay is deemed by those interviewed as unsustainable unless people have other means of financial support such as wealthy parents, high earning partners or the ability to live rent free. All the runners interviewed said that it was not possible to live in London and work as a runner without living at home and that even then an expensive commute presented financial challenges.

In addition, with less work available, producers are preferring to use people in craft roles with more years of experience. Given historical lack of diversity in post production, there are fewer women and people from minority ethnic backgrounds with this type of experience<sup>40</sup> meaning that they are again losing out on opportunities. As Emma Butt observed in her research, “Decisions on hiring are influenced by the opinions (or perceived opinions) of people in project management roles. In a risk-averse culture this results in the hiring of the same sound teams without opportunities for new entrants, or later on in mid-careers professionals moving between genres.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>38</sup> Glassdoor (2024) *Post production runner salaries*

<sup>39</sup> HMRC (2024b) *National Minimum Wage*

<sup>40</sup> The Creative Diversity Network’s Diamond 6<sup>th</sup> Cut data found that women are underrepresented in post production at 36.3%, with BAME at 12.4%, LGB at 12.8% and disabled people at 5.7%. In sound the figures are much worse with 16.3% female, 6.1% BAME, 8.2% LGB and 5.3% disabled.

<sup>41</sup> Butt, E (2020) *Diversity in post production sound roles in UK television production*

## 2. Insecurity: gratitude, blame and fear

Our research found that the precariousness of post production work drives several behaviours that impact on people’s human rights and prevents them reporting issues. More junior people experience insecurity of tenure that makes them more likely to be grateful for bad jobs, unable to set decent terms and much less likely to raise concerns. Senior people experience insecurity that can manifest in bullying behaviour or blame being passed downwards.

### Human rights at risk:

- Right to non-discrimination
- Right to just and favourable conditions of work
- Access to justice

### Decent Work, Good Work and Gratitude

The competition for roles contributes to a strong sense of insecurity and makes people particularly grateful for jobs that they do have or a sense that they should be grateful for those jobs, even if they do not meet international definitions of ‘decent work’ or sector definitions of ‘good work’.

The International Labour Organisation defines decent work as: *“opportunities for work that are productive and that delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.”*

The Good Work Review for the Creative Industries, published in 2023, arrived at the definition shown in the diagram.<sup>42</sup>



*Diagram from: Job Quality in the Creative Industries (Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre)*

Yet our research and that of others, identifies many examples where some or all of these aspects are lacking for those working in post production. A 2022 research report by Rowan Aust found that, “workers are not only grateful for their jobs, but they are also grateful not to be abused while at work”<sup>43</sup>, a sentiment reflected in interviews for this project as well. Interviewees gave statements such as, “Personally – I’ve been lucky as I’ve never been bullied” and, “you feel lucky to have the job” and, “I feel fortunate that I haven’t experienced bullying, harassment or discrimination” and, “Even if you’re working somewhere awful you’re grateful because so many people want the job and you’re in it”.<sup>44</sup> These demonstrate how that sense of gratitude has been normalised in post production.

<sup>42</sup>Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (2023) *Job Quality in the Creative Industries*

<sup>43</sup> Aust, R (2022) *The currency of gratitude*

<sup>44</sup> Interviews 2024

Aust concludes that, “It is up to broadcasters to understand that the conditions they impose through budgetary constraints have a very real effect on the people making their programmes.”<sup>45</sup> Without that understanding and action by broadcasters, and by production companies, post production workers will continue to take work that is not fair, healthy, inclusive or secure, because they feel that they should.

**“We’re told to feel grateful and we’re inclined to be threatened that there might be thousands of people out there who might want the job so we should just accept what it is” – Picture editor**

**“It’s seen as a privilege to work in the industry; a million people who would die for your job” – Post production supervisor**

### **Chasing payments, setting terms and working with subjectivity**

The freelance nature of much of the industry which makes work more precarious is compounded by many of those freelancers stating that they lack financial or business skills. As one interviewee said, “We’re basically a bunch of artists ... who are terrible at business and agreements”, echoing another who said, “Creatives generally aren’t business minded and don’t have that strong foot to put down. And that gets exploited.”<sup>46</sup> This makes it hard for them to chase payments from those who owe them or to push back on unrealistic demands.

As well as late payments, interviewees said that overtime is usually not paid. Even when it is written into contracts, few interviewees felt confident in asking for overtime payments. In some cases, the overtime has to be justified and a production may reject the reasons given for overtime. After a job is finished, a freelancer may also be asked for updates which they are then expected to do for free.

While this may be an issue for freelancers in other parts of TV production or, indeed, for freelancing generally, the isolated working environment of post production means that it is difficult for individuals to know what is reasonable to ask, what others are doing and how common it is to push back. Adding to the sense of insecurity is also the subjectivity that is part of many of post production’s craft roles.

- “You can sit and fiddle with a scene until the end of your life...When is it good enough? This is subjective and it comes with experience and sometimes you’re wrong.”
- “I would often work 17 hours a day – driven by fear; it’s a subjective thing so there’s not a firm goal to obtain so you keep reworking it.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Bullying**

The insecurity of tenure in the industry, combined with the pace of technological change, are both drivers that contribute to bullying. For example, several interviewees suggested that bullying behaviour may stem from senior individuals’ lack of knowledge and insecurities about their own employment in response to the speed of industry changes in post production.

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<sup>45</sup> Aust,R (2022) *The currency of gratitude*

<sup>46</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>47</sup> Interviews 2024

However, insecurity is not the only driver of bullying. Another driver identified by interviewees included that staff with managerial responsibilities are under stress. But rather than addressing the stress or the bullying, it is often passed over as a feature of the industry or seen as a 'rite of passage'. One interviewee reported an incident when, "Gaffers were teasing a runner, a new graduate, and shutting him out of conversation...they said that they had to put up with it so the runner should too". Examples like these shed light on why the 2022 Looking Glass survey found that 40% of post production respondents had witnessed bullying and 27% (more than 1 in 4) had experienced it.<sup>48</sup>

These findings echo Van Raalte et al.'s research across the TV industry, which described how "the stress experienced by commissioners and executives filters down through the team as managers creating a culture in which incivility to and undermining of others is normalised as a management technique serves to render bullying all but invisible."<sup>49</sup>

While it is individuals who act as bullies, post production as a context enables them to do so with impunity, as the relative isolation of post production workers means that they are often in a situation of one person's word against another.

### **Blame gets pushed down: "Junior people are thrown under the bus"**

The inherent insecurities of post production also put a significant amount of pressure on people to avoid mistakes – sometimes unrealistically, because in complex projects something is likely to go wrong at some point. Interviewees described post production as a place where blame for problems is pushed downwards, often to the most junior people in the team.

- "Stress is being passed down the train."
- "Shit always rolls downhill – it's always the problem of the person below someone else."
- "Countless times when someone higher up has messed up, blame has been put on the junior person for not spotting it."
- "If you make a mistake, you'll be chucked under the bus and pulled off the project."
- "When senior editors are working with junior editors, junior people get thrown under the bus when it's not their fault."<sup>50</sup>

This shifting of blame downwards further erodes any sense of security. It affects trust within teams, reduces productivity and quality, and means that no one learns effectively from mistakes.<sup>51</sup> A blame culture features in most definitions of a 'toxic workplace'<sup>52</sup> and unfairly blaming others is one of the examples of bullying and harassment identified by the BFI.<sup>53</sup> Within post production, blame shifting is one consequence of unclear lines of accountability, conflicting hierarchies and conflicting priorities.

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<sup>48</sup> Looking Glass 2022 data

<sup>49</sup> Van Raalte, C et al (2023) *More than just a few 'bad apples': the need for a risk management approach to the problem of workplace bullying in the UK's television industry*

<sup>50</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>51</sup> Timms, M (2022) *Blame culture is toxic. Here's how to stop it.*

<sup>52</sup> E.g. Sandhu, P (2023) *9 signs you're in a toxic work environment – and what to do about it*; or Hetler, A (2023) *11 signs of a toxic workplace culture*; or Platform *Toxic Work Environments: How can managers safeguard employees*

<sup>53</sup> BFI (2020) *A practical workplace guide for the prevention of bullying and harassment in the screen industries*

## Raising concerns

Being able to raise grievances and have those acted upon is a fundamental component of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Without it, individuals who have their rights impacted cannot effectively access remedy. However, the sense of insecurity, and the actual insecurity given the current job market, makes it particularly difficult for those working in post production to raise concerns about impacts to their human rights, whether that is in relation to individual or corporate behaviour.

Being a freelancer is difficult when it comes to raising concerns as there is a (well-founded) fear of industry blacklisting<sup>54</sup>, knowing who to trust is difficult and there are usually no human resources teams or employee assistance programmes to fall back on. There may not be any channels at all through which to flag something to those in charge of a production. Even when a person is employed permanently and where human resources teams do exist, systems for reporting issues internally may not exist, the fear of blacklisting remains and there is a sense (whether right or not) that a human resources team is there to protect the company rather than individuals attached to it.

**“It’s not good to get a piece of paper from production to go through a portal because you’re talking to your team and it doesn’t feel the safest.” – Assistant Editor**

While this is challenging throughout the TV industry, four aspects make it particularly difficult for post production workers:

1. Post production often happens in isolation, away from teams, sometimes towards the end of a project and without the opportunity to build trusted relationships. This also means that there may be no witnesses to problematic behaviour and people end up doubting their own experiences, especially when there are only two or three people in a small sound-proofed room. In addition, others may be unwilling to corroborate incidents due to their own fears of blacklisting.
2. Post production workers on a project may have different statuses, depending on whether they are directly employed by a production, by a facility or via another freelancer, making accountability for addressing issues unclear.
3. There are not always obvious routes or trusted channels for post production workers to raise concerns. For example, details of a facility whistleblowing line may be in a staff-only area of an intranet, meaning freelancers cannot access it. Where facilities point people to key individuals with whom they can raise concerns, there may be no options for anonymity. Sometimes the person to report to is themselves a freelancer, also concerned about the security of their career and unwilling to push issues further.
4. There is no standard management training in post production so those with management responsibilities may not know how to respond to challenging situations that arise.

It’s a particular challenge for those in more junior roles, with interviewees who are now relatively senior recognising that their seniority puts them in a position where it is easier to speak up. Interviewees spoke mostly about fear in relation to raising concerns:

- “Everyone’s afraid for their jobs.”

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<sup>54</sup> Bectu (2021) *File on 4 research*

- “Often I don’t know who I would reach out to.”
- “There isn’t a safe space to take a stand; you’re in fear of tarnishing your reputation.”
- “There’s a fear of speaking out and never working again.”
- “Raising concerns is very informal and lots of time the people you’d complain to are those doing the bullying.”
- “No clear channels and fear of repercussions.”
- “They might think it’s subjective or misinterpreted so there’s that worry that I might be seen as difficult.”
- “You could be seen as a troublemaker for saying things that throw a spanner in the works – you’re expected to put up with it and don’t mention things; if you do, you’re seen as difficult.”
- “The worry about being blacklisted makes it an impossible cycle.”
- “Can’t go much higher than the post production supervisor because it looks like you’re trying to screw the editor.”<sup>55</sup>

Interviewees said it was tempting to put up with challenging situations, knowing that they are temporary. This finding was borne out by the 2022 Looking Glass survey, which found that 77% of post production respondents who had experienced bullying did not report it.<sup>56</sup>

**“As a freelancer working on short contracts averaging 8 weeks, it often doesn’t seem worth it to raise the issue, although clearly it should be.” – from Looking Glass survey 2022**

However, there are many problems that arise when people are not able to raise concerns or expect to have them addressed. Some will leave the industry because issues remain unresolved; some experience impacts to their mental health; and others will find alternative outlets for their grievances, such as a website called Film Industry Watch<sup>57</sup>, which publishes allegations against individuals and organisations. While airing grievances in an online environment may feel cathartic, it also denies due process to those against whom allegations have been made, or the ability to defend themselves.

There is an urgent need to identify clear and trusted channels for individuals in post production to report problematic behaviour, whether that is late payments or sexual harassment, and to have such reports acted upon appropriately. Every production needs clear lines of accountability. Such grievance mechanisms can enable issues to be addressed promptly before they escalate and act as an early warning system for potentially bigger problems that could have financial, legal or reputational ramifications for a production or a broadcaster.

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<sup>55</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>56</sup> Looking Glass 2022 data

<sup>57</sup> Film Industry Watch

### 3. The schedule: unrealistic demands, unsustainable hours and incompatible lives

At the root of many issues aired by those in post production is ‘the schedule’ – the plan established for when decisions will be taken and work will be done. Sometimes the initial schedule is unrealistic in terms of its expectations; for other projects it is the delays or last minute changes to the schedule that results in problems to those working in post production. The situation is so challenging that it seems to many insiders that a family life is incompatible with post production work.

#### Human rights at risk:

- Right to non-discrimination
- Right to just and favourable conditions of work
- Right to life
- Right to health
- Right to a family life

#### Insufficient time to complete the work from the outset

The time needed to complete post production work is frequently underestimated in schedules, or differences between genres and the specific demands they are likely to entail are overlooked. Thus problems may be baked in from the outset of a project, rather than anticipated and addressed. One interviewee described every project as starting from a position of “controlled panic”.

Projects that are likely to need more time scheduled include those that:

- Have lots of crowd scenes
- Have a lot of dialogue
- Are VFX heavy
- Are an action show
- Are in series 1
- Need lots of clearances, e.g. for music, visible artwork

In some cases, the underestimation is based on insufficient information from productions about the nature of a project or a lack of clarity from writers/creators about what they want, instead expecting to ‘know it when they see it’. In other cases it may be a lack of understanding by productions as to how long it takes to complete different aspects of post production. Interviewees reported a trend of increasing expectations by productions with less time allocated and for less money.

The impact on individuals working under these circumstances includes stress and exhaustion, both of which are contributors to poor mental health and symptoms such as forgetfulness and impulsiveness.<sup>58</sup>

**“I can be on a job for 6 months and for maybe 5 months I’m working against the clock. There’s constant stress of thinking I haven’t got enough time and doing that day after day is incredibly hard.”**

#### Changes to the schedule and late decision-making

The insufficient time from the outset is often compounded by further changes to the schedule after the project starts. For example, there may be problems on the shoot and an expectation that ‘we can fix it in post’, but with no schedule adjustments to enable that to happen.

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<sup>58</sup> Wiehler, A, and Pessiglione, M, *A neuro-metabolic account of why daylong cognitive work alters the control of economic decisions*



Sometimes schedules are paused but the post production facility and freelancers associated with a project are expected to remain available for whenever the project restarts. This pause can happen at very late notice. For example, several interviewees working in sound described situations where work was postponed the day before it was supposed to start, or even on the day itself, finding themselves out of work and with no income.

- “If it’s been pushed three weeks you have to stay available or you might not be used again.”
- “Schedules often change, you could be put on hiatus at no notice and left with no work for an indefinite period of time and then the production starts up and expects you to be available.”<sup>59</sup>

Squeezes to the schedule, when deadlines stay fixed but starting points move, are a problem all the way along the chain of post production but are a particular challenge to those at the end, such as sound which has to be done after the picture is final. For example, one interviewee said that picture lock day “always gets pushed back” but the pre-mix deadline does not move so that work has to be done in less time than originally scheduled. Similarly, an editor reported being asked to cut something that should take a week but being told that the next viewing was scheduled for three days time.

Some of the schedule squeezes are down to late decision-making, notes or approvals from commissioners and producers, with little recognition of the impact that will have on those working in post production who are under significant pressure to deliver.

Our findings in post production were remarkably similar to the ‘crew perspectives’ identified in the Timewise study of working hours on set, which found that, “[The crew’s] perception is that writers and production executives don’t see the impact of scripts landing late or being changed at the 11th hour, or understand the difficulties of making the production work to schedule and budget whilst maintaining quality.”<sup>60</sup> Similarly, post production crew felt that a lack of understanding about the impacts of decision-making can contribute significantly to long working hours. For example, if a decision to change something is not made until 7pm, that means night shifts for those working on post production, often with no notice. In addition, clients who see the quality control stage as a last chance to change things can cause hours more work over apparently small requests which may impact multiple different master files.

**“There is lots of pressure towards crunch time and deadlines are immovable. Work expands to fill and exceed time available. There is more to do to speak truth to power. Commissioners and producers are both equally to blame for late unreasonable demands.” – VFX artist**

### **Long working hours**

All the interviewees mentioned long working hours as a feature of the industry, with it impacting different roles in slightly different ways. Working hours is a long-standing concern of labour rights with the first Convention of the International Labour Organisation adopted in 1919 to limit hours of work and provide for adequate rest periods for workers.<sup>61</sup> However, long working hours continue to be an issue, with Bectu

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<sup>59</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>60</sup> Timewise (2024) *Designing a Blueprint for shorter working day*

<sup>61</sup> ILO (1919) *Hours of Work (Industry) Convention*

flagging, in 2023, “the matter of the unsustainable and excessively long hours expected due to ever-shifting schedules and last minute changes.”<sup>62</sup>

Long working hours do not appear to be beneficial to anyone. For individuals, there are impacts on health, safety and family life. The work itself also suffers, with interviewees in all roles saying that they were unable to work well after 10 hours. This means work needs to be reviewed and often repeated, sometimes at additional cost to productions.

- “Any work done after 8pm in the cutting room has to be redone the next morning because decision-making skills are impaired after a 10 hour day.” – Post Production Supervisor
- “You are not only physically and mentally fatigued, your ears are shot. You’re not making constructive decisions when working late and you’ll have to fix things when you come in the next day.” - Sound
- “After 6pm my attention is gone because it’s such a demanding job because you’re making thousands of mental adjustments a minute and doing so much with your hands and we don’t realise how demanding it is mentally and physically. So during those crunch periods, I’m just going through the motions. After 9pm, we’re not productive, haven’t got good judgement and are not doing good work, so we’ll have to redo it.” - Grader
- “I have to redo things all the time – it’s a technical thing ‘pixel-fucking’; you miss those as you get tired.” - VFX<sup>63</sup>

As one report stated, “A long-hours culture damages productivity. It’s bad for business. Ultimately, it’s the product of bad management. When crew working in Film and TV are routinely working long hours, it’s more likely that they are doing it due to a lack of investment in careful management and not because of any real business need.”<sup>64</sup>

Some interviewees blamed individuals for long working hours, such as freelancers who like to do long hours and then rest for a few weeks, providing a poor example to new industry entrants and sometimes requiring all those around them to work long hours as well. Clients such as commissioners, directors and producers also have a lot of power and may be “treated like gods”, so that everyone has to work to their schedule with no one feeling able to push back on unreasonable hours. Conversely, clients can have a very positive impact. Paul Rogers who won an Oscar for his editing of the film ‘Everything, Everywhere, All at Once’ said in his press room speech, “They allowed us to make this film in a really humane way, you know, reasonable hours, time with our family, no yelling, no screaming.”<sup>65</sup> Long working hours can also be a function of poor equipment – “when equipment is very slow, a 10-hour day turns into a 15- or 16-hour day”.<sup>66</sup>

Other interviewees referenced a general expectation to work until a job was done with an example given of 21 continuous hours dealing with ongoing client edits, and another of working unpaid weekend days to complete a job. Where contracts are in place, people are required to sign out of the working time directive but no one interviewed felt this was optional.

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<sup>62</sup> Bectu (2023) *Open letter on behalf of the UK post production sound community*

<sup>63</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>64</sup> Evans, P and Green, J. (2017) *Eyes Half Shut: A report on long hours and productivity in the UK film and TV industry*

<sup>65</sup> Rogers, P (2023) *Oscars95 Press Room Speech*

<sup>66</sup> Interviews 2024

There is also a sense that people need to work long hours in order to be noticed and supported to progress, with the phrase ‘rite of passage’ coming up several times.

**“People now say it’s all about perseverance and spending hours in order to help yourself and you’re the only one that can help yourself in the industry. It’s almost a conditioned trait that if you work all these hours then it will pay off.” - Editor**

One facility trying to address this is The Finish Line, which was awarded ‘best place to work in TV’ in 2023 and 2024<sup>67</sup>. In an online article, founder Zeb Chadfield explained how it used to be normal to quote for 12-hour days but how he decided to quote on 8 hour days instead. He reports that “talent and clients ended up actually completing the work faster when spread over more, shorter days and with higher quality results.”<sup>68</sup>

It should be in everyone’s interests to address the long working hours in post and yet without concerted industry efforts to address the normalisation of long working hours, it will continue to the detriment of those working in it and, ultimately, to the detriment of the industry as experienced people exit the sector. As one interviewee said, “Everyone is working 15+ hours a day. That’s two people’s jobs. Why can’t you have two production managers or production coordinators or editors? There’s clearly too much work being done by one person in a role.”<sup>69</sup>

### **Impacts on health, safety and family life**

The hours and lack of rest days have significant knock-on impacts to other human rights as well. From a health perspective, long hours in chairs doing repetitive work can impact physically. From a safety perspective, long hours may mean travelling home late at night, which can feel particularly unsafe for women, or driving home when excessively tired. As one article on VFX stated, “[We] all know someone who’s dozed off driving home after a long day”.<sup>70</sup> There are additional complications in that having a cab paid for by work is a taxable benefit, meaning that people may incur costs for the privilege of being safe.

The lack of rest days meant that interviewees reported being unable to find time to visit doctors or dentists, particularly if freelance and on a busy project. If that project then rolls straight into the next one, it could be months before being able to make and attend health appointments. This makes such work particularly challenging for carers, disabled people who may need regular check ups, those with long-term health conditions, women going through pregnancy or the menopause and anyone else needing to attend medical appointments. This inevitably impacts on **diversity**, with the schedules making some post production work inaccessible to certain people.

The punishing schedules also have a substantial impact on family life and the ability to make and sustain meaningful relationships and access social support. One assistant editor felt their role was “100% incompatible with friends and family”. Another interviewee said that, “So many times when I’ve planned to meet up with a friend I have cancelled because of work or because I am so tired that I have no energy to do things”.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The Finish Line (2024) *The best place to work in TV 2024*

<sup>68</sup> The Finish Line (2024) *The best place to work in TV 2024*

<sup>69</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>70</sup> Turney, D (2022) *The VFX Industry is trapped in a downward spiral*

<sup>71</sup> Interviews 2024

The lack of time with family and friends can lead to experiences of loneliness, which in turn can have profound effects on a person's mental and physical health. In fact, the importance of social connection for good health is increasingly recognised, to the extent that the World Health Organisation recently declared loneliness a pressing global threat and launched a commission to foster social connection.<sup>72</sup> Amongst industry workers, The Film and TV Charity's 'Mind-Craft' report found that loneliness was the biggest single factor influencing mental health, having three times the impact of the second strongest factor measured.<sup>73</sup>

**“I don't really have a social life – most of the time I'm at home, either cutting a short film, or messing around on my computer” – Assistant editor**

This can be a particular issue for young post production workers at the start of their careers who may prioritise their career over personal time and relationships, at the expense of those relationships. As one interviewee said, “nurturing relationships is so important and you can't get that time back”.<sup>74</sup>

For a small but significant number of interviewees, working in post production feels incompatible with having children altogether. Some mentioned the challenges of managing work around childcare, others described stepping back from career goals or moving into non-craft roles as a result of becoming parents. One interviewee said the lack of work life balance was a factor in not having children, with another saying, “I'm 35 and single and I do think a lot is because of my job”.

The problems are linked to post production's cultural expectations of availability and a sense from interviewees that if you took time off or became unavailable, that this would have damaging ramifications on your career.

- “Once you're signed up to a job we have to be 100% available and convenient at all times. It's like they've hired a tool that can be picked up and put down at any time. It is very much frowned upon if you don't do it.”
- “It's in the DNA of the industry that you've signed away every right to everything by taking on the job. Any right to free time or having a life is as bad as it could be.”<sup>75</sup>

In addition, those in post production are expected to work around everyone else's availability. For example, individuals re-recording dialogue (ADR) will find themselves at the mercy of an actor's schedule, making it challenging to plan their lives and other work around it. One interviewee said, “Being able to plan for the future is so hard. For 15 years I'd never book a holiday – you have to wait until a job finishes and hope it coincides with school holiday and sneak a week off. But often that doesn't happen.”

Bectu summarised the challenges with the schedules as, “This reliance on freelancers to accommodate scheduling issues results in unreasonable workloads; excessive hours erode productivity and well-being, leading to burnout, talent atrophy from the industry, and impossible conditions for people with greater family, parental, and caring responsibilities.”<sup>76</sup> Our research confirmed these are systemic issues, not isolated incidents, and they will need systemic change to address them.

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<sup>72</sup> WHO (2023) *WHO launches Commission to foster social connection*

<sup>73</sup> Steele, D. (2022), *Mind-Craft: What shapes the mental health of UK film and television workers?*

<sup>74</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>75</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>76</sup> Bectu (2023) *Open letter on behalf of the UK post production sound community*

## 4. Working conditions: unhealthy rooms, problematic attitudes and traumatic content

The conditions in which post production work takes place have some unique features which can put the safety and health of workers at risk. An industry culture of poor communications and reports of discrimination compound the challenges faced by some of those working in it.

### Human rights at risk:

- Right to non-discrimination
- Right to just and favourable conditions of work
- Right to rest and leisure
- Right to health

### Unhealthy rooms – airless, dark and small

The nature of post production work is that it mostly takes place in small sound-proofed rooms, with one or two people working together. The types of rooms used in post production facilities are either ‘machine rooms’ or ‘client-facing suites’.

Rooms which are client facing tend to be better equipped, larger and better ventilated as this is where clients (producers, directors and sometimes commissioners) will sit in with editors or colourists to discuss their vision. Non-client facing ‘machine rooms’ are, in contrast, often small, windowless and less well ventilated. While air conditioning may be present, this is not always fresh clean air and may be targeted at equipment rather than people. Interviewees reported times when they were too cold or too hot, with limited ability to control the working environment. Those working in sound sometimes require complete silence so have to work with no air conditioning at all. One interviewee said, “I was in a metal shipping container and I had to work in my pants because it was insanely hot.”<sup>77</sup>

By necessity, rooms are often fairly dark and it is not uncommon for machine rooms to be in a basement. On some projects, and particularly in winter, workers may not see daylight all week. This affects a person’s sense of time and their body clock, which can lead to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and even reduce life expectancy.<sup>78</sup>

Post production workspaces may sometimes be illegally small. UK regulations state that: “Every room where persons work shall have sufficient floor area, height and unoccupied space for purposes of health, safety and welfare.” It goes on to say “The total volume of the room, when empty, divided by the number of people normally working in it should be at least 11 cubic metres...[This] is a minimum and may be insufficient if, for example, much of the room is taken up by furniture etc.”<sup>79</sup> Some interviewees reported working in rooms that were little more than cupboards.

### Repetitive injuries and unhealthy eating

Regular breaks and movement can help address the health risks described above, with the Health and Safety Executive recommending that people working at desks get up and move for 5-10 minutes every hour.<sup>80</sup> Unfortunately, a culture that lionises those that work continuously can make it very difficult to take the breaks that are needed, particularly for those early on in their careers.

<sup>77</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>78</sup> Foster, R (2019) *The key to a good night's sleep*

<sup>79</sup> HSE *How much room am I entitled to at work?*

<sup>80</sup> HSE *Working safely with display screen equipment*

Breaks for some sessions were reportedly explicitly not allowed. For example, one interviewee working on re-recording dialogue (ADR) gave an example of a 6-hour session with no breaks allowed because that would have cost implications. More commonly though, breaks are simply not considered and this can have significant health implications and increase the likelihood of health issues occurring. Post production workers in different roles all highlighted risks of repetitive injuries:

- A grader looking at something the same distance away all the time can impact on eyesight – eye strain is likely after 10-12 hours in a colouring suite
- Re-recording mixers sometimes work at very high volume levels, risking long-term damage to their hearing
- Someone working in 3D risks eye strain, especially if they're working at 24 rather than 48 frames per second
- Editorial teams make repetitive mouse movements

All types of workers mentioned repetitive strain injury (RSI) as a risk or an experience they had had as a result of very long hours.

**“I heard stories of engineers in their 30s and 40s so riddled with RSI that they had a mouse to click with their feet” – Sound designer**

Post production work involves long hours being sedentary and bending over equipment, which can lead to musculoskeletal problems. While employees in a facility may have the opportunity to access ergonomic desks and set up a healthy working environment, freelancers visiting for short periods or those in non-client-facing roles may have to work with what they have. One interviewee said, “the further down the company you go, the more you're just given stuff that's lying around, including broken chairs and tables.”

Some facilities do provide additional lighting, standing desks and other ergonomic equipment. However, desks or chairs are not always adjustable so mixing desks and editing desks may be problematic for those who are not average height. Also, if the request is directly to productions, they may not have the budget to respond, even though reasonable adjustments are a legal requirement.

Insufficient breaks are also a key factor in unhealthy eating. Interviewees reported receiving schedules for long days with no breaks marked, eating lunch at desks and relying on takeaways. One said that back-to-back projects easily led to weight gain, especially as there is little time to take exercise. A study on the VFX industry stated that, “75% of VFX workers reported being forced to work through legally mandated meal breaks and rest periods without compensation.”<sup>81</sup> Another interviewee said that, “I wouldn't even take a break to go to the toilet when younger. Then I got kidney stones.”

### **Solitude**

Much post production work is a solitary experience, requiring deep concentration or sound-proofed rooms. This isolation can have associated mental health impacts. It is also a safety risk. For example, if someone has a health condition and an issue occurs, they may not be found for some time because people are not regularly checked up on.

Working in a small room with perhaps only one other person is also a safety risk in terms of harassment and assault. Rooms are soundproofed which can make people be and feel particularly vulnerable, particularly those staying late or working overnight.

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<sup>81</sup> ‘Shadows’ (2023) *Working conditions in the VFX industry: a new study highlights a ‘crisis’*

## **Safety at work**

Post production work itself does not have many safety hazards. The only example provided in facilities was that runners and assistants may be required to move heavy desks, screens and furniture, or set up electronic equipment. Interviewees who mentioned this also said that they had not received any manual handling or electronic safety training and therefore risked injury.

However when post production workers are required to be on sets, which can be hazardous places, then they will be subjected to the same safety risks as other crew working on set but often without the same training or mitigations to help them feel safe. As one study explained, “VFX workers on set are often tasked with capturing difficult and dangerous elements, such as explosions, stunts, and splinter-unit duties which can put them at higher risk than other departments.”<sup>82</sup>

## **Remote/hybrid working**

A positive development since the Covid pandemic has been the rise of remote and hybrid working, which is enabling more people to balance their home responsibilities with their work commitments. It also saves people time and money from commuting. However, this does come with challenges that need to be actively addressed by post production facilities in particular.

Firstly there is the problem of inadequate home equipment. People will have different internet speeds which can affect how long it takes to download and upload rushes. One assistant editor described getting up at 6am to start downloading rushes in order to deal with this issue. Post production facilities need to support those working from home with the right equipment to do the job properly.

A second challenge is that working from home can lead to poorly defined working hours. Because people *can* work from home, there may be an expectation that they *will* work whenever is needed and take calls from colleagues, interfering in their family life and rest time. However, as one stated, “Being tethered to your computer all the time is not conducive to good mental health”<sup>83</sup>.

A third challenge is that with fewer people based in the same location there are fewer opportunities for training. However, this is perhaps more a feature of the way training has been done in post production to date and more structured training opportunities and defined paths to progression would address this issue. Some facilities and individuals have sought to manage this by sending trainees to the home offices of those whom they are observing. However, this brings safeguarding and insurance issues. It may well not be appropriate to send a junior person to the private home of a senior person for mentoring.

## **Discrimination – still a feature**

Discrimination unfortunately continues to be a feature of post production. In the 2022 Looking Glass survey, 36% of post production respondents had witnessed identity-related discrimination and 22% had directly experienced discrimination<sup>84</sup>. Many interviewees reported that they had personally encountered problematic attitudes. Of

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<sup>82</sup> IATSE (2022) *VFX Rates and Conditions Survey*

<sup>83</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>84</sup> Looking Glass 2022 data

those interviewed, only three said that they had not witnessed or experienced discrimination, with one of those saying they felt ‘lucky’ that this was the case.

From an accessibility perspective, many post production facilities have no ramp access and are based in buildings such as Soho townhouses, which, if not modified, are challenging to navigate for those who are not able-bodied.

Anna Bull’s report on sexual harassment in the UK film and television industry since #MeToo found that, “Gender inequalities contributed to creating workplace cultures that supported sexual harassment and violence to occur”<sup>85</sup>. Similarly, our research found that misogyny remains an issue in some parts of the industry and in some facilities, particularly as the more senior levels of post production tend to be dominated by men. One interviewee shared his experience of an all-male facility with a macho culture where sexist jokes were common. Even where women are present, there was a sense that they may be overlooked for promotion, with another interviewee commenting that, “Women would only get opportunities by leaving and going somewhere else.” Two interviewees separately described coming across the perception that men are a safer pair of hands than women.

Interviewees were also able to share examples of racism, including inappropriate banter, microaggressions and insensitive behaviour. One interviewee said, “I’m surprised racial minorities stick it out – it’s an unfriendly environment to be in”. Evidence from other research supports the perception that attitudes impact on diversity, for example, Emma Butt’s work on diversity in post production sound roles, found that “decisions on hiring are influenced by the opinions (or perceived opinions) of people in project management roles”.<sup>86</sup>

There have been initiatives to encourage more diversity at entry level roles, such as Access VFX<sup>87</sup> and Black Women in Post Production (BWIPP)<sup>88</sup>, but representation at senior levels remains a challenge. For those in the industry who come from less privileged backgrounds, it can be difficult to navigate the industry without support and contacts due to the informal ways that people find work and promotions. Compounding the problems entailed by informal recruitment, diversity targets set by broadcasters for productions do not currently filter through to post production. This means that diversity monitoring forms for Diamond<sup>89</sup> are often not sent by productions to those working in post production, particularly freelancers. Consequently there is limited data available to track representation and build the evidence base needed to improve the situation.

**“As budgets have become smaller and schedules have become tighter, there are no entryways and until that changes we’ll be stuck in old working patterns because the status quo won’t change as it benefits those in it.” – Post production supervisor**

Interviewees also gave examples where people minimised someone’s experiences or mocked their perspectives. One said that she was booked into a studio where she had previously experienced sexism. When she flagged this, she was told it was “no big deal”. Another interviewee reported seeing a colleague openly jeered at for asking not to do a project that went against his Christian beliefs. A senior industry representative

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<sup>85</sup> Bull, A (2023) *Safe to speak up? Sexual harassment in the UK film and television industry since #MeToo*

<sup>86</sup> Butt, E (2020) *Diversity in post production sound roles in UK television and production*

<sup>87</sup> Access VFX

<sup>88</sup> BWIPP

<sup>89</sup> See <https://creativitydiversitynetwork.com/diamond/>



interviewed for this project said that, “The younger generation are not particularly robust” in response to a question about discrimination and mental health, perhaps reflecting some of the attitudes that continue to prevent improvements.

### **No warnings: Working with sensitive or traumatic content**

Along the chain of post production, people work with a range of different content, often repeatedly, as they edit, colour, sound edit or quality control a project. Sometimes this content is sensitive or traumatic. This can happen in scripted, such as a dramatisation of a real-life event, and in unscripted, such as fly-on-the-wall documentaries on emergency services, prisons and hospitals. The impact of working with such content can be significant and cumulative, leading to burnout. As one interviewee said, “You can’t unsee it. It sticks in your head”, and another described fainting several years after working on a difficult project when a clip of the footage was played at an event.

Examples given by interviewees of roles that might be impacted by working with traumatic content included:

- DIT team ingesting daily footage
- Editors looking at rushes
- Edit assistant reviewing archive footage of war or crime scenes
- Junior colleague tasked with blurring graphic footage of injuries
- Grader of sensitive scenes
- ADR re-recording harrowing crowd scenes
- Sound editor creating graphic sounds, e.g. person slowly cutting off limb
- VFX artist creating graphic images that are too disturbing to film directly or to enhance something particularly traumatic

However, it is not always obvious who might be affected by what. For example, depictions of murder, domestic violence, sexual assault, suicide or eating disorders may particularly affect some workers in post production due to their own lived experience. One interviewee mentioned the challenges of working on an emotional death scene having recently lost a family member.

The common finding was that post production workers rarely get warned about the type of content they are about to see.

- “I’ve never been warned about anything I’ve worked on.”
- “Audiences get disclaimers but we don’t.”
- “There was never a choice or a check that I was ok working with this material.”<sup>90</sup>

The lack of warning reflects a wider disregard for the experience of post production, many of whom raised poor communications from productions as a key challenge. For example, they are rarely considered by production management for counselling and welfare support that might be offered to a production crew. They are also likely to take fewer breaks due to the scheduling time constraints, going against good practice for working with sensitive content.<sup>91</sup> This aligns with the 2022 Looking Glass survey, which found that 47% of post production respondents disagreed with the statement, “In my experience, people working on challenging or traumatic stories receive sufficient support to manage their own mental wellbeing”.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>91</sup> Dart Center (2014) *Working with traumatic imagery*

<sup>92</sup> Looking Glass 2022 data

## 5. Unsustainable terms of trade: a business model that relies on exploitation

Budgets are under pressure at all stages of the TV production value chain and producers are tasked with keeping as much of the budget in front of the camera as possible. This does not include post production, even if the sentiment when shooting is ‘let’s fix it in post’.

### Human rights at risk:

- Right to just and favourable conditions of work
- Right to rest and leisure
- Right to health

However, as post production comes at the end of the process, if budgets have been mismanaged or misallocated at earlier stages, post production may be left far less than is required and it becomes an option of taking the work below cost but in return for credits or turning it down altogether. This situation can have severe knock-on impacts for employees at post production facilities, who may be expected to work excessive hours for no extra pay, and for freelancers who may be expected to accept below minimum wage work or work for free.

**“You are at the end of the pipeline so if the shoot goes over budget then there’s less left for you in the end.” - Facility manager**

### Underbidding

The US writers’ strike and slowdown in UK commissioning in 2023 has had a delayed impact on post production, which saw insufficient projects in 2024. Where projects are available, budgets for post production appear to be static or reducing, even though overheads such as energy bills and rents continue to rise. Some productions look for cheaper alternatives outside the UK, putting additional pressure on post production houses to compete.

As a result, there is a ‘race to the bottom’ with facilities underbidding in order to win work or accepting drastic cuts to budgets, with no equivalent cut in expectations<sup>93</sup>. Our research identified three ways that post production facilities respond to this situation:

- Using junior staff instead of more senior people to deliver work, risking quality
- Choosing not to be profitable on a project, risking the business when margins are already very low
- Using exploitative labour practices in order to meet client requirements

If the third of these tactics is used, then broadcasters, commissioners and productions are complicit in those exploitative practices if they demand work to be delivered quickly, cheaply and to a high quality, with no compromise on any of these points. The adage (of unknown origin) is, “Cheap, fast, good - choose two”, because it is impossible to achieve all three without highly problematic working conditions that put people’s human rights at risk.

**“There is high pressure to deliver to extremely high standards on an ever-decreasing budget that has never gone up with inflation. Budgets have gone down and rates haven’t gone up in the last 15 years.” – Facility manager**

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<sup>93</sup> MPTS (2024) *State of the Nation: Post Production* and *State of the Nation: VFX*

There are, of course, strong and multi-faceted connections between a person's labour rights and their health and wellbeing. Underbidding by facilities affect these connections in other ways as well, with one report explaining that, "Shrinking production budgets and impractical schedules not only create serious issues in relation to staff wellbeing but put managers under stress to an extent that can compromise their ability to manage well, and that in many cases can serve to increase the stress felt by their teams."<sup>94</sup>

Many post production facilities already operate on low margins and have been forced to diversify away from the genres they specialise in and towards any work that might be available. If post production facilities were to put up their fees to reflect rising costs and to pay fairly for working hours, it may mean that work goes elsewhere and out of the UK – perhaps putting facilities out of business. This is the choice facing post production facilities if those commissioning work place insufficient value on the treatment of workers in post production, on healthy workplaces or on diversity.

**“A producer's remit is to make things as cheaply as possible – that's what they build their reputation on. They push for a low price, but we have to sweat staff to do it. We are always on the edge of making money.” – Sound designer**

### **Outsourcing to lower cost countries**

Post production is an international business. Outsourcing to lower cost countries already takes place for some aspects of post production, with India, China, Indonesia, Latvia, Turkey and Australia all mentioned by interviewees. The UK is an outsourcing destination for other countries, particularly US projects that see UK post production as a cheaper alternative to US based facilities yet with compatible language and culture.

VFX is more commonly outsourced because of the high number of people needed. As one interviewee said, "Often you need to throw a hundred people at a task and off it goes somewhere to be churned out."<sup>95</sup> India in particular has a low cost but well developed VFX industry with preparatory roles such as 'roto scoping' and 'match move' often offshored or outsourced from Europe and the US. Editing may also be outsourced.

People working in these outsourced jobs are often expected to work with the time zones of the client, with no consideration of potential impacts on them or their families. They are even further removed from the decision makers, who may have even less oversight of conditions than already is the case. One interviewee remarked that, "If you lift the bonnet, it's a modern-day sweatshop." Our research was not able to verify this directly but others have written about the issues, for example, articles include:

- Without us, there is no film industry': inside the UK's special effects sweatshop<sup>96</sup>
- Guest Commentary: The Life of an Indian Visual Effects Artist<sup>97</sup>
- VFX in Los Angeles – 100 hours a week and homeless<sup>98</sup>

One commentator wrote that, "Work isn't sent overseas simply because it's cheaper. The cold, hard reality is that work goes overseas because developing countries have lax

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<sup>94</sup> Van Raalte, C and Wallis, R (2024) *The good manager in TV: tales for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

<sup>95</sup> Interviews 2024

<sup>96</sup> Kersley, A (2023) *Without us, there is no film industry: Inside the UK's special effects sweatshop*

<sup>97</sup> Amidi, A (2013) *The Life of an Indian Visual Effects Artist*

<sup>98</sup> Heusser, J (2013) *VFX in Los Angeles – 100 weeks & homeless*

labor laws that offer minimum worker rights and maximum opportunity for worker exploitation.”<sup>99</sup> As expectations increase on broadcasters to understand where human rights risks lie and to conduct effective human rights due diligence, turning their attention to ‘outsourced’ parts of production supply chains will be essential.

### **Insufficient unionisation**

In the UK, workers themselves find it hard to push back on exploitative practices, in part because there is limited unionisation among post production workers and the main union, Bectu, has faced challenges in getting post production roles included in industry agreements thus far.

By contrast, in Norway the Norwegian Film Makers’ Association, Norsk Filmforbund, does include post production and VFX workers. Their tariff regulations act as an effective incentive for producers to avoid long working hours and cover temporary employment on film and TV projects:

- 4-8 hours – normal fee
- 8-11 hours – 50% extra
- 11-14 hours – 100% extra
- 14-onwards – 200% extra
- Working hours overnight and at weekends also results in 50-100% extra in fees

The Norwegian union explained that, “We have separate collective agreements for feature film, drama-series and what’s called TV-entertainment. They cover working conditions, wages and authors rights. We don’t have a collective agreement for documentary films, but production companies usually follow the agreement for feature film. We also have agreements with most international streaming companies, which commit them to following our national collective agreements on working conditions, wages and authors’ rights.”<sup>100</sup>

In the USA, there have been calls for unionisation among VFX workers, driven by reports of unsustainable working conditions: “[Unionization] would ideally mean that it allows setting floors on artist compensation, and artists would have more recourse when it comes to things like how much overtime they do. That would mean the VFX houses will also have to take on that floor of costs and bid according to the amount of overtime they can max out with. In turn that means...clients would then have to accept more realistic bids, and have more financial incentive to be more judicious with the amount of rework notes, and have to plan out their projects better from the get go.”<sup>101</sup>

### **Lack of transparency undermines planning and communication**

There are alternatives to the budget models outlined above. Done well, involvement by post production at an early stage can find cost savings, prepare post production teams adequately and provide realistic estimates of schedules and time needed. Post production is both a technical and a creative process that is essential for successful content, but post production facilities often have limited information about the production itself until the rushes arrive.

**“Productions don’t engage the post houses early on. If we could get involved earlier we could help save money upfront.” – Post production coordinator**

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<sup>99</sup> Amidi, A (2013) *The Life of an Indian Visual Effects Artist*

<sup>100</sup> Email from Norsk Filmbund

<sup>101</sup> Plant, L (2022) *Pressure, crunch, blacklist*

Examples given by interviewees included not knowing whether a project would involve lots of action and crowd scenes or be more dialogue-based or have not much sound at all. This makes it difficult to do an accurate estimate of the time needed and two hours of footage on one project could take three times as long on another, due to the content. Other challenges arising from a lack of transparency might be more technical. For example, a post production facility might have won a project only to find the rushes are not labelled properly, which they then need to address with no extra budget, and possibly without any available individuals to support the process.

Sometimes this lack of transparency might be because it has not occurred to productions how important it is for post production houses to have sufficient information in advance. Other times, interviewees suggested that there can be a culture of secrecy around projects that extends beyond necessary commercial considerations, and makes it particularly difficult to tease out information.

**“Transparency is not there and by the time things arrive at post, there is not a lot of money, time or patience left and post is hard stop before delivery.” – Post production coordinator**

The same lack of transparency is a problem for individuals, with one saying, “People just want to know you’re available but you have no idea of what you’re getting into and whether it’s possible in the budgeted time – it gives me anxiety that it could be a very stressful position.” The issue extends into the post production process as well, with very limited two-way communication possibilities between post production artists and the commissioners and producers. As one interviewee said, “It’s all top down with no discussion, we just have to do what they say and are expected to make it happen, whether it’s achievable or not”.<sup>102</sup>

## **6. Privacy and security: risks to subjects, contributors and participants**

While most of this research has focused on human rights risks to those working in post production, there are also some risks to the privacy of subjects, contributors and

### **Human rights at risk:**

- **Right to privacy**
- **Right to life, liberty and security of the person**

participants featured in TV programmes as a result of production and post production practices. The research explored the following examples:

- Footage filmed before people can give consent (e.g. hospital)
- Footage where people’s identities need to be disguised for their own safety
- Intimate footage or personal information captured for reality or documentary that would not make it to final cut

### **Security practices and safeguarding of footage**

For some high-end dramas, there is considerable security in place around post production as companies do not want storylines to leak. For particularly sensitive documentaries, there may be access limits and work will take place in rooms with

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<sup>102</sup> Interviews 2024

blacked out windows and doors. Where this is driven by wanting to protect intellectual property rather than safety of those depicted on screen, it is unclear whether mitigations fully address risks to participant's rights.

Such security measures tend not to apply to other TV genres, such as documentaries, reality and entertainment, where there are often far fewer safeguards in terms of restricting access to footage. One interviewee said that, "There are zero controls on intimate images – zero contracts or expectations and no limiting who can see or view content. You might have 20 assistants seeing images and there are no safeguards in terms of an appropriate way to deal with that material." Another said, "There is an assumption that I have backups and I've had requests when a version gets lost. They should be horrified that I've kept anything but there are no contracts or terms."<sup>103</sup>

Sometimes there are blanket non-disclosure agreements in place and post production facilities may protect footage through encryption, password protection (sometimes with time expiry) or logins via a portal. It does seem that very little leaks out, perhaps because people know it would end their careers to do so, but there are no industry-wide standards for safeguarding footage.

### **Protecting the identity of participants**

Subjects, contributors or participants usually have their faces blurred or voices disguised either for protection or because they are sharing a personal or sensitive story. However, blurring and disguising happens late in the post production process. So, unless measures have been taken during filming, there are likely to be a number of people working in post production who will have seen the footage and be aware of a person's identity. This does increase the risk that a participant's identity becomes public at some point, risking their privacy and potentially their safety.

The late stage at which identity-masking happens may also risk the safety of post production workers. For example, if the programme in question is investigating organised crime or is critical of a state or other powerful figures, this raises the possibility that those working in post production might themselves become targets. It may also increase the likelihood that hackers target the facility involved.

Better industry standards for safeguarding sensitive or intimate footage would help to mitigate the privacy risks to those who have been filmed and the safety risks to those on, or working on, footage likely to upset powerful stakeholders.

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<sup>103</sup> Interviews 2024

## Conclusion: the responsibilities of commissioners and productions

The conditions in post production identified in this research are, to a significant extent, the result of practices that filter down from commissioners, studios and production companies.

Under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, all companies have a responsibility to understand where risks of severe human rights abuses exist in their operations and supply chains and how their own activities might be causing or contributing to such abuses. They also have responsibilities to prevent and remediate human rights abuses where they are causing or contributing to them, and using leverage where they are directly linked but not causing or contributing<sup>104</sup>.

This matters because these Guiding Principles align with major international frameworks such as the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business. The Guiding Principles are also referenced in legislation, such as the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). Several countries – including Germany, Norway, France, South Korea and Switzerland – have introduced their own bills or legislation mandating human rights due diligence and action to address human rights risks in supply chains.

In the financial sector, banks are increasingly recognising their responsibilities as financiers of projects. Broadcasters are more than financiers as they input and make decisions at each stage of the process. It is incumbent on them to understand and address the human rights risks in the making of their programmes.

Many of those working in commissioning and in productions will admit to a lack of understanding about post production processes and the impacts that their requirements have on conditions for those working in post. It is this lack of understanding that lies at the root of many of the issues uncovered in this research, including insufficient budgets, impossible schedules, a lack of transparency and poor communications.

Alongside limited understanding of post production as a sector, factors detrimental to the wellbeing of those who work in it notably include the late and unrealistic demands often made by commissioners and productions. These demands can impact working hours and cause last minute cancellations, as well as affecting timetables, the ability to take breaks and rest days, and workers' physical and mental health. How producers, directors and commissioners operate directly contributes to the harms experienced by post production workers and described in this research – including exploitative working practices, significant detrimental impacts on family life and impediments to a diverse workforce. At particular fault are:

- Demands for work that is cheap, fast and high quality;
- The associated purchasing practices of commissioners and productions; and

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<sup>104</sup> For definitions of what it means to cause or contribute to human rights harms or to be directly linked to them, see the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the work of the TV Industry Human Rights Forum on 'TV production: Remedying human rights harms when things go wrong'

- The failure to require, budget for and monitor good practices of post production suppliers.

Taken together, these suggest that broadcasters are not paying the true costs of the programmes that they make. Some of these costs instead end up being borne by individuals least able to afford it, who provide their labour below cost or for free in order to meet the project parameters they have been given.

At the same time, the approach used is not cost effective. Poor planning and lack of communications can waste time and effort, as efficiencies are missed and work may be duplicated. Long hours and unhealthy working environments also reduce productivity and result in work having to be re-done.

It is therefore incumbent on broadcasters and production companies to increase the understanding of post production processes among commissioners and production teams, to reset expectations on the way budgets and time are allocated and to change their own practices in order to incentivise and enable better working conditions so that the post production industry, and wider TV sector, can thrive.



# Recommendations

Systemic issues of the scale identified in this research require systemic solutions. There are, however, steps that broadcasters and production companies committed to good practice can take. These are set out in the following recommendations.

## Broadcasters, commissioners and productions

### Build understanding and reset expectations

1. Require training on post production processes and people as part of ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) for commissioners and those working in productions. This could involve shadowing opportunities, reverse mentoring and regular briefings on changes and challenges in post production.
2. Reset expectations about the amount of budget and time needed for post production work and to ensure that which is apportioned is able to cover the actual cost of work and adequate time:
  - a. Ringfence post production budgets so that they are not reduced by an overspend during production
  - b. Be transparent with post production teams to enable better planning upfront so that they can help to identify what is realistic and prevent problematic underbidding
3. Recognise that changes to schedules have cost implications for everyone in the chain and take accountability for those costs so that they do not fall on individuals least able to cover them:
  - Budget to pay more for night and weekend work
  - Maintain a contingency fund to cover unexpected changes
  - Bring in additional capacity where schedules are squeezed but deadlines are immovable
  - Pay for last minute cancellations or work done but not used
4. Make good practice by post production facilities non-negotiable, conduct due diligence on their labour practices and reward those that meet higher standards with preferred supplier status. Hold productions and suppliers to account to ensure practices in relation to contracts and payment terms are legally compliant.

### Change own practices

5. Commit to prompt payment practices and make it a requirement of suppliers to pay promptly as well.
6. Be prompt in decision-making, approvals and commissioners' notes. Where this is not possible, recognise that this will impact the schedule and ensure it is revised accordingly.
7. Require content descriptions as standard on footage at all stages of the post production chain – one option would be to adopt a checklist that productions complete alongside footage handed to the data wranglers/DIT team, which then gets passed to all those working with that footage so that they have warning of sensitive issues, including artists, assistants, interns and quality controllers.

8. Where counselling or other support is made available to production teams because of the nature of the content that they are working on, extend that same support to all those working in post production, including all freelancers.
9. Require productions to implement minimum terms and conditions (e.g. Bectu's model terms and conditions) when they directly subcontract post production talent.
10. At the outset of a project, bring together the team, including those who will be working on post production in sound, editing, picture and VFX, to set the tone, create a psychologically safe space and to provide information about the support and channels available for raising concerns.
11. Set specific diversity targets for post production to encourage conscious hiring for a diverse crew, using resources such as the Open Source Directory (curated by Bianca Gavin), Look Beyond the List, the TV Access Project and Black Women in Post Production (BWIPP); and ensure that Diamond monitoring form returns include all post production workers assigned to a production.

### **Broader action in collaboration with others**

There are improvements that will need an industry-focused approach rather than being done by individual organisations. Some of this work is already underway and we hope that these research findings provide additional support and impetus for such industry-wide projects.

1. Work with unions to ensure post production is a part of all industry agreements, including future changes to the PACT/Bectu agreement on scripted TV.<sup>105</sup>
2. Provide tangible support to the Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority (CIISA), particularly raising awareness of its impending reporting service to those working in the screen sector. CIISA aims to provide an independent, impartial and anonymous (if needed) channel for post production workers to report issues, monitoring trends and themes, flagging productions that may need a deeper dive to broadcasters and then holding those broadcasters accountable. This would help broadcasters know when to intervene in a production.
3. Support industry efforts to clarify job descriptions, career paths and expectations in terms of skills and experience for different roles. Connect together the technical and creative aspects needed for those in post production to progress in their careers.
4. Provide industry-level support for finding work, such as spaces for people to share availability or networking and promoting open recruitment.
5. Provide training opportunities on:
  - Financial and business skills for freelancers
  - Management training for every level, to help people manage upwards as well as downwards

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<sup>105</sup> <https://members.bectu.org.uk/advice-resources/library/3074>

- Self care for everyone working in post production to help them manage different scenarios that they might encounter
- 6. Promote use of The Film and TV Charity’s Whole Picture Toolkit for Mentally Healthy Productions and its application to post production.
- 7. Push for post production to be included in relevant creative further education courses and training.
- 8. Support recommendations in the [Creator remuneration report](#) for a Government-appointed Freelancers’ Commissioner with appropriate powers and cross-departmental oversight, ensuring that the resources are there to understand and support post production freelancers.

There are also steps that good practice post production facilities can take, regardless of those taken by broadcasters and production companies.

### **Post production facilities**

1. Push back on clients over unrealistic demands and make them aware of the human impacts of their requirements.
2. Provide formalised, structured training opportunities and clear paths to progression for in-house staff. This is particularly important for post production runners who should have time protected to sit with others, attend events, go on courses and gain proper exposure to the next rung on the ladder.
3. Proactively address stigma around accessing support, such as counselling, and regularly signpost all those involved in projects (both employees and freelancers) towards sources of support, such as employee assistance programmes and the Film and TV Charity. Ensure those working with sensitive content take regular breaks and are given time to heal.
4. Commit to prompt payment of suppliers and freelancers.
5. Ensure contracts / written Ts and Cs with all freelancers, e.g. Bectu’s model terms and conditions and aligning with Fair Terms for Creators. Check that freelancers working through other freelancers or small businesses on projects also have written terms and conditions in place.
6. Review accessibility of own facilities and put reasonable adjustments in place.
7. Support employees working from home with the right equipment to do the job properly.
8. Recognise that long working hours reduce productivity and be proactive in reducing working hours of staff and freelancers working on projects.
9. Limit and log who has and hasn’t been given access to footage.

**“What’s really missing in our industry that sense of community working together to build something of value.” – Sound editor**

# Appendices


## A: Understanding post: processes and people

Process	Activities involved	People involved
Storage	Ingesting rushes, storing files	Dailies, DIT, technicians
Editing (offline)	Assembly, rough cut, fine cut, picture lock	Offline editor, Assistant editors
VFX	CGI, compositing, motion capture	VFX artists and VFX supervisor
Colour correction and grading	Colour correction, LUT – desired look, Grading – stylization, Motion graphics	Colourist, grader
Sound	Audio (including dialogue, sound effects and foley), music, mixing	Sound supervisor, Sound editor, ADR, Dialogue editor, Rerecording mixer, Sound designer, Sound effects editor, Foley artist, Composer
Graphics and finishing	Graphics, Mastering, Quality control, Subtitling, Meeting technical standards	Finishing artist, edit assistant


### The people involved in post: Example roles and the issues they face

(Please note these are composites put together from interviewees with individuals holding such roles)


#### Post production coordinator

	Hopes to progress to:	Post production supervisor
	Has come from:	Bookings assistant or bookings manager
	Likely to be:	Employed in a facility
<b>Example responsibilities:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assigning resources, rooms and people</li> <li>- Manages digital workflow</li> <li>- Manages post production budget and schedule</li> <li>- Manages relationships with post production artists and talent</li> </ul>		<b>“Currently a dearth of trained post producers in facilities”</b>
<b>Particular issues/risks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Has to deal with poor planning by productions and often their lack of understanding of post processes and roles</li> <li>- Lack of management training and support to deal with the complexities of budgets and schedules, especially if no post production supervisor involved</li> </ul>		


## First assistant editor

	Hopes to progress to:	An offline editor who pieces together narrative and story in a craft role
	Has come from:	Runner or 2 <sup>nd</sup> assistant editor
	Likely to be:	Employed by facility but may be on fixed term contract
<b>Example responsibilities:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do whatever is needed by the editor</li> <li>- Manages others, e.g. 2<sup>nd</sup> assistant editor, trainees and runners</li> <li>- Setting up edit rooms, printing, organising files, downloading and labelling rushes, last minute paperwork</li> <li>- May need to keep track of VFX count if no VFX editor</li> <li>- Support to remove booms from shot, put in sound effects, find music</li> <li>- Export files for review</li> </ul>		<p>“Unsung heroes”</p> <p>“The most over-worked”</p> <p>“People-pleasing role”</p>
<b>Particular issues/risks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Very long working hours as often starts an hour before the editor and finishes an hour after and may work weekends to catch up</li> <li>- Low pay with high responsibility, heavy workload</li> <li>- Unlikely to have had management training but manages others</li> <li>- Low budgets mean insufficient assistant editors who then are too busy to have the opportunity to learn and step up</li> <li>- In order to progress to becoming an offline editor, will be expected to do editing for free in spare time</li> </ul>		


## Sound editor/designer

	Hopes to progress to:	Sound supervisor
	Has come from:	Audio assistant or mix tech
	Likely to be:	Freelance
<b>Example responsibilities:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Craft and artistry – painting with sound to complete the artwork</li> <li>- Dialogue editing: tidying up dialogue takes, replacing problematic dialogue lines with alternative takes, creating an ADR list for actors to re-do their lines</li> <li>- ADR recordist and editor: re-recording actors in a studio, selecting correct mics, matching sync, pitch, tone and projection</li> <li>- Sound effects: placing effects for atmosphere using combination of stock from library, sounds created through software and foley contributions</li> <li>- Sound mix: using technical tools to mix the sound into the project</li> </ul>		<p>“Sound is a digital craft”</p> <p>“Creating emotion through sound”</p>
<b>Particular issues/risks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Artistic role that is deeply subjective so difficult to know when to stop</li> <li>- Sound happens at the end so late decision-making hits them hardest</li> <li>- Rarely have written contract or terms leading to late payments, no overtime payments, last minute cancellations with no recompense, indefinite hiatus</li> <li>- Sometimes informally hired by other freelancers so unclear accountability lines</li> <li>- Lack of warnings for working on traumatic content</li> </ul>		

## Visual Effects (VFX) artist

	Hopes to progress to:	VFX supervisor
	Has come from:	VFX assistant
	Likely to be:	Employed or on FTC in the UK at a VFX house
<b>Example responsibilities:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Artistic role and one of a large team, e.g. a very big project of 1,500 shots will involve hundreds of people across many disciplines</li> <li>- Painting out things that shouldn't be in the scene, e.g. camera cables</li> <li>- Creating effects such as explosions</li> <li>- Layering a scene back together</li> <li>- Using a range of different software and technical platforms</li> </ul>		<p><b>“Lots of passionate people who work themselves to death and burn out”</b></p> <p><b>“Sweatshoppy”</b></p>
<b>Particular issues/risks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intensive delivery periods to meet deadlines with very high levels of stress and very long working hours</li> <li>- Unpaid overtime, no lunch and no break</li> <li>- Working on traumatic visuals too challenging to shoot</li> <li>- Impacted by slow or unclear decision-making on VFX</li> <li>- Sometimes productions try to avoid paying for shots that do not end up being used, rather than paying for hours worked</li> <li>- Mental health impacts of lone working for artists</li> <li>- May be managed by someone with no management training</li> <li>- May be self taught and lacking key skills</li> <li>- Role may feel under threat from the rise of artificial intelligence</li> </ul>		

## Colourist / grader

	Hopes to progress to:	Senior colourist
	Has come from:	Assistant colourist
	Likely to be:	Employed by a facility or specialist colour company
<b>Example responsibilities:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Online editing role – mainly considered creative but could include technical aspects and picking up fixes as well</li> <li>- Colour correction (white balance, exposure) for each shot</li> <li>- LUT (look up table) – desired look of the footage</li> <li>- Grading – stylisation of the footage</li> <li>- Adding in motion graphics</li> </ul>		<p><b>“A lot of your company is built around the colourists you have”</b></p>
<b>Particular issues/risks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Eye strain from staring at something the same distance away for a long time</li> <li>- No warning of traumatic content but likely to have access to the script in advance</li> <li>- Insufficient time in the schedule to grade or colour all the shot to a high standard</li> <li>- Subjectivity of grading means it can be difficult to know when to stop</li> <li>- Exceptionally long working hours</li> </ul>		

## **B: Methodology**

The research was led by Amelia Knott, independent human rights expert for the TV Industry Human Rights Forum, with support, insight, analysis and review from the Film and TV Charity and Emma Butt, a freelance sound editor who actively works in post production.

The research initially involved desk reviews of articles, blogs, research reports and news items, together with analysis of the post production data from the 2022 Looking Glass survey and Diamond: 6<sup>th</sup> Cut. A full bibliography of references is provided in Appendix C.

To supplement the available literature and data, the researcher conducted 28 interviews with key stakeholders between February and June 2024, including 14 men and 14 women. She also conducted a half day visit to a post production facility and engaged with a wider group of stakeholders at a 'post production mixer'.

The in-depth interviews included:

- Five with experience in post production coordination, technical and supervisor roles
- Five with experience in editing roles
- Eight with experience working in sound editing roles
- Three with experience in picture editing roles
- Four with experience in VFX
- Three in senior leadership roles

Of these, 13 were fully employed and 15 operated on fixed term contracts or were self-employed. Interviewees represented a mixture of genres across scripted and unscripted and were located across the UK.

The draft findings were presented, reviewed and validated at a meeting of the Rough Assembly Committee, which included people working in a range of different post production roles. None of them had previously been involved in the research so they represented a new group of stakeholders with which to test the analysis and draft conclusions.

Finally, the recommendations were checked and reviewed with wider industry stakeholders to ensure that they were feasible and aligned with related initiatives.

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