"I'm so lucky": narratives of struggle, unfairness and luck in among new entrants to the Irish media industries

Sarah Arnold & Anne O'Brien

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Sarah Arnold [iD] and Anne O'Brien [iD]

Department of Media, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

ABSTRACT

The Irish creative industries have featured in recent cultural policies that have centred on the promotion of Irish culture and heritage and on the economic exploitation of heritage through the development of strong creative sectors. There are policy-led drives for more skilled workers to sustain this creative economy and creative industries policies refer to the need for more training, education and supports for workers to enter the industries. However, new entrants report difficult transitions from education to work and a culture of exploitation should they eventually find work. They feel the need to engage in unpaid affective labour to try to make themselves attractive to potential employers and often are left with low or no pay. Our study reports similar findings, where interviewees report inequalities, precarity and unfairness when seeking entry to media industries. We find a paradoxical narrative that negates inequalities and unfairness and identifies individual confidence and persistence as key to interviewees' career success. While 'unfairness' defined media work for those who struggle to gain it, 'luck' used to explain entry into media work.

Introduction

Irish cultural policy has recently focused on developing employment in the creative industries. The Creative Ireland Programme, (Creative Ireland 2017) saw investment in creative and cultural infrastructure as a key priority (Creative Ireland 2018) and laid out an ambition to "grow and sustain the creative industries" and to "increase… employment across the sector" (2019). The Audiovisual Action Plan (2018) subsequently listed employment and skills development as strategic goals. There is a clear policy-led drive for more skilled creative workers and a related need for more training, education and supports for them to enter the industries. At the same time however, researchers have emphasised how creative work is marked by precarity (Curtin and Sanson 2016; McRobbie 2016; Siciliano 2021). Creative work has become more casualised, less unionised (Gill and Pratt 2008; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2013; Ross 2008) and is defined

by instability, bulimic employment patterns, inequality, poor working conditions, portfolio careers, with students and new entrants understood as particularly vulnerable to unpaid internships, no or low pay and exploitation (Bridges 2018; Brook et al., 2021; Conor, Gill, and Taylor 2015; Gill and Pratt, 2008; O'Brien, Arnold, and Kerrigan 2021). This article adds to that body of literature by examining the experiences of entry for young graduates of a media degree programme in Ireland. Through interviews with 19 such new entrants, the study demonstrates that they do see media industries as exclusive, unfair, 'closed shops', characterised by endemic nepotism and unclear or mysterious points of entry, but they nonetheless develop multiple strategies to negotiate entry. When they succeed in gaining work, new entrants sometimes note how their class or educational privilege plays a role in facilitating their access to work. However, oftentimes they also frame success as 'luck' or good fortune and detach it from the conditions of unfairness or inequality in creative industries. New entrants therefore oscillate between frustration with the 'bad work' that they see as endemic to media industries and feelings of gratitude and relief when they do gain work. Ultimately, new entrants' narratives of work reflected a tendency to 'socialise' career failure and 'privatise' career success. Industry conditions of inequality were either named or erased depending on the outcomes for new entrants and whether they benefitted or were disadvantaged. New entrants can, therefore, occupy complex and contradictory worker identities that respond to their career circumstances.

Literature

While the creative and cultural industries (CCI) are presented in research and in national economic and cultural policies as valuable contributors to economic growth, urban regeneration, cultural output and employment (Florida 2005; Landry 2008; Scott 2006) researchers are often sceptical of the extent to which CCIs actually deliver these gains (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009; Kong 2014; Oakley 2004; Oakley 2009). Criticisms of creative and cultural industries policies and activities extends to the commercialisation of creativity for the purposes of profit (Banks and O'Connor 2009; Hesmondhalgh 2007; Kong and O'Connor 2009); the impact that CCIs have on local culture and economies (Flynn 2018; Kalemci and Özen 2011; Lee et al. 2014; Prince 2010; Wasko and Erickson 2008) and conditions of labour whereby contracts, union membership and wages are perceived as deteriorating (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009; De Peuter and Cohen 2015; Paterson 2001; Ross 2008; Smith & McKinlay, 2009). Researchers have also drawn attention to the experiences of creative workers who have little job security, are under- or unemployed but are expected to be flexible, entrepreneurial and adaptable to market conditions, who engage in unpaid labour including self-branding and networking, and who are responsible for continuous education, training and upskilling, to stay in the sector (Hesmondhalgh 2010; Ball et al. 2010; Banks 2007; McRobbie 2016; Gill and Pratt 2008; Taylor and Littleton 2012; Gill 2010; Banks 2017; Wallis, Van Raalte, and Allegrini 2020; Duffy and Wissinger 2017; Deuze 2013; Lee 2011). While offering opportunities for creativity, self-expression and flexibility, creative work has been understood as oftentimes precarious, as reproducing and exacerbating inequalities and as being exploitative (O'Brien, Arnold, and Kerrigan 2021; Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2021; Eikhof and Warhurst 2013; Dent 2017; Conor,

Gill, and Taylor 2015; O'Brien 2014; O'Brien 2019; Cannizzo and Strong 2020; Jones and Pringle 2015; Saha 2017; Allen 2020; Malik and Shankley 2020; Randle and Hardy 2017; O'Brien 2019). Creative industries are, therefore, said to be sites of privilege, which enable those with cultural and economic capital and with better social and geographic mobility easier access than those without. In addition, the very privileges that grant some entry to media work are often negated altogether or misidentified as luck by beneficiaries of those privileges, who use terms like 'lucky' and 'fortunate' to mask the role privilege plays in their own career success (Friedman et al., 2021; Brook et al., 2021; Taylor and O'Brien 2017; Scharff, 2017). In this sense, creative work is not only characterised by inequality, but the inequalities that form barriers to entry to creative work are also refuted.

New entrants are particularly exposed to barriers to entry, inequality, exploitation and marginalisation (Ashton 2015; Taylor and Littleton 2012; Gollmitzer 2014; Percival and Hesmondhalgh 2014; Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2021). At the same time, aspiring or new entrants to creative work are drawn precisely to some of the features that are associated with precarity including flexible work, project-based work, portfolio-careers and the commodification of their creativity (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005; Morgan, Wood, and Nelligan 2013; McRobbie 2016; Gill 2002). They, therefore, may be more willing to tolerate poorer working conditions in exchange for creative autonomy and freedom from nine-to-five, routine work (Banks 2007; Banks, 2010; Wong and Au-Yeung 2019). However, autonomy and freedom from standardised working life have many negative corollaries including the lack of formal and clearly mapped-out routes into creative work (Tomlinson 2008; Brook and Comunian 2018). Organisations and companies may provide few formal training schemes or on-the-job training and employers may expect that new entrants possess the skills required for creative work (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2009; Collins and Snowball 2015; Hennekam and Bennett 2016; Jacobson and Shade 2018; Davies 2021). In place of more formalised routes into creative work, educational institutions have increasingly provided, to varying degrees of success, programmes aimed at preparing people for creative work (Roodhouse 2009; Ashton and Noonan 2013; Gilmore and Comunian 2014; Nielsen, Bridgstock, and McDonald 2018). Yet, education providers and industry employers often show little alignment, and the skills and experience that graduates emerge with are not always valued by industry (Comunian and Conor 2017; Comunian, Faggian, and Jewell 2011; Vasilendiuc and Sutu 2021). Education to work transitions are consequently often experienced as difficult and messy (Bridgstock, 2011), with Matthews replacing 'transition' with 'translation' in order to represent the effort that graduates must undertake to translate their skills and experience into "the language and taxonomies of the workplace" (Matthews 2011: 43).

In such a scenario, internships are undertaken by graduates and aspiring creatives as another stage on the road to 'proper' creative work, since education is undervalued by employers (Haukka 2011, Faggian et al. 2013). Graduates and aspiring creative workers commit to internships without any guarantee of further employment, of appropriate and meaningful training or of fair pay (Figiel 2018; Hunt and Scott 2017). In this context, employment prospects lie firmly in the hand of the employee who must demonstrate their skills, knowledge and experience and present themselves as an attractive prospect to potential employers. In addition, an oversupply of aspiring

new entrants, a consequence of the expansion of higher education participation and the perception that such work is "cool, creative and egalitarian", means that becoming employable requires more work as aspiring workers compete for creative jobs (Gill 2002; Haukka 2011; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2013). Work placements, unpaid work and unpaid internships are now normalised as acceptable conditions of education to work transition (Allen et al. 2013; Phillipov 2022). New entrants, therefore, are under additional pressure since they must develop skills and knowledge, demonstrate skills and knowledge, engage in emotional labour in searching for employment, initiate practices of networking, alongside being informally or formally employed on temporary, short-term, flexible, zero-hour contracts or paid or unpaid internships. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that in our findings, as elsewhere, a running motif of 'struggle' emerged.

At the same time skills shortage narratives are foregrounded in Irish creative industries policy documents which call for more training and education initiatives targeted to key roles and jobs (Crowe Horwath 2017; National Skills Council 2020; Creative Ireland, 2018; Screen Skills Ireland 2019). For example, agencies like Screen Skills Ireland, national educational initiatives like SpringBoard and national skills networks such as Animation Skillnet, Gréasan na Meán Skillnet and Learning Wave Skillnet all centre on addressing skills needs and shortages in their creative industries sectors and engage in the provision of training and mentorship. The Screen Skills Ireland's Skills Needs Analysis Report claimed that there is a pressing need to attract talent to the screen sectors, to provide more work-based learning in order to fill skills gaps and to support transitions to work (2019). However, despite the breadth of initiatives and intense focus on the skills needs of the creative industries, two key problems are clear: there is little focus on career sustainability across skills needs narratives, and there is far less emphasis on embedding and supporting new entrants into creative work specifically. Instead, entry routes into creative work are poorly mapped and work placements, unpaid work and internships are still widely reported (Moody 2020; O'Brien, Arnold, and Kerrigan 2021). New entrants report difficult transitions from education to work and a culture of exploitation (NicGhabhann 2015; O'Brien & Kerrigan, 2020; O'Brien, Arnold, and Kerrigan 2021). They feel the need to engage in unpaid affective labour to try to make themselves attractive to potential employers (Hayes & Silke 2018) but are often left with low or no pay (Moody 2020; Moody and Kerr 2020). The findings below report new entrants perceptions of inequalities, precarity and unfairness in CIs but also a paradoxical narrative that identifies individual confidence and persistence as the key to career success. Before findings are outlined the next section discusses the methodology used to uncover these experiences.

Methodology

The bounded system of a case study approach allows us to richly explore a particular phenomenon without the need to make broad generalisations in findings (Simons, 2020). We use interviews as a means of gaining insight into the experience of new entrants and place value on the self-described narratives of interviewees when they recount stories of seeking and doing media work (Edwards and Holland 2013). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 graduates of a single Irish media

studies programme, with 18 based in Ireland at the time of the study. Semi-structured interviews were found to allow for "the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important" while still allowing for some focus on the part of the interviewer (Brinkmann 2014: 473). All respondents graduated between the years 2016 and 2020. Purposeful sampling was used in order to identify those who had attempted to or gained media work at some point. Respondents were recruited by, first, identifying them on pro-fessional social media platforms, followed by direct messages and emails to invite participation. Participants worked in many different areas of media including the broadcasting sector, film, journalism, content creation, public relations, communication and social media and doing media type work within non-media organisations. Unpaid workers were included in the sample as many respondents moved in and out of unpaid work. All participants had been employed in at least two roles since the completion of their studies. While all had in engaged in some form of media work, not all were currently undertaking such work.

Interviews were conducted exclusively by video call due to national restrictions in personal contact as a result of the pandemic. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour 15 minutes. Interviewees were asked a series of questions that encouraged them to provide rich and detailed explanations of their education to media work transitions, their expectations and the reality of their career development, how they attempted to secure or secured media work, what their experiences were and how they would advise other new entrants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and, using creative industries and creative work literature as a lens through which to analyse the data, coding was undertaking in order to examine common and divergent experiences and to identify broader patterns relating to participants' subjective experiences of media work as new entrants. The overarching themes identified in the data are job-seeking struggles, perceptions of unfairness and feelings of 'luck' in gaining work.

Findings

The struggle for media work was articulated in interviewees' accounts of seeking entry level employment. Although some respondents were very targeted in their search for work and assertive in their job hunt, they often experienced disappointment. Multiple barriers to entry into media industries were reported including a lack of full-time per-manent jobs, no observable entry routes into work, lengthy waits for opportunities to arise, and no response from employers following job applications. Some of the respon-dents simply moved into other roles or media-adjacent sectors such as marketing and PR. The difficulties in entering the media industries were sometimes attributed to interviewees' own perceived limitations including lack of experience and of confidence, however, interviewees were particularly vocal about how nepotism and internships made entry to media work challenging and were, therefore, unfair practices. While interviewees, in this sense, engaged in 'inequality talk' (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2021) about how age, education and class shaped entry into media work and how privilege could play a role in their own career success, they nonetheless stopped short of calling for structural change in the media industries and framed as 'lucky' their own entry into

media work. Ultimately, career success was frequently individualised and explained by sheer luck, good fortune in terms of geography, by persistence or by resilience even while there was a recognition that privilege could play a role in career success. What started as a narrative of struggle and unfairness, discussed below, shifted to one of opportunity and possibility in the media industries but each narrative was contingent on the outcomes for that particular narrator.

Struggles in gaining media work

Interviewees experienced a form of limbo while seeking out and waiting for media work opportunities, with some settling for freelance work in the interim. They seemed resigned to the inaccessibility of the industry and felt that their initial optimism post-graduation had been quashed. Tom and Fergal stated this quite explicitly when accounting for their disappointment at the lack of full-time employment:

> I was expecting this full-time role if you get me? But it didn't kind of work out that way and right now I'm just kind of doing my freelance work, like I'm working three jobs, which I thought, I don't know I kind of had this idea of having a nine to five job… There's nothing really you can do (Tom).

> I suppose I had some kind of optimism towards getting into some sort of production company or something like, hasn't happened yet, but I've done interviews and stuff like that but I've been working freelance since then, since graduating instead of actually getting a job with someone that employs me as an employee, I've had to employ myself I suppose (Fergal).

Although flexibility is often touted as one of the key attractions of young people to creative work (Gill 2002), in this instance, interviewees favoured more stable employment and elected for unstable freelance work only out of necessity. The time it took to get media work also frustrated interviewees, who often took non-media roles to get by.

> I wanted to be front of camera and I still do…. I wanted to work for the BBC and I wanted to work for Channel 4 and I still want to do all those things but what I realised is it takes a lot longer than you think it does (Gráinne).

Dierdre spoke of disappointment at her failure to secure media work before taking an internship:

> I definitely struggled to find a media job before the internship. I was trying to go directly into it and I still would love to – I'd love to go into design or any kind of media work to be honest.

The radio sector was especially representative of this pattern of pivoting to other work, with Tara, Róisín and Owen reporting that they gave up their pursuit of work in radio, and, instead moved into other media fields, disappointed by the perceived impossibility of getting into radio.

This disappointment with the realities of gaining media work was echoed in interviewee's criticisms of the lack of response from employers to their applications or CVs. Interviewees spoke of their naivety at expecting to gain work with ease and

their despair at the silence their CVs were met with. Owen put this succinctly, "I mean I was pretty optimistic for sure… and then, as I started getting loads of job rejections, that naivety started to come down." Fergal also used the word 'naivety' and described his expectation that he would "just go out into workplace throw out a few C.V.s and something would come my way, reality's a little bit harsher than that…A lot of the time when I apply to jobs for either production roles or marketing roles… a lot of the time you just don't hear back from them." Michael, again speaking of radio, suggested that he had "sent a hundred thousand unanswered emails… but it's hard, it's very, very difficult to get into radio and to get on air is even harder and so many unanswered emails" but ultimately thinks that the "resilience to keep emailing….is important." So, while industry was blamed for poor recruitment practices, Michael felt that it was up to individual aspiring workers to overcome this.

This individualisation of career (under)achievement was apparent when interviewees blamed themselves for not gaining work. While many would acknowledge the scarcity of entry level work and lack of career routes, they sometimes criticised their own inexperience or lack of confidence. Like the naivety reported by some interviewees, both experience and confidence were noted as attributes the interviewees did not have and which were the cause of their difficulty in gaining work or performing at work. Hugh, for example, spoke about an unhappy experience in an early role that he blamed on himself:

> I definitely struggled with my experience or the lack of experience, but to be honest looking back on it now like I did feel very stressed and very under pressure in that job a lot… I would put that down to sort of maybe just the wrong person placed in the wrong job.

Breda, similarly, stated that she lacked confidence in an early role and was, therefore, exploited, noting that "the confidence always comes" later as does experience. Garry stated that "obviously the big hindrance for me is the experience….you always feel like you're a bit behind the curve". Discounting any chance of gaining media work in her early career, Joanne said "At the time, I'd kind of just convinced myself that it wasn't possible so I kind of ruled it out… I definitely could have been more proactive in getting…some internships, that sort of thing." Speaking about a job that, in retrospect Stephen found exploitative and underpaid, he nonetheless stated that "I didn't have the courage or the confidence to be like, "I deserve this, I deserve that."" Paradoxically, then, interviewees saw media industries as at fault for lack of work, but also saw themselves as at fault for personal and professional failings.

Unfairness and inequality

While interviewees often blamed themselves for struggling to gain media work, many more of them also saw the industry as 'rigged', with nepotism rife. Despite some admitting to benefitting from it, they saw nepotism as profoundly unfair and connected it especially to class inequality. Nepotism was perceived to perpetuate elitism and keep the media industries staffed with rich and well-educated people. At the same time, though, beneficiaries of nepotism were perceived to be undeserving and taking up a place that should rightfully belong to someone with the rights skills and education. Therefore, nepotism was believed to be an unfair industry practice, but individual aspiring workers would nonetheless engage in it to gain media work. This

contradiction was particularly evident in comments made by Owen at various points in the interview where he stated, at one point: "I was able to get into [media organisation] just through someone I know, it definitely wasn't completely through my skill" yet later was scathing about an instance of someone using connections to gain a media job: "I was like "that's really frustrating" because here I am, still job hunting for three years now and you just walked in the door because of who your Dad was." Andrea was, likewise, scathing of nepotism but admitted to benefitting from it:

> I've seen before so many people getting jobs because their parents or family… It's a real industry of who you know. And even I've gotten jobs through my friends in media corporations that I'm like: "I would never have gotten this just on ability", it's just who you know.

Nepotism was strongly correlated with status and class, with interviewees seeing privilege at work in instances where peers gained employment through parents or close friends, with distain shown for what was perceived as the nepotistic practices of Ireland's major broadcasters, in particular.

> I do think [in] those bigger companies … it's all very: "Oh my Dad knows someone in there" or "My Mam knows someone" … I just think if your parents are of a certain social status or [know] someone… you'll probably get in (Joanne).

> Nepotism is huge in this industry, huge. It's all about who you know, it's about: "Did your Dad work there? Did your Mum work there? Does your aunt work there?" (Gráinne).

Interviewees, therefore, saw nepotism as evidence of the perpetuation of the cycle of privilege, whereby peers were able to exploit existing connections and relationships in order to access work without having to 'earn their place' in the media industries.

This cycle of privilege was also connected to internships which, in Ireland, are common in media industries. Many of the internships undertaken by interviewees were low or unpaid, offered few guarantees of permanent work but were seen as necessary despite being viewed as deeply unfair. Interviewees were especially concerned that internships were highly exclusionary: only those with access to financial or family supports could afford to take them on. As with reports of nepotism, family was often relied upon to help interviewees enter media work, in the case of internships, by providing free or cheap accommodation or financial assistance. It was recognised by many interviewees that such family support privileged them. They were highly critical of this and, more generally, the exploitative nature of internships. As in the case of nepotism, however, internships were seen as deeply problematic, but interviewees still undertook them because they felt they had no alternative route into media work. Laura and Andrea, for example, had unpaid internships at the same company and reported similar experiences of long hours, poor conditions and no pay. For Andrea, her experience opened her eyes to the extent of internship exploitation in media industries:

> Going into it I was a bit shocked at how… some parts of it worked… it was essentially run on interns and I was a bit like: "Oh my God, how can this go ahead?". So it probably wasn't the best start but it did kind of really show me how the industry can be. I did like the work because obviously it was everything that I was interested in at the time, but it was fulltime unpaid so that's tough.

Having undertaken the internship Andrea, in hindsight, was against the practice and wanted to discourage it.

> It's not really sustainable to do for a long period of time but it's kind of disheartening that that's quite standard, for people to just be expected to just go in and work fulltime [unpaid]…. I don't want to contribute to it because I think it is feeding into the problem as well, taking unpaid internships because they know they can get away with it.

For others, unpaid internships were similarly unsustainable, especially when they were based in Dublin which has an excessively high cost of living. Interviewees could neither afford to live in Dublin nor to afford the commute:

> I only did it very briefly because it was actually too far away for me…I would have had to commute every day and I definitely wasn't paid enough to pay for a car (Owen).

> I'm from the midlands of Ireland, that would involve travelling up to Dublin… it just would not be sustainable (Tara).

This financial burden placed on unpaid interns was condemned by all and interviewees were especially scornful of the normalisation of the practice of internships but also felt uncertain about how to deal with this. Gráinne saw it as an "industry standard" that was simply "wrong". Paul stated that unpaid internships are "complete bullshit because they limit who can access what". He saw them as "demoralising because you feel like you're not actually worth anything". In contrast, Natalie was more than aware of the value that she brought to the role, stating that because she "was the only one to know [the job]…it could have been someone's actual job but they didn't want to pay anyone". Yet, when asked how to address the general problem of unpaid internships, interviewees often suggested that aspiring media workers avoid them, rather than industry stop providing them. Laura suggested to prospective media workers "don't do an unpaid internship because eventually you will get something that is paid and you'll just get resentful working unpaid". But Natalie admitted that this was "easier said than done". With new entrants the most under pressure to gain experience and find entry routes into media work, they are the in the weakest position to challenge the practice of unpaid internships. And with so many aspiring media workers competing for limited access points to work, it is perhaps no surprise that the practice continues. After all, while interviewees saw internships, along with nepotism and poor entry routes, as issues that needed to be addressed and fixed, they nonetheless ultimately reported feeling 'lucky', 'fortunate' and 'privileged' when they succeeded in gaining paid work. The next section discusses how these narratives of luck and privilege emerged in interviews and considers the extent to which these narratives negated the critiques levelled at practices of internships and nepotism by interviewees.

Being lucky and knowing your worth: strategies for entering media work

Because of their perception of the industry as unfair and as exclusionary, interviewees put their achievement of media internships or work down to luck or privilege. Some, for example, recognised their own class and geographic privilege, the latter of which is especially pronounced in Ireland due to extremely high costs of living in Dublin,

where much media work is based. Yet, when interviewees were asked about what advice they would give other aspiring media workers, interviewees spoke of being persistent, resilient and developing skills in networking and self-promotion, with a view that aspiring workers would eventually get 'lucky'. In other words, while much 'inequality talk' was about barriers to entry and about class or geographic (proximity to Dublin) privilege, individual success was often put down to luck, and advice to others was to trust in the meritocratic potential of media industries.

A key way of accounting for career success was through naming quick success at graduate employment as 'luck' and making a comparison with peers who had the same education. Interviewees spoke of their luck relative to others with the same educational background who were not in media work (Only one respondent, Andrea, noted that media work was comparatively inaccessible to those without a degree and that holding a degree privileged aspiring media workers). In calling their success lucky, interviewees downplayed the privilege afforded by education, with their comparison to their peers implying a 'level playing field'. Tom stated that "I am fortunate because I know loads of people, my peers… they're still on either the COVID payment or just working in part-time jobs so… I feel lucky that I'm still doing media". Tara explained her luck at quickly gaining work, "I definitely was lucky that I got a job… a week after I finished my final exams so I definitely was luckier than all of my friends". Likewise, Ita spoke of applying for jobs while in college and being "surprised" at her success, "I remember at graduation even a lot of my peers would have still been looking…so I think I was definitely one of the lucky ones". Dierdre "was lucky enough to get a full-time position, not straight away, it was a couple of months… after graduating" but this made her "happy enough that I didn't have to do an internship for minimum wage". Breda thought herself lucky to gain an internship and to avoid a lengthy job search, "I'm probably lucky in fairness". This persistent reference to luck resembles Brook et al.'s study of senior figures in CCI roles that demonstrate an inequality rhetoric when speaking of their industry but a rhetoric of luck when accounting for their own success (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2021). Our findings extend up this to show how individuals can internalise paradoxical narratives of exploitation, underprivilege, privilege, and luck at any given time, particularly as they transition into work. In other words, new entrants continuously reposition and reframe their own career development and do not have consistent narratives to describe their own career trajectories.

'Luck' was often used to account for privilege and, indeed, unfairness. Where interviewees saw it as unfair when they could not benefit from contacts and networks nor could take up unpaid internships due to costs, these same practices were associated with luck when interviewees themselves were beneficiaries of them. Paul, for example, referred to the 'chance' of having a job interview that turned out be with someone he had previously undertaken work experience with. Rather than refer to this as a personal contact this was narrated as an instance of luck. Even when interviewees directly referred to class and geographic inequalities, they nonetheless used the term 'lucky' to describe being middle-class and having a home to live in rent free which was close to media work. They recognised that it was unfair that others did not have this, but often refrained from positioning their own status or privileges as unfair. Andrea exemplified this duality when she said:

> I'm so lucky that I'm able to get the type of jobs that I've gotten because I'm from Dublin and I've a home base here so I don't have to pay for rent, I do think that it really

favours people [who have family in Dublin] because I couldn't take an internship or anything like that if I had to pay rent here especially…

I'm so lucky and it's just expedited my career that I was able to do that. … So I definitely think class comes into it majorly.

Ita also stated that she "was lucky" that her "parents were fantastically supportive, they paid my rent through colleges and I'm really lucky that they were in a position to do so". Paul added that "I'm lucky that I come from a well-off family that had I done an unpaid internship I could have lived at home, provided it was in Dublin, which is where most of the key internships are at the moment". He noted that those from outside of Dublin would not be in the same position. Therefore, even though class was referred to as a form of structural inequality, it was often accompanied by a negation of interviewee's own privilege.

Privilege, when interviewees experienced it, was reframed as luck. Consequently, according to their own career narratives, it was not unfair that interviewees benefitted from having a middle-class background and financial or housing supports, it was simply by accident of birth. Scharff (2017) found similar use of the term luck in her study of female classical musicians who used the narrative of luck as a way of negating the role social background played in their career success. Equally Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor (2021) have described how narratives of luck, in their study of successful male CCI workers, did not necessarily disavow one's privilege, instead use of 'luck' was a form of deflection from one's own privileges. Our study found similar uses of 'luck' to account for career success and access to work opportunities, however, we identified a parallel and para-doxical narrative of unfairness and inequality when interviewees described difficulties and challenges in gaining work. Accordingly, failure to gain work was a structural issue and success was an individual achievement. This individualisation of career success extended to interviewee's discussions of strategies for getting into media work.

When asked how they would advise aspiring media workers, answers were largely concerned with individualised strategies for gaining media work. Aspiring media workers were both in charge of their own career destiny and individually responsible for success or failure in entry into the media industries. Traits such as resilience, persistence and confidence were promoted as key to success. And aspiring media workers were advised to network, develop contacts, assertively pursue jobs and self-promote. Barriers to entry could be overcome through the right attitude. For example, levels of confidence were associated with difficulties or success in gaining media work. Breda, Dierdre and Andrea all referred to 'knowing one's worth' and having confidence as key to their own success. They offered stories of how their confidence had grown and how they had then come to know their own worth or value. Breda described this when she said:

Thinking back at myself…I might not have been as confident, but the confidence always comes, you just need experience, you just need time, time is so good in this kind of thing because you learn so much over time. The advice I'd give anyway… "know your worth".

Elaine also saw confidence as a key trait and suggested that aspiring media workers "try and be confident and to not let this idea of whether you fit in impact your decisions and your work … have the confidence to prove yourself when you're there". Success or lack of it was, therefore, a matter of personal behaviour and performance rather than the existence of structural barriers to entry. For Hugh any experience of

unfairness could be addressed through individual response – "make sure you're not taken advantage of" – thus redirecting attention from potential structural inequalities to the individual.

Confidence was also strongly aligned with persistence, which emerged in the strategies that interviewees offered to aspiring media workers. Persistence was echoed in comments such as "don't be afraid to drop somebody an email or connect with somebody on LinkedIn" (Gráinne) and "believe in your own talents and abilities and work ethic and all that…even from the point of view of sending so many unanswered emails" (Michael). For both Gráinne and Michael failure to do these things was a sign of lack of true ambition, "if you don't actually ask the people that do it then you're not really going to get anywhere" (Gráinne). Joanne drew from her own experience of career success stating the "main thing that helped me get both my jobs was just putting myself out there and networking and not being afraid of rejection". Not being afraid, or resilience, also formed part of Michael's advice when he said that aspiring media workers should "keep letting [potential employers] know you're there until you're taken notice of". Therefore, while the same interviewees had recounted stories of the "impossibility" of gaining media work and the multiple barriers to entry, their advice to aspiring media workers negated this and gave the impression that hard work, individual talent and persistence in pursuing work and networking made entry to media industries achievable. Although some advised new entrants to avoid unpaid internships, this was one of the few signals that unfairness and inequality could be features of media industries. Nor were confidence and resilience associated with the social status or capital of media workers. Instead, inclusion and exclusion from media work were largely determined by an individual's own drive and talent. This finding that successful entry into media work is perceived as meritocratic echoes similar findings by Taylor and O'Brien (2017) who argue that the lack of recognition of structural inequality by those who make it into the industries risks the social reproduction of inequality. Their study of creative workers found that perceptions of fairness correlated with level of success in media work, with those on the outside perceiving the industries to be unfair and exclusionary and those on the inside perceiving creative industries to be fair and accessible. Our study finds that one cohort of people can retain both of these perspectives which may shift across time or even within a career story. Further, despite reporting barriers to entry and structural inequalities, interviewees nonetheless painted for others a positive picture of a meritocratic industry that could be accessed via hard work, persistence and confidence.

Conclusion

Despite interviewees feeling lucky that they managed to gain entry into media work, their narratives nonetheless foreground struggle and unfairness as key features of their search for work. Vulnerability is, therefore, a persistent feature of new entrants' narratives about early career media work. The media workers represented in this study face precarity, face periods of unemployment or underemployment, feel expected to take on internships or other 'bad work' and feel that the industry is a 'closed shop' to many. They experience career liminality in their transition from education to work, with a lack of certainty about whether they will manage to get on the media career

ladder. New entrants often spend a number of years in a media industries purgatory, unsure of whether they will succeed in making the transition to work at all.

Those who experience challenging education to work transitions were explicit in identifying causes for this, namely, unfair practices in the media industries that favoured some new entrants and excluded others. Poorly paid internships and nepotism were both cited as the main unfair practices that interviewees had experienced and interviewees were able to recount instances where they saw such unfairness in practice. Interviewees were able to engage in inequality talk where they identified exclusionary practices that they perceived as inhibiting their own entry into media work. They also identified structural inequalities that might disadvantage others, particularly based on geography and class. However, such inequality talk did not extend into interviewees' narratives of their own success and their own advice to others about how to gain entry into media work. Instead, interviewees evidenced a form of dissonance (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2021) whereby inequality accounted for their lack of entry and then, later, merit for their entry into media work. Further, those who were in media work represented the media industries as fair and meritocratic to others starting out their careers and identified a number of personal characteristics and skills that would facilitate career commencement including: confidence, resilience, ability to network, and persistence. This, ultimately, suggested that one's career success was individualised and not dependent upon structural factors.

This acknowledgement and then negation of unfairness and inequality across the early careers of media workers suggests that career narratives and experiences can be complex and contradictory. A limitation of this study is that it did not account for how these experiences map onto identity categories such as class, gender and race. Further studies would benefit from taking an intersectional approach to how education to work transitions are experienced by aspiring media workers and could examine how narratives of struggle, unfairness and inequality, and luck emerge through or across different identities.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Dr Sarah Arnold is Assistant Professor at Maynooth University. She is author of the book 'Gender and Early Television: Mapping Women's Role in Emerging US and British Media, 1850-1950' (Bloomsbury, 2021). and co-authoring the book 'Media Graduates at Work: Irish Narratives on Policy, Education and Industry' (Palgrave, 2021) with Páraic Kerrigan and Anne O'Brien. Her previous books include 'Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood' (Palgrave, 2013) and the co-authored Film Handbook, with Mark de Valk (Routledge, 2013). Her research focuses on the roles of women in media and cultural work.

Dr. Anne O'Brien is an Associate Professor with the Department of Media Studies at Maynooth University. She has published a number of articles on the representation of women in radio and television, on women workers in creative industries and examined why women leave careers in screen production. She has undertaken research on community media and written about how media produce content on mental ill health, suicide, intimate partner homicide and domestic violence. Books include 'Women, Inequality and Media Work' (Routledge) 'Media Work, Mothers and Motherhood' (Routledge, 2021) and 'Media Graduates at Work' (Palgrave, 2021).

ORCID

Sarah Arnold 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9774-2550
Anne O'Brien 🔟 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1185-1460

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