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Imagining Diversity: An Irish Case Study of Graduates' Perceptions of Inequality in Media Work

Sarah Arnold and Anne O'Brien

Abstract: *Recent international challenges to the hegemonic structures in the media industries—particularly regarding gender, sex and class—have resulted in a range of institutional-level responses. In Ireland, state bodies such as Screen Ireland and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland have developed gender action plans. Funding incentives in screen production are now tied to increasing women's participation. The national broadcaster, RTÉ and various independent companies have published diversity and inclusion strategies. The Irish media workforce today, it seems, should be open and inclusive to all. However, contemporary scholarship on media work suggests that structural barriers remain (O'Brien and Kerrigan; French). Media work is still a site of privilege, with working conditions and cultures reproducing class and gender hierarchies. (O'Brien et al., "Are"; Malik; Banks and Oakley). Our article proposes to add to this body of knowledge by prioritising the relatively neglected point of view of aspirant new entrants to industry. Generation Z graduate entrants articulate how graduates conceive of diversity and equality in the workplace, whether they believe they will experience structural or cultural exclusions, and how they interpret organisational efforts to achieve change.*



Figure 1: Woman Holding Clapper Board. Ron Lach, 2021.

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Introduction

Work and jobs in creative industries are distributed on the basis of certain social and cultural attributes being prioritised or valued above others (Henry and Ryder). Similarly, educational institutions often aspire to reproduce those valued characteristics and attributes in graduates (O'Brien et al., *Media*). As Banks notes in his work on creative justice in the cultural industries, discourses of talent "cast a convenient veil" over some of the unequal aspects of creative industry education that "favour the favoured" (8). A person who is socially disadvantaged in terms of race, ethnicity, disability, class, gender or sexuality is rarely understood as talented or as a valuable contributor to the creative sector, and rather than being sought out they can be marginalised or excluded when it comes to education for creative work. As Banks observes, "higher education in the creative arts is revealed to be much less guilty of elevating the naturally talented, than of reproducing established patterns of social advantage" (68). Despite this insight, it is nonetheless routinely argued within industry and educational institutions that talent and hard work, or meritocracy in general (Littler), will win out and people will get the opportunities and positions that they "deserve" or have "earned". This duality in attitude is at the heart of this article, which examines how aspirant entrants to the creative industries perceive inequality and how it might shape their entry to or experiences of media work in Ireland. It explores how graduates of a media degree think that class, race, ethnicity and gender in particular will shape their creative working lives. The analysis of this question, outlined below, is based on a case study approach. Data were collected from an in-class, open-ended survey with a cohort of final year students from a single degree programme in Ireland. The key findings of the article are that students largely value the idea of creative justice but are ambivalent about whether or not it characterises the Irish industry; they see injustice in representations and participation in Irish media; they are somewhat sceptical about equality initiatives in the sector; and they do accept that there are significant barriers to entry. In short, the graduates were not convinced Irish media was a meritocracy or that "talent will out".

Literature Review

The challenges of working in creative industries have been well documented (Banks and Milestone; Conor, Gill, and Taylor; Banks and Oakley; Eikhof; O'Brien et al., "Are"). As Sarah Proctor-Thomson argues, rather than offering "good work" creative work is more often characterised by inequality and exclusion (Banks et al.). Those inequalities have been articulated in terms of the normalisation of neoliberal practices that include low pay, long hours, self-governance and the transference of responsibility and risk for work onto individual workers, who come to constitute a "precarious generation" (Holgate and McKay; Gill, "Life"; Perrons; Gill and Pratt). Mark Banks, Rosalind Gill and Stephanie Taylor highlight that unpaid internships have become normalised for new entrants and that serial internship offers a potentially "terminal limbo" for creative careers (177). Interest in the labour of creative workers has offered a consistent and now extensive structural analysis of the shifts toward an informational form of neoliberal capitalism, a situation in which workers are increasingly insecure, casualised and in intermittent employment, with few if any social benefits or protections (Gill, "Life" 251).

Nonetheless, state policy continues to promote creative industries as engines of economic growth and education institutions have responded by shaping human capital in response to state agendas as well as industry understanding of needs (Flew; O'Brien et al., *Media*). Roberta Comunian, Abigail Gilmore and Silvie Jacobi note higher education

institutions' role "in embedding creative human capital into a region and providing a platform for knowledge transfer through third spaces"' (372). Roberta Comunian, Alessandra Faggian and Sarah Jewell argue in the UK context that the main role of HEIs is to produce high-quality graduates "who can fit into and be productive in the labour market" (445). For graduates of university programmes, the creative industries, labour market challenges, financial barriers and lack of support networks are some of the more obvious structural and systemic issues that make creative work difficult to access (Pollard 60–61). Graduates' entry into creative work is characterised by extended transition periods, multiple entry attempts, unpaid internships, peripheral project-based work and dual employment within and outside the creative industries in order to subsidise earnings (Haukka; Ashton, "Creative Work"). Progression from a university education to work is frequently "neither smooth nor predictable; and notions of what we understand to be a graduate level job and a linear career path are being challenged" (Pollard 46). Emma Pollard notes that education, placements and opportunities to establish networks and build confidence are all valued by graduates during the transition phase but ultimately their careers are characterised by underemployment, self-employment and continual upskilling, all of which is subsidised by paid work in other areas of the economy outside of the Critical and Creative Industries (CCI)s (Pollard 62). Graduates often find it difficult to become established professionally and individual career management competence and intrinsic work motivations are significant predictors of early career success in creative work (Bridgstock 2).

Nonetheless, creative industries remain an attractive possibility for graduates internationally. Moreover, Caitriona Noonan notes that, far from being naïve about the difficulties of attaining sustainable work, students were highly aware of both the rewards but also the challenges of cultural work ("Smashing" 137). Noonan observes that graduates understood that self-promotion and branding were required of them and that many of the "transitions to becoming professional have already begun when the students begin university" (140). Similarly, Anne O'Brien and Páraic Kerrigan note that "students generally did expect that work in the CCIs would be challenging and precarious" (55). Graduates understood that they should accommodate change and uncertainty in an industry that was competitive and saturated with qualified media workers and so many graduates accepted overwork and underemployment as the cost of achieving their goal of becoming creative workers (O'Brien and Kerrigan 64).

In terms of how obstacles and difficulties entering the workplace were additionally complicated for graduates without the advantages of the middle class, white and male identities that dominate in industry (Saha; O'Brien and Kerrigan), Kim Allen notes that "participants were aware of some of the challenges associated with creative careers and expressed anxieties about their futures" (85). In particular, demands for entrepreneurial self-promotion on social media and class-based discomfort with networking amongst young working-class women produced tensions and conflicts "informed by their social position" (97). Discomfort with social media self-promotion was equally an issue for women craft-makers of colour who, as Karen Patel notes, hesitated to post pictures of themselves online because of fear of racism (176). Moreover class-linked advantage played a role in mediating experiences of financial hardship and insecurity (Allen 89). Allen's research with young women from socioeconomically and ethnically diverse backgrounds documents how their entry is characterised by "compromise and constraint" further contesting the myth of creative industries as egalitarian and meritocratic (94). Noonan moreover notes that, while graduates could see that creative work was inherently unequal, they also understood that they were precluded from challenging those structures ("Smashing" 140).

This article aims to add to the analysis of aspirant entrants to the creative industries by examining the attitudes of a cohort of final year students and their perceptions of how inequality might shape their experiences of media work in an Irish context. In particular, the article focuses on how class, race and ethnicity, and gender shape the aspirations of graduates about to enter the media workforce in Ireland.

Methodology

The research adopted a case study approach to explore how final year students perceived social inequality in the industries they aspired to enter. Data for the case study were collected from an in-class survey with a cohort of final year students from the same media degree programme at an Irish institution. One half of this cohort took a practice-based track while the other half took a theory track. The survey was anonymous and no identifying information such as name, student number or IP address was gathered. The survey contained open-ended questions about students' general awareness of work-based discrimination, their expectations about fair treatment, whether diversity and inclusion initiatives were effective in promoting fairness and equality, whether they saw people who shared their identity as members of the media workforce, and what they thought were the main barriers to entry into media work for new graduates. All participants gave informed consent prior to participating in the survey. A total of 59 students participated and of that 61% identified as female, 37% male and 2% as non-binary. No information on race was collected as the background of a very small number of students in this category risked making them identifiable. Students generally had no direct experience of working in the media industries, with only two referring to working in media. Findings of this study are representative of this cohort of undergraduates in their early twenties and are not necessarily representative of all media and communications graduates within the Irish higher education context because there are significant variations amongst programmes across the sector. In analysing the data, all of the qualitative responses to the open-ended survey questions were read and coded by the authors for recurrent concepts or patterns that were repeated across the participants' responses. Codes were clustered together to generate themes and those themes were analysed to create an overarching framework of findings. Extracts from the survey material have been used to represent the larger patterns and themes in the data and are presented as short quotations from specific participants that represent a theme found across the interviews. Those key findings are outlined in detail below.

Findings

Four general themes emerged from the data: students highly valued fair treatment in media work but were unsure if Irish media employers treated workers fairly; students perceived Irish media representations to be narrow and exclusive and this reinforced the notion that media employment is also exclusive; students were ambivalent about media organisations' promotion of diversity and inclusion in the workplace; and, finally, students perceived that various forms of employment and workplace discrimination formed barriers to media work. This suggests that, despite their lack of experience in media work, students already form negative or ambivalent attitudes towards media work, where they see media organisations as capable of inequality if not actively inequitable.

We found that, although students had an awareness of issues regarding equality and diversity in the workplace, they were not certain that media employers were fully committed

to creating diverse workplaces where people would be treated equally and free from discrimination. Therefore, while media work remained attractive to them and, indeed, they were largely eager to pursue it, they had an acute awareness of inequalities identified in the media and in scholarly literature (Gill, "Inequalities"; O'Brien et al.; Campbell). However, while students were very conscious of the need to create diverse and equal workplaces and were generally in agreement that discrimination can take place, there was a small number of students who believed that the media industries are equitable and that everyone had an equal opportunity to engage in media work, regardless of gender, class or racial status. Such students tended to refer to the industries as meritocratic and to individualised failure and success. This view has been found in research elsewhere, where students commit to the view that media industries are inclusive, despite evidence to the contrary (Moreau and Leathwood; McSheaffrey). In general, though, many students expressed a sense of apprehension or uncertainty about the degree to which media industries might be diverse and equitable. These students perceived barriers to entry into media work, which is especially significant given their lack of experience of media work. In addition, these barriers went beyond those that formed the basis of the study—gender—and, instead, students referred to many other barriers to entry, which suggests, following Noonan, that more attention to wider forms of exclusion is necessary ("Smashing"; "Professional Mobilities"). Therefore, below we account for these multiple forms of discrimination that students referred to.

Concerns about Fairness and Equal Treatment

While many of the students referred to their employment, only two had worked in the media industries. Nonetheless, few students thought that people seeking media employment in Ireland would be treated fairly, with only 22% stating that they thought that employers would treat everyone fairly. Over 53% did not believe that employers treat everyone fairly. Students related unfairness to bias and discrimination whereby certain groups of people would be treated more favourably than others. The audiovisual sector was seen as especially problematic for "anyone who identifies as anything other than a heterosexual cis white man" (Respondent 35, female). Female respondents were more vocal about the perceived challenges faced by women seeking work and many reported that they understood that men would be more successful in gaining work than women. This gender bias was seen as an obstacle that was difficult to surmount. At times, gender bias and discrimination were seen as inevitable. For example, Respondent 9 (female) stated that, "when it comes to audio and visual production work, I feel the industry tends to favour men." Respondent 14 (female) said that in the media industries there were "very few People of Colour" and there was a perceived "tendency to treat women as inexperienced or liabilities that can get pregnant." Respondent 27 (female) stated that "I think males are more likely to be employed in the media industry especially for broadcasting roles" and Respondent 28 (female) stated that she "just find[s] that in general it's harder for women in the industry to get the positions that they desire […] sometimes men are chosen instead." While most respondents were referring to their perceptions of media work, one had anecdotal evidence that not everyone would be treated fairly. Respondent 19 (female), for example, knew of "friends or family members who experienced some type of discrimination in the workplace at some point." Gender inequality, therefore, was an expectation of these female students.

Respondents also felt that racism, classism and xenophobia were evident in the Irish media industries, with many highlighting a wider culture of racism and conservatism in Ireland that extended to media. One male respondent stated that "racism, prejudice, and racist beliefs

are prevalent throughout Ireland" (Respondent 51). Another respondent believed that racism was a feature of parochial Irish culture: "I think a lot of racist and old-fashioned mind sets from rural Ireland still remain today in the contemporary world and affect working environments" (Respondent 24, female). Respondent 15 (female) thought that employers might be more likely to recruit an Irish person before a person of another ethnicity. Another female respondent said that for a "media role in front of the camera you are more likely to see a white person get it" (Respondent 26, female). A perception of racial injustice in the media industries emerged from these responses, with both men and women (who, in our cohort, were largely white Irish) highlighting racial discrimination as a significant problem in Irish media industries.

However, not all respondents felt that gender, race or ethnic discrimination were common in media work. Some dismissed this notion, instead suggesting that the media industries are not different than any other workplace and that discrimination was a normal feature of all working lives. Respondent 47 (male) likewise stated that "there will always be a certain level of discrimination due to differing ideas and values between people." This "natural" tendency for employers to discriminate was presented as one of the "tough lessons" that aspiring media workers had to learn. Such workers were expected to adapt to this work culture. Respondent 50 (male) said that fairness was "just not how the world works, unfortunately." In addition, other respondents suggested that the concept of fairness was antithetical to merit. Respondent 38 (male) expressed frustration with equality initiatives stating that "I fear we as a society are moving towards equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity and meritocracy. Prioritising virtue signalling over ones [*sic*] ability to do the job."

Therefore, while the majority of responses from students suggested that they were sceptical about all people being treated fairly by media employers, a small number of respondents (4 male, 1 female) did not feel the same. This latter position demonstrates students' capacity to retain an ideological position on meritocracy despite the fact that this concept was explicitly challenged in their educational programme. A strong focus on questions of inclusion and equality was central to their degree content and yet a small number of students refused to disavow the idea that "merit" determined success.

Lack of Diverse Representations in Irish Media

Equality in media representation was as important to respondents as equal work opportunities and, indeed, respondents took "media representation" to mean representation of groups in media education, media work and in media content and texts. While many students felt that people like themselves were represented in Irish media content, they were especially conscious that this was not the case for many other groups. Less than a third of respondents believed that Irish media content is diverse and inclusive, and many pointed to a lack of representation of racial and ethnic minorities, as well as an underrepresentation of non-Irish and LGBTQ+ people. Irish media, including the industry and the representations it produced, was largely perceived to be homogenous and exclusive and it was pointed out by some that this was counter to Ireland's increasingly diverse society. This was encapsulated by one respondent who stated that:

> There is no effort made to make this industry more inclusive than it is. The majority involved or celebrated are white males. Low levels of representation considering how

> Ireland is such a multi-racial and multi-cultural country. Little to no LGBTQ community representation either. (Respondent 7, female)

This feeling that the industry was not trying hard enough to represent diverse groups was echoed in many of the responses. Respondents highlighted the lack of racial and ethnic minorities in media education and work as a key concern, with one respondent saying that both media classrooms and professional production sets had an underrepresentation of people of colour, drawing attention to the way that underrepresentation materialised in the education-to-work pipeline (Respondent 2, female). Respondent 42 (male) said: "I believe there is not enough representation in the media for people of colour and other minorities." This lack of visibility in the media was perceived to be a greater issue for minorities than for women.

Lack of diverse representations on Irish television was specifically referenced by a number of respondents, particularly in terms of presenters and announcers. One respondent stated that, while she was unsure about diversity behind the screen, she could see from viewing Irish television that it is racially homogenous:

> I find while watching Irish shows there tends to be mainly white people on screen like on *The Late Late Show* and *Elaine* or even *Ireland AM*. I'm not completely sure what it's like behind the scenes but it's mainly white people with screen time. It would be nice to see people of colour on a daily or weekly show as presenter. (Respondent 28, female)

Equally, Irish television was said to underrepresent non-Irish people, with Respondent 14 (female) pointing to the "very few POC and/or foreign voices [and] faces on Irish television particularly in presenting." Respondent 30 stated that she had never seen her own (non-Irish) nationality represented "in any show, soap, movie, so forth. It's rare." Respondent 46 noted that it was largely people like him that dominated television: "I'm a straight, white man. Turn on the radio or the TV and you will almost only see and hear straight white men." Respondents, in this case, demonstrated an awareness of the need for racial justice in Irish media.

However, some respondents felt that Irish media had become more diverse over the years and was in the process of becoming more gender balanced and culturally diverse. This was seen as very much a work in progress and all respondents stated that there was still more for media industries to do to create a diverse workforce. Some of the respondents provided examples of positive developments in gender and cultural diversity with Respondent 53 explaining that a particular media production company he was familiar with "has employees of all backgrounds." Respondent 51 (female) referenced Irish national broadcaster RTÉ's efforts to create gender equality in the workplace. Therefore, there was a sense of cautious optimism among some respondents, with one commending the "slow developments towards diversity" and another acknowledging the "cultural shift" that was taking place (Respondent 34, female; Respondent 19, female).

Interpretations of Organisational Efforts to Achieve Change

This cautious optimism was, at times, reflected in students' interpretations of organisational efforts to achieve equality, diversity and inclusion in the Irish media workforce. Over one third of them thought that media employers did care about equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) issues. Over a half of students were unsure if organisations really cared and

many of these students displayed cautious optimism in their responses where they thought that perhaps some positive changes were afoot. Some 10% believed that companies did care but only insofar as it boosted their public image or increased their profits. A further 10% believed that companies do not do enough to create a diverse and inclusive workforce. Only a small number of respondents thought that companies don't take any measures to create a diverse and inclusive workplace.

Of those who more generally thought that companies were more conscious of equality and diversity, the tendency was to adopt a "wait and see" approach while commending measures that companies had taken to date. These respondents did not necessarily believe that media organisations were altruistic, but perceived industry change as positive, regardless of whether company change was self-initiated or a consequence of social pressure. For example, Respondent 30 (female) stated that: "Because of the current climate and people becoming more aware and more inclusive I believe companies and corporations definitely have that to think about. The focus on equality is everywhere now." Others saw that organisational change followed social change and noted that the progressive turn in Irish society had resulted in organisations implementing EDI measures:

> Recent social justice campaigns have been really heavily supported by the general public. We're at a turning point for equality and people are being called out more often for showing bias. Work cultures are now becoming more diverse and educating workers on how to interact with people who have different backgrounds. This helps to create a more comfortable and diverse culture. (Respondent 19, female)

Among the respondents who felt that industry change should be seen positively even if it is slow, most were female, perhaps evidencing their deeper knowledge of structural inequalities in the Irish media industries and progressive measures to address them.

A number of other female and male respondents took the opposite view. They felt that, although media organisations did seem to care about developing a diverse and inclusive workforce, the motivations to do so were suspect and genuine change was unlikely. These respondents were cynical in their view of organisational efforts to achieve change and believed such efforts to be largely tokenistic. For example, a number of respondents referred to organisational change only occurring "when pressure is placed on them by the public" (Respondent 59, male). Other respondents saw profit as the main driving force of media organisations with companies being more diverse if they thought it "would prevent loss of profit from controversies" (Respondent 54, male). These respondents perceived organisational change as superficial and pointed to hidden biases that might be present in organisations that appear to create a more diverse and inclusive workforce. Respondent 13 (female) stated that, despite possible good intentions, "you only really get in because of who you know" and Respondent 15 (female) said that personal biases might result in favouritism towards "employees who come from a certain ethnic background or a specific gender." These two contrasting perspectives—one that change is positive even if it is cynical versus one that says while change is positive it is too cynical—formed the majority of responses.

A third, smaller trend emerged whereby respondents (two female and one male) stated dissatisfaction with the expectation that media organisations should care about nurturing a diverse and inclusive workforce. These respondents largely felt that aspiring media workers were judged on equal terms, were not subject to discrimination and were judged on their skills and capabilities. In addition, they took umbrage at the notion that EDI should be valued and

prioritised within an organisation. They felt that "employers aren't there to hold your hand" (Respondent 1, female) and that employers' valuing of media workers' "media skill/experience with equipment" would win out over any biases employers might have (Respondent 16, female). These respondents were concerned that a focus on diversity and inclusion would mean that their individual skills and talents would be overlooked, with one respondent saying that diversity and inclusion "should be a secondary goal" for media employers whose "primary goal should be to employ people based on their hard work, experience, talent and motivation" (Respondent 46, male). Respondent 46 suggested that a focus on diversity and inclusion would come at the cost of individual talent. He thought, instead, that a meritocratic workplace would inevitably facilitate diversity and inclusion:

> I do not think it is that important to think about diverse and inclusive work forces. I believe that an employer should hire based upon quality of candidate and not race, gender, sexuality, religion etc. The best candidate should receive the position and I believe that will naturally increase diversity and inclusivity in the workplace.

This investment in the notion of a meritocratic media industries echoes the "mismatch of narratives" identified by Mark Taylor and Dave O'Brien between notions of an open and inclusive creative workplace and the structural exclusions that impact on marginalised and minority populations (30).

Taken as a whole, then, all of these interpretations of organisational change to accommodate diversity and inclusion were ambivalent. Respondents largely valued equality and diversity and hoped that media industries might promote and embody these values. However, many respondents also tempered their optimism since they saw media industries' efforts to become diverse and inclusive as profit or PR driven. Finally, a small cohort of respondents was unenthusiastic about diversity and inclusion practices altogether and saw this as counter to employment on the basis of merit. Media students, therefore, have different views on diversity and inclusion in media workplaces, but most perceive the potential for some form of unfairness in media employment practices.

Perceived Barriers to Entry in the Media Industries

This sense of unfairness was reiterated in responses to questions about whether students have experienced or perceived there to be barriers to entering media work. When asked what students saw as the main barriers to media work, several trends emerged. First and foremost, students saw the main barrier as themselves. Around half of them identified their own lack of confidence, education and training, and skills and abilities as barriers to media work. Therefore, they individualised structural exclusion and did not question the perceived standards expected of graduates or early entrants to media industries (O'Brien and Kerrigan). Secondly, almost a half of students believed that gender and sexual orientation would be barriers to entry and, indeed, a number of women (12%) reported that they had already been subject to gender discrimination in their employment. Over a third of students felt that disability, geography, social class and age would be barriers to entry. In particular, some students (8%) reported that they had been subject to discrimination and/or bullying at a workplace due to their young age. Respondent 44 (male) reported experiencing discrimination on the basis of national origin. Discrimination on the basis of origin was also referenced by Respondent 46 (male), who stated that some media employers "are and will be reluctant to hire someone because they live in a 'working class' area like Ballyfermot in West Dublin." This same respondent also stated that

this would also be an issue for people on the basis of race and ethnicity and he specifically mentioned the Traveller community as being vulnerable to discrimination in media employment. This concern with discrimination based on race or ethnicity was evident in 29% of responses. A final trend was that parenthood or caring responsibilities would act as barriers to media work. 25% of respondents believed this could occur in the media industries and almost half believed that media work was incompatible with family and caring responsibilities.

Where students saw barriers to media work for some, they also saw doors into media work for others regardless of experience or education. 54% of respondents believed that some groups benefitted from nepotism or personal connections, from gender and racial favouritism, whereby white men were perceived to be unfairly advantaged in seeking media work, and from class advantage. 61% of women and 50% of men believed that this occurred. Women, in particular, perceived men to be favoured above women in media employment and felt that they would have to be more skilled and educated than men for the same role. Respondent 2 (female) recalled being told that she would need a media degree to be considered for a role where a male applicant would not. Respondent 8 (female) felt that employers would employ people they like above people from minority and marginalised groups, "no matter how much a company says they have an equal opportunities policy." Other respondents noted intersectional privileges and disadvantages, with "'straight, white [men]' not having to work as hard as others to find work" (Respondent 14, female). Many of the respondents felt like outsiders with few seeing entry into media work as straightforward and fair, reflecting research on structural inequalities and discrimination in creative and media industries (Eikhof and Warhust; Conor et al.; Randle and Hardy; O'Brien).

This outsider/insider narrative was particularly evident in respondents' perception that nepotism and industry connections gave unfair advantages to some. Respondents felt that those with family connections could access media work easily and one respondent claimed to know of a number of new entrants who had secured work due to family or close connections (Respondent 54, male). Several respondents specifically stated that entry into media work was based on "who you know not what you know" and this was perceived to be unfair since those with insider connections could bypass those who were educated or trained. This echoed research by Daniel Ashton who equally found that students felt excluded and outside of important professional networks ("Media Work" 550). A further group of respondents correlated insider status and connection with social class, seeing the media industries as elite and exclusive. Respondent 41 (male) stated that, "when it comes to knowing the right people, others from, for example, more wealthy backgrounds might have more access to […] routes into the industry." Respondent 54 (male) stated that access to media work "weighed in favour of the upper classes through familial connections." Consciousness about opportunities afforded by family background and social class have been documented elsewhere among media workers who see media industries as elite and exclusive (Randle, Forson and Calveley; Brook et al.) and Irish media industries are perceived as such by these respondents.

Given the respondents' perceptions of barriers to entry and their anticipation of the media industries being discriminatory in employment practices, it is no surprise that a majority of them stated that they would be attracted to employers with clear diversity and inclusion policies. They largely responded positively to initiatives undertaken by organisations including Screen Ireland's Gender Action Plan and RTÉ's Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and felt that this would help create fairer media industries. One respondent acknowledged that "[p]eople will always have a sense of bias towards people they feel are more like them […] Because of the way that hiring practices have been for decades this does not favour a diverse hiring

environment without the implementation of external intervention" (Respondent 58, male). Overall, respondents sensed that barriers to entry existed, whether due to discrimination on the grounds of a protected characteristic or to lack of contacts and networks. Therefore, they were responsive to, albeit cautious about, organisations that claimed to value diversity and inclusion.

Discussion and Conclusion

The literature on Irish media industries suggests that attaining and sustaining work is challenging for marginal or minority groups, particularly women (O'Brien; Connolly; Liddy; Canning). This is also evidenced in the number of news stories and public outcries regarding issues such as the serious harassment of women in media work ("Harrassment"), the lack of female voices on Irish radio (Slattery) and the gender pay gap in Irish broadcasting (O'Connor). Although few of the respondents referred specifically to any of these situations, they had a broader sense that Irish media industries perpetuated inequalities through employment practices.

Our findings suggest that respondents value, and largely seek, what Mark Banks calls "creative justice" in that they hoped for "a more even distribution of positions and rewards in the creative industries […] on the grounds of economic opportunity, since everyone who wishes to should have a fair chance to enter, participate in and earn a living from cultural work" (2). Students differed in how they thought equality could be achieved, with some favouring a focus on social groups and the pragmatic encouragement of diversity and inclusion and others sensing that equality would be achieved through championing individual merit and talent. This latter view reflects the 2017 large-scale studies of Creative and Cultural Industry workers by Taylor and O'Brien, who found that their survey respondents thought their sector to be fair in regard to media work. Crucially, Taylor and O'Brien correlated such attitudes with social privilege, whereby those least likely to perceive inequality were "highly paid non-disabled white men" (43). Further studies of Irish media students and/or workers could take into account the social position and privileges of respondents. Our data collection used only gender, with other forms of identity mentioned by respondents in qualitative responses. In sum, most respondents expected or hoped that people would be treated fairly in seeking media work, but fairness was defined in divergent ways.

Respondents were generally cautiously optimistic or sceptical about equality and fairness in Irish media work and this was in part a consequence of the lack of diverse representations in Irish media. For those who had not engaged in media work at this stage in their lives, media representations offered the first glimpse of how equitable the industry might be. Media scholars such as Debbie Ging and Zélie Asava have noted some opportunity for more diverse representation in Irish media since the Celtic Tiger years, which saw increasing cultural diversity in the Irish population. However, they cautioned that increased visibility was not tantamount to equitable representation, particularly if Black, Asian, Traveller, disabled, female, LGBT and non-Irish people continued to be represented in a tokenistic way (Asava 15). Not only did our respondents feel that Irish media was lacking in diversity, but they perceived a significant absence of non-white and non-Irish people. Irish television was especially targeted by respondents for being racially and ethnically homogenous. Our respondents, therefore, reflected literature that called for more monitoring of, and progressive representations within, Irish media industries (Breen et al.; Kenny).

In addition, the findings point to an important gap in literature and also in policy relating to Irish media industries. Literature on graduate pathways into Irish media work and experiences of new entrants to media industries is limited (O'Brien et al., *Media Graduates*; O'Brien and Kerrigan). While numerous media education programmes graduate aspiring media workers, there is little attention paid to the experiences of such graduates nor to the attitudes they have to media work. Equally, Irish cultural policy (that includes policy related to media industries) promotes the cultural and creative industries as a key driver of "future work" without paying regard to the systemic and structural barriers to entry and forms of exclusion that many aspiring media workers face. Instead, creative work policies (outlined in Ireland's Future Jobs Plan and the Creative Ireland programme) focus on the generation of flexible workers who will engage in lifelong learning to adapt to industry and economic change ("Government"). This is despite one of the aims of the Creative Ireland Programme being to "support and enable participation in creative industries." While some measures have been introduced to identify and address issues relating to exclusion and some media organisations have implemented policies and strategies to facilitate more diversity and inclusion (such as the aforementioned Screen Ireland Gender Action Plan and RTE's Diversity and Inclusion Strategy), these do not yet influence students' attitudes to media work.

Finally, the expectation of discrimination and exclusion may act as a deterrent for media graduates who opt out of media work altogether. Media graduates already face many challenges in gaining entry into media including lack of opportunities, prevalence of unpaid and low paid internships, and more generally the precarious nature of work that is often temporary and sporadic. This enables those already socially and economically privileged to gain entry more easily than others, thus perpetuating exclusion. In addition, our research showed some evidence that access (or lack thereof) to media work was often individualised, with respondents perceiving success or failure in achieving media work as an individual rather than a structural issue, reflecting neoliberal attitudes to work. Further research on media graduate destinations and the experience and worker subjectivities of early career media workers could track wider trends in equality and inequality in the Irish media industries.

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