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'I Think Women Are Possibly Judged More Harshly with Comedy': Women and British Television Comedy Production

Brett Mills and Sarah Ralph

Abstract

Critics and creative workers have recently highlighted the lack of women working in British television comedy. Through thematic analysis of interviews with British television comedy professionals, this article explores how women talk about their work and their position within the industry. Outlining the specific industrial contexts within which female comedy professionals work, the article examines institutionalised gender norms and practical impediments which the interviewees' responses reveal, while also exploring the institutional and personal initiatives which they have developed to address these problems.

Key words: women, British television comedy, production, interviews, creative workers

One of the headline announcements of Creative Skillset's *2012 Employment Census of the Creative Media Industries* was the improved picture for women, which showed that between 2009 and 2012 the proportion of females in the sector had increased from twenty-seven per cent of the total workforce to thirty-six per cent (2012, 4). For women working in television representation was even greater: forty-five per cent of the total workforce, compared to forty-one per cent in 2009 (*Ibid.*, 24).¹ Figures such as these provide useful large-scale data on broad trends, but they are unable to offer any specific insights into the everyday working lives of women in the UK TV industry. While the headline might be good news what this means for particular individuals is often more complicated. The figures point to an increase but also show that there is no gender balance in this sector, even if the ratio of women in the television industry is better than that for the creative media industries as a whole.

Quantitative data does not exist for the number and proportion of women working in television comedy, although the lack of women working in this field has been repeatedly highlighted by critics and creative workers. Most recent discourse has tended to focus on the paucity of women featuring on comedy panel shows – which culminated in BBC Director of Television Danny Cohen pledging to no longer have all-male line-ups (BBC 2014a) – and there has also been concern about the lack of female comedy writers (Cosslett and Baxter 2014; Thorpe 2013). The quotation in the title of this article from experienced television and radio comedy writer Sue Teddern (2012), echoes these public debates, suggesting that women's work in television comedy is under much greater scrutiny than that of their male colleagues.

Drawing on such statements, this article explores how women working in British television comedy production perceive, reflect upon, and talk about their work, their achievements and their position. It does so through in-depth thematic analysis of interviews undertaken with women working in a range of television comedy roles – writers, producers, editors and commissioners – and in various production contexts. In doing so, we intend to 'take creative workers' accounts seriously' while acknowledging the 'various forces that shape people's experience' (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011, 50). This research was conducted as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project 'Make Me Laugh: Creativity in the British Television Comedy',² which charted the working practices of a number of industry personnel over a three-and-a-half-year period, and also mapped the creative production processes particular projects and programmes went through. While this analysis prioritises material gathered from female interviewees, it also draws on contributions from some male participants who reflected on the paucity of women in the sector.³

There is an extensive range of literature on the position of women in the general labour market (see, for example, Bradley 1999; Hakim 2004; Walby 1997), but by foregrounding the accounts of individual female production professionals we seek to contribute to a growing body of interdisciplinary work on women's actual experiences in the creative and media industries (Creedon 1989; Gill 2002; Perrons 2003; Ursell 2000). Although the historical role and contribution of women to television production in Britain has received academic attention in recent years (Franks 2011; Hallam 2013; Irwin 2013; Sutherland 2013), few studies have employed first-hand accounts to explore the circumstances of female production professionals in the *contemporary* television industry, and none have focused specifically on British television comedy in this way.

It is worth noting at the outset the particularities of the British television comedy industry and thus the industrial contexts within which the interviewees work. Firstly, while there are many broadcasters on British television, the number that commission comedy production is relatively small, with the BBC the major player. The BBC has a number of television channels, and their content is required to conform to particular remits. Each of these channels also serves particular audiences, which means comedy is required to fulfil specific roles. In

2013/14 the BBC made 1756 hours of television comedy, but sixty-seven per cent of that was for a single channel – BBC Three – whose remit is to ‘entertain audiences from 16-year-olds to 30-somethings’ (BBC 2014b, 71, 66). BBC Three comedy is also required to be ‘innovative’ (57), thus enabling the BBC to spend public licence fee money on entertainment. These factors have implications for the kinds of programmes that get made, with comedy apparently defined as a genre primarily for younger audiences. Workers within the industry must respond to these factors, particularly as such contexts are prone to change in response to legislation, audiences and management. The public service remit which informs all BBC production and broadcasting therefore requires comedy to fulfil a social role.

A second key factor informing the working practices of those in the television comedy industry is the large number of independent production companies (indies) in this sector. That is, on average around 50 per cent of comedy on the BBC is broadcast by it but not made by the broadcaster itself; rather it is bought from indies (BBC 2013, 33). Channel 4, which commissions between 50–60 hours of UK-made comedy per year (Channel 4 2013, 20), does so solely from indies, as it has no in-house production. Those working in independent comedy production are thus at the mercy of broadcasters’ needs, competing against other indies for commissions. Many indies are small, with few employees and necessarily function in a short-term manner, working on individual projects and dependent on the next commission in order to survive. This means that television comedy production is predicated on ‘precarity’ (Raunig, Ray and Wuggenig 2011), in common with many creative industries. For workers this undermines any notion of professional stability, but also frees them from the institutional pressures of working in a large organisation and offering the ‘freedom of being creative’ (Taylor and Littleton 2012, 138) as one of the attractions of the sector. More significantly, it also results in the sector being made up of disparate, competing companies and organisations that have little chance (and little incentive) to work collaboratively. This raises a question: who is responsible for thinking about the role of gender in a sector defined by such disparate de-centredness?

‘My View of the World’: Institutionalised Gender Norms

The debate about the lack of women in television comedy works on the assumption that this is a problem, not only in terms of equality of access to work in the sector, but also because there is something particular which female writers may bring to the creative process. The BBC is required to ‘serve all audiences’ and should ‘reflect the diversity of its audience in both its programmes and its workforce’ (BBC 2014b, 3), noting that this requires ‘increasing the number of women on air’ (8). The role of women in creating programmes is therefore understood not only in terms of equal opportunities, or as representing UK demographics; instead, these two factors are seen as complementary, with

representation behind and on-screen a simultaneous process with mutual benefits. That a larger number of women working on programming can lead to the BBC better representing the nations it serves works from the assumption that women may make different contributions and offer different ideas from men. Furthermore, the fact that the current majority of creative workers are men is seen to limit the kinds of comedy that will be made, which will predominantly come from a male perspective. Of course, defining 'male' or 'female' humour is reductive and flawed, despite ample research which shows that men and women learn to use humour in slightly different ways (see, the summary in Kotthoff 2006). Denying that there is something we call 'feminine humour', but then arguing that more women should be involved in production because they are likely to bring different creative ideas to the table, is evidence of the recurring contradictions of binary gender models. Our interviewees struggled with these issues, acknowledging the need for more women in the industry yet uncomfortable with concrete definitions of 'feminine' or 'female' comedy.

For example, Kay Stonham and Sue Teddern have experience of writing as part of a team, on long-running programmes with a high turnover of writers, where individuals pitch jokes and storylines for scripts that are collaboratively formed. This method is common in the United States, but not in the United Kingdom, where it is more usual for one or two people to write sitcoms. The team method requires multiple writers to be in the same room at the same time, proffering ideas that are assessed by their peers in a heated and pressured environment. Teddern was very uncomfortable in such a space, saying, 'It's a very competitive world and I think it probably still is quite male, that sort of competitive gag world is quite blokey' (2012). In this instance the space was quite literally masculinised, in that the majority of writers were male, leading to a 'competitive' way of working that did not suit Teddern:

I found that petrifying, because you had to come up with gags immediately, and I wasn't quick enough. And you did feel that the quieter you were, the longer you were quiet, the more self-conscious you would be to say something, particularly if it wasn't funny. And I just used to come home just *mortified*. (*Ibid.*)

That Teddern uses adjectives such as 'petrifying' and 'mortified' demonstrates how, for many creative people, such work is not solely labour, but also defines the self, so that any perceived failure is personalised. Furthermore, in an industry where securing future work can depend on how others perceive you, to feel that you are seen as not performing as well as others can have implications for an individual's career. For Teddern this mode of working is one that she aligns with masculinity as 'blokey', with the implication that such creative spaces do not welcome women.

Stonham similarly acknowledged the masculine nature of such environments, but found she was able to manage this:

[I]t was a very, very male environment. You know, I happen to have a very male sense of humour, so I thrived in that environment and it didn't worry me, but lots of women who came with a slightly different sort of sense of humour didn't like it, it was too sort of like, too gladiatorial, and they dropped out. (2013)

Stonham acknowledges her success was predicated not on disrupting the masculine space, but in being able to conform to it, unlike those who 'dropped out'. Both interviewees outline a normalised set of practices, requiring a 'male sense of humour' for success. What is meant by a phrase such as this? It clearly indicates a competitive process for creating humour, but is also seen to be indicative of the kinds of comedy that are produced. Teddern is wary of oversimplifying gender differences, but she proposes that men and women want to produce different kinds of comedy:

I suspect women's comedy is a lot – it's such a generalisation – is a bit more observational and a bit more self-deprecating, and I think men want to come up with the gags. And I think there is a sort of shoutiness that is quite hard, and women, they don't [do that]. (2012)

The sense of loss evident indicates how the production system disadvantages women, as well as the absence of particular kinds of 'observational', 'self-deprecating' comedy which are not being heard. Delineating this material as the product of a feminine approach is problematic, not least because a wide range of factors inform any individual's take on the world and approach to humour. While Stonham insists there is something specific to her kind of comedy, she also notes that gender is not the only relevant context:

My view of the world is just radically different to the view of the world of the gatekeepers who are in charge of commissioning. And it's different because of gender and it's different because of class. And now it's different because of age. Because I'm an older woman writer – even worse! (2013)

By this account gender is simply one aspect of a writer's identity, with class and age also marking an individual as different from the 'norm' within the comedy industry. Stonham notes that for women writers age becomes particularly significant, as whenever commissioners and executives look for more female writers they think this means new and young, thus ignoring the talent and expertise of those with experience. For Stonham this means that men are able to have a career in the industry because their age is seen as evidence of authority, whereas younger women inevitably replace older women. If newer women writers simply take the place of older ones, then the proportion of women writers never rises, and initiatives intended to improve gender balance simply perpetuate the problem. A number of our interviewees insisted that comedy

was 'a young person's industry' (Teddern 2012), but this may have more damaging implications for women than for men.

While Teddern and Stonham are writers, the assumption about what is 'typical' informs institutional norms for other production roles as well. Editor Sara Jones is fully aware that her job is typically associated with men, to the point where she is required to reshape her workspace in order to accommodate herself:

[We were talking about] editors mostly being middle-aged men maybe, well, tables and chairs are always set for them, and I always have to . . . put my feet on a box or something. Like at the moment I've got loads of cushions stashed on my chair to try and give my arms some support. (2014)

Jones notes that other workers remark on this, not only pointing out the unhealthy nature of her labour, but also highlighting how female spaces are different to the normalised male ones. Although Jones was able to point to a number of female editors she knew and had worked with, she was also aware that their existence did not undermine the assumption within the industry that editors were male. What is significant here is how easy it is for women to not realise that this assumption exists if they are successful in the profession; it is only when they are confronted by it – usually by the actions of men – that it becomes apparent. Jones recounts such a moment of realisation:

[S]o it hadn't really occurred to me until . . . I went to London, [at] the beginning of this year. And I was working with Dominic Brigstocke and, on the *Monks* pilot, and they said to me that, [and] there was three men in the room, and they said to me that all three of them had, you know, worked in comedy for quite a while and they said that they'd never worked with a female editor before, in comedy. I was quite shocked.' (2014)

There is a geographical context here, as Jones notes this was an experience she encountered in London. Jones is usually based in Wales and the programme she was working on when she was interviewed was set and made in Wales. Although there have been attempts by the BBC to foster production beyond London, the majority of programme-making still occurs in the capital. BBC Glasgow has a long tradition of producing comedy (though much of this is only broadcast in Scotland) and as part of its move to MediaCity in Salford in 2012 the BBC began an annual comedy showcase (BBC 2014c). Our research does not have sufficient material to make broader statements about the opportunities available to women in different parts of the country; however the fact that Jones' gender seemed less notable while she was working in Wales than in London means that different regions may have different norms and expectations. While age and class inform how gender functions, location might also be a factor.

Jones' surprise when gender differences became visible is also telling, as is the responses of her colleagues. While gender disparity is apparent in the industry

for many workers it is not always visible or acknowledged, particularly by those who are successful and are therefore less likely to feel that gender discrimination has been a barrier to their career. Whether this can be read as progress, with gender seen as insignificant, or whether it can be understood as the normalisation of gender hierarchies, is hard to discern; the specifics of precise moments, for particular individuals, are paramount. What is most apparent is the surprise expressed when issues of gender become visible, and the real confusion a number of our interviewees expressed at their own norms and assumptions. While Jones' example is one where jobs are categorised as 'male', this also applies to professions that are gendered female, as the producer Lisa Clark noted:

I think you'll find most, most production secretaries and production co-ordinators are girls, actually. It's just the way it is. So no, not at all. I'd rather have more blokes, you know, but no it's just the way, nothing conscious at all. [...] It sort of feels like a girly job. I suppose most PAs are women? Aren't they? Most secretaries are women. I don't know why. Most receptionists are women. I don't know. It seems weird that, when you look at it. (2014)

This account highlights how such roles are normalised, particularly as Clark notes how 'weird' this is when it is considered. The fact that certain jobs 'feel' related to gender indicates how working cultures assume that women should 'adopt traditionalized female roles, either directly in the context of their employment in administrative or support occupations, or indirectly' (Banks and Milestone 2011, 81). Asserting that this is 'just the way' it is suggests that nothing can be done, or that factors which result in this state of affairs are beyond the control of the interviewee. We will return to the problem of workers feeling disempowered in responding to such issues later, but Clark's discussion here – in which her problem with gender norms was evident – is telling, as the tone of resignation appears to accept gender differences as inevitable.

Indeed, a number of interviewees noted difficulties in raising issues about gender, whether in a particular production, or in the wider industry. To speak out about issues of representation is to risk being perceived as a troublemaker, critical of the sector that employs you. In an industry so dependent on personal relationships, where work often depends upon a recommendation by colleagues (Paterson, 2010, 5), there is significant pressure to be perceived as part of the community and easy to work with. Of course, creative work always involves discussion and disagreement, and this is often likely to be heated and pointed. There is however a difference between how particular kinds of creative difference are understood. For a writer to raise issues about character motivation or story structure is not only typical, but what they are employed to do; however, to be female, and bemoan particular representations of women is to risk being branded as someone who foregrounds their gender in their work, and thus disruptive to 'normal' (masculine) working processes. Sue Teddern recounts the

courage it took to assert her concerns about a particular storyline when she was working on the team-written *My Family* (2000–11).

[T]here was one point where there was a plot – funnily enough about shoplifting, again – that rested on the Zoë Wanamaker character being pre-menopausal and shoplifting something [because] she was all over the place, and I had to dig my heels in about could we make it sunglasses that she steals rather than a dress, ‘cos I, you know, I hate this story that women who are menopausal are going to go seriously shoplifting. [...] And I really thought I was sticking my head above the parapet, having been quiet for most of these meetings, for the one thing that I did dig my heels in about was about old, menopausal women [laughs] It was horrible, I hated it. But I won. (2012)

Teddern recalls that, as the only female in the room, she was the only one to raise this issue. There is a positive aspect to this, in that, without her, the storyline would have gone ahead; but if there had been more women in the team, then the notion that a female writer has to somehow represent *all* women would not arise. What is telling from our interviewees is that it is Teddern and Stonham who seemed most willing to not only discuss these issues with us, but also to perceive them as an ongoing problem and to have voiced concerns with personnel with whom they were collaborating. This may be because they are established and successful writers, and that having a certain security in the industry translates into a sense of power. Stonham however notes that ‘You’re not allowed to say [anything about gender], because then you’re a killjoy’, illustrating that the industry is reluctant to acknowledge its ‘corporate masculinity’ (Maier 1999). The difficulty in situating oneself as someone willing to speak out is exemplified by Jones:

I have raised things like representation of women in certain shows and stuff. Not that... you know, I *am* a feminist, obviously, but it’s like, you know, it’s things like, you know, that for example or race even, you know, racial representation. Just things like that, just going ‘Are we sure this is ok?’, you know. Cos you don’t want to offend anybody. (2014)

Jones’ use of the discursive marker ‘obviously’ appears to be an acknowledgement that identifying as a feminist is expected or even required of her. Yet the other expression in this statement which is doing comparable work in an opposite direction is her closing remark about not wanting ‘to offend anybody’, which equally appears to have an ‘unarguable’ status. These two stances are opposed – it could be argued that you sometimes to offend, in order to be heard and therefore effect change – but are presented here as if they are aligned. By including race in the debate – albeit with some hesitancy – Jones puts the issue in the context of ‘official’ agendas; broadcasting organisations have policies on race and gender, which she indicates as her point of reference. What is seen in Jones’

comments here is a *management* of the affective relationship between her personal and professional positions.

'We Laugh and We Cry': Finding Solutions

These quotations give ample evidence of problematic gender norms and the television comedy industry's difficulties in acknowledging and responding to them, despite initiatives and processes within the industry which are designed to address the marginalisation of women. As we noted earlier, the BBC has a commitment to 'increasing the number of women on air' (BBC 2014b, 8); similarly, Channel 4's aims include a 'diversity of onscreen talent' (Channel 4 2013, 74), and one of the ways it will achieve this will be to 'foreground female voices' in comedy (123). Industry-wide schemes such as 'Back to Work' run by Media Parents (2014) respond to acknowledged issues within the sector (Willis and Dex, 2003). There are, then, institutional structures intended to support women, and many interviewees saw the success of female executives as evidence of the problem being addressed:

[T]here are now three controllers of BBC channels – BBC One, BBC Two, BBC Three – have got women running them. Channel 4's run by Jay Hunt, Sophie Turner-Laing and Lucy Lumsden at Sky, I think there's plenty of female Executive talents there. I think the glass ceiling is shattered and gone. (Allen 2014)

Danny Cohen, BBC Director of Television, saw his role as supporting on- and off-screen diversity, and was keen to apply 'pressure' if things were not changing as quickly as they should:

I think it's a mixture of pressure from people like me to say things have to change; I think it's about where we look for talent and having a broader scope of vision of where we're looking for our talent and where it might come from; I think you want to keep reminding people that we have to be universal at the BBC and that means serving all audiences and making sure everyone feels represented by the BBC; [...] and I think the other thing is making the behind the scenes, behind the cameras, teams as diverse as possible, because that has an impact on who's in front of the camera. (Cohen 2014)

Both these statements come from highly successful males. This is not to dismiss them; indeed, it is more likely that their executive status is of more significance than their gender. It is evident that all broadcasters and programme-makers are aware of problems facing women in their sector and have initiated schemes to respond to this issue. We suggest, however, that there is a mismatch between these large, institution-wide initiatives and the day-to-day perceptions and experiences of the individuals who are making programmes. We found that our interviewees did not see the institutions as places to turn to for help, and

instead either drew on support from particular individuals they admired, or set up their own peer networks.

Across many different types of organisations, mentoring relationships – whether part of a formal scheme or a more ad hoc arrangement – are an important resource for *all* employees, giving individuals a definite advantage over those without them, but they are perceived to be an essential aid to women. Mentors – most effectively of the same gender – can advise female protégés on an organisation's structural politics, offer beneficial information on prospective roles or future projects, help to build self-esteem and provide useful feedback (Ragins 1999, 348). A number of these forms of support were given to Lucy Lumsden, Sky's Head of Comedy, during the early part of her career by key women occupying more senior roles. She was given 'the best wake-up call into how *efficient* you needed to be and incredibly disciplined' by another woman, and described another as 'a great woman who was [a] great mentor who said that, you know, "you can do it" and who was great to have around' and a third as 'a strong woman who I much admired as a Controller at BBC One' (Lumsden 2012). For Lumsden these women provided her with female role models whom she could admire, emulate and learn from.

Belle Rose Ragins, who has researched mentoring relationships, notes that this kind of knowledge transfer is typically provided to male employees through the 'old boy's network' (1999, 348) and the notion that such a network operates within British television comedy is suggested by comments from a number of the women to whom we spoke. Kay Stonham describes how early in her career when working as a team writer on the Radio 4 programme *Week Ending* (1970–98), she observed cohorts of men 'straight down from Oxford and Cambridge' and how they 'helped each other and marshalled each other through the career structure' (2013). Jane Berthoud explains how, when she was first encouraged to take up her current role as BBC Head of Radio Comedy, one of the reasons for her reluctance was because she felt she lacked the necessary contacts and industry relationships that the men who had previously had the position boasted:

[I]t had always been done by these *big* Oxbridge comedy... and they were all part of this same gang and they all knew the same people and they all knew the same references and they... And I kind of thought, 'I don't know that stuff. There's quite a lot of that stuff that, you know, I can't call on all those people. They're not my friends in that way. (2014)

It is of course worth noting that not only do both these examples relate to radio comedy – the radio and television comedy creative talent pools are vitally intertwined, with radio comedy providing a training ground for many television writers and writer-performers – and that they are also both historical. Berthoud

acknowledges that though television comedy, where she worked as a producer before returning to radio, 'used to be terrible' for women, it had seemingly 'turned around' and 'female stuff is coming through'. What is also significant from these accounts is that whilst the 'old boy's network' might be perceived as a form of 'gendered exclusion' (Gill 2002, 82), it also disadvantages those from different social and ethnic backgrounds.

An additional form of support that Lumsden reports having received from one of her mentors was the woman's apparent understanding when she was given a senior role and then 'went and got pregnant'. The more senior woman, she laughs, 'wasn't cross about that, so that was really nice!' Whilst her comment is jocular in tone, it hints at the conventional notion that women who become pregnant at a time deemed inconvenient to a business or organisation are viewed negatively. Lumsden's remark at this point in her interview implicitly commends role-model managers who demonstrate empathy towards an individual's work-life balance. Achieving a balance between work and family life is also cited as important by Lisa Clark, who runs independent production company Pett Productions with Bob Mortimer and Vic Reeves. Clark states that she 'couldn't do wall-to-wall productions' and 'be in the studio nine months of the year' because she wants to 'get a work-life balance right' now that she has a family (2013). She is able to realise this because 'Vic and Bob have got kids, so they get that'. Alison MacPhail, a senior producer at production company Baby Cow, remarks that the 'great thing' about the television comedy industry is that 'so many people have kids, it's Easter holidays, there won't be a commissioner in the land who isn't on holiday in the next two weeks' (2013) and she therefore feels less responsibility in taking a holiday with her family herself. These examples demonstrate that being sympathetic to the work-life balance is not gender-specific: Clark's male company partners 'get' it, and MacPhail uses the gender-neutral 'people' and 'commissioner'. In her study of those working in the new media industry, Perrons (2003, 82) notes that men and women with pre-teen children living at home reported equal dissatisfaction with their work-life balance. However, as Perrons observes, the women she interviewed with caring responsibilities were owner/managers and thus had considerable flexibility when it came to child-care: both Clark and MacPhail are in a similar position. This kind of flexibility is not available to all female creative workers in television comedy, particularly those who work freelance such as writers.⁴

Working for a broadcaster or within an independent production company facilitates the arrangement of formal or informal mentoring relationships. However for writers – both men and women – who spend much of their time working alone, finding a suitable mentor is much more difficult (Editors' note: see Free's essay in this issue, for his account of Linehan and Matthews' early career outlines how they were mentored, fostered and virtually adopted by Smith and Jones). A number of the comedy writers we interviewed report that they belong

to informal writers' communities who meet with each another and act as a support network. Sue Teddern describes membership of such a group:

I'm part of a group of women who met on a comedy workshop... 20 years ago? And we meet at each other's houses every month [...] we all have different parts of the business, but that is also a sort of support group, network thing. (2012).

The fact that this group has been sustained over such a long period is indicative of its importance, but it is Teddern's description of what the women do when they get together that demonstrates its value: 'We laugh and we cry and we weep about the business' (*Ibid.*). Their meetings offer women the opportunity to share experiences with other female comedy professionals, in what Teddern refers to as a 'sort of short hand' (*Ibid.*). In other words, the women have a common understanding of what it is like to be a woman in the industry and the specific barriers and difficulties that they face.

'You've Just Got to be Doing It': Where Now?

Our interviews demonstrate the complexities involved in trying to make sense not only of the particular issues faced by women in television comedy, but also how individual and institutional contexts perpetuate inequality. In a study of women working in science and technology Flis Henwood (1996, 212) finds that the masculine image and culture of these industries makes it hard for women to succeed in them. She notes that both men and women agree gender equality is important and fair, but that this is defined as women 'wanting, and being offered, the same conditions as men' (*Ibid.*, 208). There is little discussion of how jobs and working relationships might be reshaped; rather initiatives are intended to show women that they can do the same jobs as men, thus normalising particular ways of working. When women do raise concerns they are seen to be 'individualising their experiences, making it difficult for them to use such experiences as a basis for collective action and change' (*Ibid.*). By this account, discourses of gender equality are genuinely supported, but their consequences in practice are to normalise masculine ways of working and to individualise women who speak out.

It is significant that, for our interviewees, collective discussion and debate happened in informal, self-directed networks which, while offering support, had little effect on the inner workings of the industry. As we noted, most television comedy comes from small independent production companies whose employees depend on commissions from the broadcasters for survival. This system fosters creative freedom, but also serves to distance executives who have the power to initiate change from a fragmented creative workforce, thus reinforcing a hierarchy where individuals are reluctant to raise diversity issues for fear of looking like trouble-makers. Decentralised labour such as this makes it difficult for bodies like the BBC to gain a detailed overview of specific working practices,

and consequently be able to see where their initiatives might have effect. While there is a genuine desire to improve women's position in television comedy, the very structure of the industry militates against collective action and disperses responsibility across people and institutions.

Finally, it is worth reiterating the genuine concern many executives expressed about this issue in their interviews, as well as their annoyance at failing to effectively combat it. Running through the interview material is a real desire for these workers to know they are doing 'good' or 'just' work (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, 2001; Muirhead, 2004), which is not only well-made, but also of cultural value, expressing progressive, liberal ideals. That said, while there were many interviewees who expressed surprise when they saw issues of gender affecting workplace treatment, few knew what could be done in response. For Kenton Allen: 'I think there are not as many great female comedy writers as there are men, I don't know why that is. It's not for want of us trying to find them' (2014). His 'I don't know' echoes a sentiment we repeatedly encountered in our interviews. It seems indicative of the confusion those working in a supposedly liberal industry express when they discover their profession is not as progressive as they hoped. For many, simply continuing to search for and support women wanting to work in television comedy was the way forward; as Allen states: 'You've just got to be doing it' (*Ibid.*). The problem is, it seems, that people are unclear about exactly what it is that they should be doing, and gender inequalities persist.

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Notes

- 1 It is worth noting however that the representation of women in television has remained steadily at forty-five per cent since 2004, and that the 2009 dip to forty-one per cent was part of an overall decline in their representation within the creative media industries workforce over the 2006–09 period (Creative Skillset 2012, 24).
- 2 This project, *Make Me Laugh: Creativity in the British Television Comedy Industry* (2012–15), is led by Brett Mills, with Sarah Ralph as Research Associate, at the University of East Anglia (see www.makemelaugh.org.uk), and is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [project reference AH/I003614/1].
- 3 These semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2012 and October 2014 with 44 television comedy workers (over a third of the participants were interviewed on more than one occasion during this time period). Their experience ranged from those at the very start of their career trying to gain their first programme commission, to those who had been involved with the industry for many decades and were well established in their particular professional role. Reflecting the issue of the lack of women working in the genre, of our 44 participants only 10 were women, though this

included those working at all levels of the industry: a Head of Comedy (Lucy Lumsden) and Head of Radio Comedy (Jane Bethoud), established producers (Alison MacPhail, Lisa Clark) and writers (Sue Teddern, Kay Stonham), as well as an up-and-coming producer (Michelle Farr), editor (Sara Jones) and writer (Molly Naylor).

- 4 Of the women comedy writers included in this study all are currently active in the industry; none self-reported as having children or other dependents, or made reference to childcare responsibilities. While not conclusive in itself, it does perhaps hint towards the incompatibility of freelance work and child-rearing.

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