Screen Agencies as Agents of Change?
Interrogating Interventions for Gender Equality

Research Theme
This research examines the interventions made by screen agencies to realise a gender-equitable sector. This paper does not attempt to measure or quantify the impact of screen agencies on gender equality. Instead, its underlying empirical research offers insight into the kinds of change they choose to enact (or not), and the tensions that these institutions and industry figures navigate as a result.

Context
Publicly funded screen agencies are a critical component of the European film and television industry. Few independent films or high-end television dramas would get made without the direct and indirect support offered by bodies such as Ffilm Cymru Wales, Screen Scotland, Screen Ireland, Det Danske Filminstitut (Danish Film Institute) and Hrvatski Audiovizualni Centar (Croatian Audiovisual Centre). These agencies intervene across development, production, distribution, exhibition and education. Therefore, in the realisation of an equitable sector, screen agencies have a potentially transformative role as cultural and economic gatekeepers in their nation’s screen sector, especially in nations where they are the main source of funding and support to the sector. However, as public bodies they are also subject to forms of control and precarity, as illustrated by Doyle et al (2015) in relation to the UK Film Council.

A combination of industry norms and production routines contribute to the reproduction of multi-layered forms of discrimination, including:

- the long-standing inequalities in policy and funding (Liddy, 2020; Nwonka 2019, 2020; O’Brien 2019; Verhoeven 2019);
- risk-averse investors who rely on reputational capital and informal recruitment in which specific forms of social capital have currency, both of which create a spiral of inequality for women and minority individuals (Wreyford 2015);
- non-traditional patterns of work which demand flexibility and availability irrespective of personal circumstances (McRobbie 2016);
- the routine absence or marginalisation of women’s contribution to screen histories (Bell 2018; Erhart 2018)
- low union membership which makes collective action difficult to instigate (Jones and Pringle 2014), and
• gender-based harassment and bullying (Cobb and Horeck 2018; Boyle 2019). Furthermore, much of the public discussion of screen labour is infused with a narrative of growth for the sector and there is little account of the precariousness of building a career in that sector. Creative industries policy has normalised the idea that a lack of workforce diversity is rooted in the deficiencies of individual workers (Newsinger and Eikhof 2019). The pandemic has revealed further the precariousness of the freelance economy for screen in which the long-term consequences for equality, diversity and inclusion are potentially even more devastating (Eikhof 2020).

Project Design
This article emerges from the AHRC-funded project ‘Screen Agencies as Cultural Intermediaries: Negotiating and Shaping Cultural Policy for the Film and TV Industries within Selected Small Nations’ which analyses the role of screen agencies operating in Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. The research draws on 46 semi-structured interviews conducted from September 2018 to February 2020 with stakeholders within and outside the agencies.

The value of this comparative framework lies in revealing the taken for granted notions of equality that cross national borders, the shared patterns of intervention which emerge and their prevailing logics.

More information about the project is available here: www.smallnationsscreen.org

Key Findings
• Our research reveals two prevailing logics which characterise screen agencies. Firstly, building a positive relationship with the sector is a normative concern for screen agencies. This is partly done through the expertise of staff, assessors and board members and which underpins claims to authority and legitimacy amongst the sector, policymakers and other publics. However, this can also be a substantial obstacle to more radical reforms. A second logic which infuses screen agencies is that the distribution of funding has been firmly established with recourse to ideas of ‘quality’ in relation to cultural and artistic value and/or (more recently) ‘market growth’ (Wahl 2017). Both of these evaluations can be contentious in their own terms but can be even more so in the context of an equality agenda where subjectivities related to ‘good’, market potential and talent can be infused with identity-based assumptions.
• Equality is present as a concern for many agencies. Most agencies publicly acknowledge the problem of gender inequality. However, there was also an admission in the interviews that screen agencies have been reactive rather than proactive about issues relating to equality.
• The existence of multiple, cross-sectoral initiatives within some prominent agencies suggests that gender equality measures are tentatively beginning to be incorporated
into the rhetoric and strategic direction of the agencies. However, we note that the presence of interventions is not in itself a catalyst for meaningful change.

- Our research highlights that interventions are often narrowly conceived and disparate, and so it is difficult to ascertain their cumulative effect.
- Amongst our interviewees, we noted an institutional hesitancy about instigating what was perceived as a wholesale disruption of the norms of the sector in order to deliver more equitable opportunities. This was replaced by more measured forms of reform, as previously noted by Redvall and Sørensen, 2018 and Skadegård Thorsen 2020 in relation to the Danish Film Institute. Despite many agencies having substantial professional authority and a public commitment to equality, there was a fear of losing political and sectoral trust which they see as vital to the agencies’ more routine work.
- We did observe some staff within screen agencies working in quotidian ways to deliver change through positively leveraging their relationships with writers, directors and new talent. We have termed these behaviours ‘nudging’, as they rely less on a premeditated or avowed tactic to enact change, and more on quasi-instinctive responses by some individuals in the agencies, who identify problematic behaviours or views as they occur and try to correct them. Especially important in this regard are the senior development executives. However, the burden on these individuals for this must be acknowledged. Such ‘spontaneous’, that is reactive and informal practices, have serious drawbacks, as they are dependent on individuals and their continued efforts bringing with it professional and reputation risk to agency staff.
- In our last survey of senior management in our sampled agencies (October 2020), individuals self-identifying as women occupied some key leadership and strategic roles:
  - Four of the nine agencies had a female CEO (SI, SS, CCA and FCW)
  - A third had a female Chair (FCW, NIS and SI)
  - A third had a majority female governing board (SI, NIS, WI)
- In our sample, there is further homogeneity with regard decisionmakers at senior level, including at the level of Chair and CEO. Very few agencies have leadership or board members self-identifying as from Black, ethnic or minority communities.
- Indeed, attention to intersectionality is largely absent within institutional policies. Few agencies currently recognise ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions, disability or age in their larger policy frameworks. Identity categories are often bracketed off into separate initiatives.

This research, therefore, presents a mixed picture of progress on the road to an egalitarian and accessible sector for all. The formation and the implications of an inclusion agenda are far more fundamental and far-reaching than currently envisioned; meaningful change will necessitate renegotiating the purpose of screen agencies and their relationship with both the sector and policy makers. An expanded remit to include positive social change will require screen agencies and their funders to consider new ways of aligning performance, values, and
accountability. It will require new and specific expertise amongst staff. This will include not only staff who know the screen sector, but who know the communities which are marginalised within the current system.

We see a critical role for screen agencies in amplifying equality as a normative concern and in instigating new hierarchies within the screen sector. They have a vital role in the redistribution of financial, symbolic and cultural resources of the sector for the good of all. However, whilst screen agencies will be critical to change, they will not be able to instigate radical change without the wider sector including large production companies, film festivals, broadcasters, educators and distributors. They will also require policy makers and funders to actively create and support mandates for equality, to defend publicly funded bodies who work against taken for granted sectoral norms like quality and meritocracy, and to create evaluative frameworks which are transparent, robust and bring about meaningful change. It is those bodies who are ‘funding the funders’ who must take additional responsibility as agents for change.

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