

Broadcasting gives women visibility but not equality

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The creative industries promise career opportunities for all: If you are creative, innovative, a good communicator, an ideas person and keen to join in a networked community of knowledge workers, you can make it here, allegedly. Because creativity, innovation and ideas know no race, class or gender, traditional social inequalities are not a problem.

Over the last few decades this promise has had [enormous policy appeal](#) in the UK and internationally. Unfortunately, its lure was so bright that it blinded many eyes to the difference between myth and reality. And the reality is that talent is not the only prerequisite for a creative career, let alone for rising to the top. The 2016 Oscars and Brit Awards, for instance, sported such a startlingly white aesthetic that manufacturers of Ariel, Persil & Co. must have been jealous. Ethnically non-white artists and creative workers were virtually invisible.

Similarly, the working class is much harder to spot than the middle class [amongst the creative industries'](#) workforce. Women, however, are not invisible in the creative industries, arts and culture, far from it. Women are everywhere on film and TV, in the media, books and paintings. But their obvious visibility masks that gender, too, is an obstacle in the creative industries: on average, women are [less well paid and less likely to advance](#) into influential senior positions. To better understand how these inequalities arise I interviewed [Charlotte*](#), a UK broadcaster, about her career.

Despite being a white Oxford graduate herself, Charlotte's lack of connections left her entry into the media world to luck. A patient in the hospital where she jobbed as a receptionist happened to be a TV producer and got her a job as a production secretary on a big broadcaster's popular quiz show. Charlotte was bright, hardworking and good at her job. She quickly made it onto the UK prime-time TV shows, as a presenter and correspondent and with her own investigative science series.

Because of what Charlotte described as "the typical freelance neurosis that the job offers would dry up," she took as many work opportunities as possible. By her mid-thirties she was burnt out from years of working long shifts non-stop, 7 days a week and disillusioned by a chauvinistic culture in which men frequently tried it on and women, let alone mothers, were largely absent in positions of power. "When I eventually became pregnant at 35," Charlotte

recalls, “I didn’t tell anyone. I lined my handbag with a sick-bag so I could vomit as discretely as possible. The film crew just assumed I had bulimia so I got away with it for months.”

Ten years later Charlotte juggles working as a freelance broadcaster and writer, the job she loves so much, with parenting four boys. Long shifts, frequent travel and evening networking events are as vital for her work as they are problematic for her family. Age is another problem: “Women ‘fall off a cliff’ once they hit 40 years.”

Charlotte doesn’t regret choosing a media career, far from it. “I’ve had some mind-blowing opportunities,” she says. “It’s hugely creative, I love the teamwork and there’s a genuine thrill about building a programme from an initial concept or fleeting idea.” She also thinks it is important for her children to see their mother in non-domestic roles, even if her work experience is far from unambiguously positive: “In my less robust moments, I look at my career and just see the endless complexities of working from home as a freelancer with no support structures, trying to get commissions and presenting jobs that would make up a meaningful salary while the boys use up my ink cartridges for counterfeiting Pokemon cards.”

Charlotte has broadened her income opportunities into writing and presentation trainings, but media “is a tough drug to kick as it shapes your life and gives you a high few other jobs will ever achieve,” she says. “It’s the best job in the world. But I don’t love all the guff that goes along with that industry, and I hate what it’s done to many of the brilliant and talented women I know.”

Charlotte’s story is replicated in other creative industries as well. It is also one that most industry insiders are either only too aware of or do not want to acknowledge. The voices of academics and activists calling for change are only slowly getting heard – not least of course because they are critical of the very same media industry through which they are broadcast. A lot will have to change before the creative industries workforce truly reflects the society we live in. Until then what we like to think of as the UK’s rich cultural life will remain much poorer than it would need to be.

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Notes:

- This post is based on the author’s paper [‘It’s a tough drug to kick’: a woman’s career in broadcasting](#), in *Work, Employment and Society*, a Sage Journal, 1–10, 2015.
- * Charlotte York is the pseudonym of a female UK broadcaster and writer.
- This post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
- Featured image credit: TV reporter in a red dress, [Matt Biddulph](#), [CC-BY-SA-2.0](#)

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