

# Screenwriters' Earnings in the Video Streaming Age

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# CONTENTS

<b>Executive summary</b> .....	<b>3</b>	<b>4. Findings</b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b>1. Introduction and main findings</b> .....	<b>4</b>	4.1: Screenwriter's Earnings in the Digital Age. ....	25
1.1 How are screenwriters paid in the video streaming age? .....	4	4.2.3 Screenwriters Pay. ....	25
1.2 How does work flow between the writers, producers and streaming services? .....	5	4.1.1 Traditional Model of Earnings... ..	25
1.3 What are the impacts of SVODs commissioning practice on screenwriters' earnings? .....	6	4.1.2 Digital Disruptors: The Buyout Model. ....	28
1.3.2 Wider impact on screenwriters... ..	7	4.1.3 Impact on Screenwriters. ....	30
<b>Glossary of key terms</b> .....	<b>8</b>	4.2 Screenwriter's Pay in a Global System. ....	32
<b>2. Context, Research Questions and Research Design</b> .....	<b>10</b>	4.2.1. Global Production .....	32
2.1 Screenwriters' earnings and buyouts ..	10	4.2.2 Agents and Production Companies .....	33
2.1.1 Direct Licencing (buyouts) .....	10	4.3 SVODs as Digital Disruptors .....	34
2.1.2 SVODs Impact on Screenwriters .....	11	4.3.1 Precarious Work. ....	35
2.3 Research Design .....	12	4.3.2 Subscriptions and Success... ..	35
2.3.1 Participant Selection .....	12	4.3.3 Transparency of Data and Algorithms .....	36
2.3.2 Sampling .....	12	4.3.4 Developing New and Mid-career Writers .....	37
2.3.3 Data Collection .....	13	4.3.5 Freelancing and Guild Agreements .....	38
2.3.4 Data Analysis .....	13	4.3.6 WGA Strike .....	39
2.3.5 Ethical Considerations .....	13	4.3.7 Future of Screenwriters and SVODs .....	40
2.3.6 Limitations .....	14	<b>5. Conclusions</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<b>3. Literature Review</b> .....	<b>15</b>	5.1. Recommendations. ....	42
3.1 Streaming Services .....	15	5.2 Limitations .....	44
3.1.1 Business models .....	15	5.3 Avenues for Future Research .....	44
3.1.2 SVOD opportunities .....	15	<b>6. Appendices</b> .....	<b>46</b>
3.1.3 SVOD challenges .....	17	6.1 BBC Script fees (2021 rates) .....	46
3.2 Screenwriters pay .....	18	6.2 Additional Sources. ....	46
3.2.1 Screenwriters Payment Structures .....	18	Rates and Pay for UK Screenwriters .	46
3.2.2 Schedule of Payments .....	18	Campaigns .....	46
3.3 Screenwriters' Earnings .....	19	6.4 Interview Guides .....	47
3.3.1 UK Screenwriters Earnings .....	19	<b>7. References</b> .....	<b>50</b>
3.3.2 USA Screenwriters Earnings ... ..	22		
3.3.3 Residuals under USA SVOD... ..	23		
3.4 Conclusion .....	24		

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This report summarises key findings from interviews with UK screenwriters investigating the impact of streaming services on their earnings.
- Screenwriters widely reported the use of the buyout model by SVODs in the UK:
  - Buyouts have become increasingly common for writers when they write for SVODs. Many writers we spoke to are already relying on buyout contracts or expect to do so in the future.
  - Buyout contracts resulted in screenwriters receiving 100-145% SUA of their script fee for the SVOD to own the original content, with no option to receive ongoing residuals or royalties.
  - SVODs' entry into the market was a double-edged sword for writers: SVODs opened up new writing opportunities for writers, but their tendency towards higher-budget productions meant these opportunities tend to be skewed toward experienced screenwriters.
  - Writers' preference for, or willingness to accept, a more immediate and substantial buyout compared to long-term residual earnings is influenced by the unpredictability of residuals, precarious working patterns, and asymmetrical power relations between writers and SVODs.
- Individual writers found it challenging to quantify the impact of changes on their earnings, due to:
  - There is a lack of transparency in the viewing and subscription figures from SVODs.
  - A lack of clarity from writers on the details of their contracts and a reliance on the agent to understand the details and to negotiate rates with the production company and SVOD or broadcaster.
- Writers expressed that the shift to working with streaming services has impacted them and the industry in a range of ways:
  - Increased insecurity and precarity, especially given the nature of work with long periods of development (or speculative work) with no or little pay.
  - Lack of development opportunities for new writers.
  - Impact on diversity and inclusion within the industry, with diversified content but concentrated labour focusing on experienced rather than new writers.
- This report makes two key recommendations to address screenwriters' earnings:
  - The need to support freelancers, including from government legislation and investment, and the representation of collective interests with streaming services similar to current WGGB agreements
  - Support for training and development of new and mid-career screenwriters, recognising a potential skill gap emerging in the industry



# 1. INTRODUCTION AND MAIN FINDINGS

The advent of Subscription Video On Demand (SVOD) Services has profoundly transformed the consumption and distribution of visual media. Once dominated by traditional broadcast networks and film studios, the media landscape is now heavily influenced by SVODs, resulting in an unprecedented demand for original content. This surge in production was initially celebrated as a golden era for creatives, seemingly promising abundant new opportunities for screenwriters. Indeed, the industry continues to generate substantial profits and demonstrate sustained growth.<sup>1</sup>

Given this expansion, one might logically assume a corresponding improvement in the welfare of screenwriters—the very creators of the content populating these platforms. However, questions regarding screenwriters' welfare came sharply into focus during the 2023 American Screenwriters' Guild strike, which ultimately led to a resolution among relevant parties.<sup>2</sup> Despite the prolific output of high-budget series and films by these platforms, as well as significant media attention surrounding recent industry labour disputes, the actual impact of these shifts on screenwriters' livelihoods remains surprisingly opaque. There is a distinct lack of empirical understanding regarding how individual screenwriters are truly faring. Specifically, little is known about how these profound changes in the commissioning, production, and distribution of content translate into screenwriters' actual earnings, career stability, and overall professional experiences. This study aims to shed light on this critical gap by examining the transformation of screenwriter compensation from the pre-streaming era (before approximately 2010) to the present video streaming age (since around 2010).

## 1.1 How are screenwriters paid in the video streaming age?

In traditional broadcasting, screenwriters may a) create an original idea, which is optioned by a producer to be produced into a TV show, series or longer drama; b) be commissioned to write an original TV show, series, or longer drama where the idea has originated with the producer; or c) be commissioned to write an episode for an existing, often long-standing TV show. Screenwriters agree terms with the producer through an assignment of ownership of the script in exchange for payments for future use. This assignment is then transferred to UK broadcasters such as the BBC or ITV when a deal is made between the broadcaster and the producer. While writers may earn incremental amounts as the script is developed, the most significant payment is received for the script fee and the advance earned on the first day of principal photography (100% of the script fee). The subsequent use advance (SUA) is a pre-purchase that covers a limited number of repeats, for example, two peak time repeats on BBC 1 and certain sales as outlined in the contract.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the SUA, the writer is entitled to residuals or payments for each subsequent time the show is aired and for other sales not covered in the original SUA. If the writer has the role of a showrunner, then they will also be involved in the production of the show. Finally, they may also receive payment from the ALCS for secondary rights when the work is used beyond their original distribution (for screenwriters, this includes retransmissions on different channels and Writers Digital Payments for streaming on ITV and BBC iPlayer).

This report examines how the emergence of streaming services (e.g. Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+, Paramount+, AppleTV+) in the UK market has disrupted this model. In our sample, there was almost a universal experience of buyout contracts when working with streaming services. In a typical buyout contract, the production company purchases the original content from the writer and owns all subsequent uses of the idea and work, which are then sold to the SVOD. Screenwriters do not receive any future payments in the form of residuals. Producers who anticipated working with an SVOD sometimes opted to introduce a buyout into the contract from the beginning, even before an SVOD was on board. Buyout figures ranged, with examples in our sample of writers ranging from 100% to

1. Ofcom, *Media Nations UK 2023*, 3 August 2023.

2. Summary of the 2023 WGA MBA

3. While it may sound like a significant sum, an SUA might quickly be depleted, leaving no further payments once the advance is recouped. SUAs are intended to cover future uses, sometimes for substantial periods (e.g., 10 years for Netflix in some agreements), effectively front-loading payments. No further payments are due until after that pre-purchased period or if the advance is recouped through specific sales, leaving no additional payments unless the thresholds for those sales are met and exceeded. (<https://writersguild.org.uk/rates-and-rights/>)

145% of the script fee. Interviewees told us that in the 'golden years' when streaming first emerged and grew (circ. 2013-2020), some streaming services commissioned shows with significantly higher buyout fees. However, nearly all the interviewees agreed that the industry is facing a slowdown as of 2024, and streaming services are being more cautious and conservative in their investments. As a result, some writers reported receiving no more income from a buyout than they would have from a script fee and SUA, and they also did not receive residuals for future use. Most streaming services have not entered into union agreements and, therefore, do not follow voluntary agreements. The exception to this is Netflix, which entered into a specific voluntary agreement with the WGGB in March 2024 after the interviews for this study were concluded.

A screenwriter's reputation in the market plays a crucial role in deciding the script fee. Their perceived value to the project confirms this reputation, comprising a mix of their creative ability, previous experience, and whether there is a buzz around them (e.g. from a recent success). In practice, script fees are set by how much the agent could argue the screenwriter was worth to the production company and the script fee the screenwriter earned for their last piece of work. Most of the screenwriters we spoke to who wrote for streaming services earned above the WGGB minimum guaranteed for a traditional broadcaster (see Appendix 6.1). However, there were cases in our sample where screenwriters earned the minimum or less when writing for streaming services.

Writers at the low to mid levels, in particular, discussed the financial challenges they faced. Screenwriters' pay is usually spread out over significant periods. Additionally, development work can be time-intensive, often yields meagre pay and can leave screenwriters in a precarious position.

## 1.2 How does work flow between the writers, producers and streaming services?

Our findings indicate that screenwriters predominantly work with producers to develop initial content, which the production company then pitches to an SVOD or traditional broadcaster. The screenwriter typically develops the original idea and pitches it to the producer. The production company then offers a contract to the screenwriter. When an SVOD or broadcaster becomes involved, the terms of the original contract may be honoured or rewritten as needed. If an SVOD agrees to produce a TV show or film, they will finance the production and have creative input, buying out the rights to the show from the production company. In some cases, an SVOD may purchase the idea but decide to use a different production company or a different writing team, at which point the writer can be bought out with no further involvement.

The UK's screen industry is part of a global network, with streaming services originating mainly from the USA (and, in some cases, also from Europe). American streaming services have set up UK subsidiaries to produce content in the UK with local production companies. Localisation is part of the international strategy where streaming services aim to create original content in different parts of the world. Therefore, the UK subsidiaries operate under UK law, and the WGGB (Writers Guild of Great Britain) covers writers in the UK rather than the WGA (the American writers' guilds). UK freelancers are considered self-employed rather than employees and not covered by most traditional employment rights legislation. Unions for freelancers, such as the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, have limited bargaining power. Their activities are primarily focused on advocacy and lobbying, including the creation of non-legally binding industry-level agreements that serve as benchmarks. They also provide legal advice, as well as offer training and development activities. The new Employment Rights Bill, currently under government review, is unlikely to change rights for freelancers as its current form maintains a distinction between employees and workers (two tiers of persons employed) and freelancers (persons under contract due to their status as independent businesses).





### 1.3 What are the impacts of SVODs commissioning practice on screenwriters' earnings?

Unlike the traditional model, the 'buyout' model compensates screenwriters with a one-time fee at the time of production, removing any future residual payments. There have been many concerns raised about the potential impact of SVODs, particularly regarding reduced income for screenwriters due to fewer opportunities to earn residuals. Traditionally, screenwriters received residuals when working with broadcasters, who paid writers additional compensation if a show aired more times than initially stipulated in their contracts. This residual income could also come from foreign entertainment distributors purchasing the rights to broadcast the show. Across the interview sample for this project, screenwriters reported buyouts are extensively used by streaming services, from newer writers earning very little for their work to very experienced ones who earned well above the industry standard. SVODs earn revenue from subscriptions to their service and use the number of new subscribers as a marker of success for new TV shows. SVODs publish only limited information, with Netflix being the most transparent, providing a biannual report on views on a global basis (total hours viewed divided by runtime)<sup>4</sup>. Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB) also publishes viewing statistics in the UK for all broadcasters, including SVODs, giving some insight into country-level analysis<sup>5</sup>. However, the opaque nature of how both residuals and buyouts work makes it challenging to accurately quantify the impact SVODs have had on screenwriters' earnings. However, the qualitative implications offer valuable insights into the underlying changes occurring in the new working environment for screenwriters.

Our research revealed that screenwriters often rely on their agents to help them navigate and comprehend the finer points of their contracts. The majority of screenwriters viewed residuals as an additional source of earnings but not as a primary source of income to be relied on. For the majority of screenwriters, apart from those on the top echelon, the script fee was the primary source of income. It is also worth noting that not all work received a residual; only original works that were successful enough to be repeated on traditional broadcasters or licensed to a foreign entertainment distributor would receive such payment. The Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society (ALCS) also collects fees for secondary uses of any work and the Writers' Digital Payment when works are later put on catch-up services such as BBC iPlayer and ITV Hub<sup>6</sup>. It is also important to highlight that although unpredictable, residuals, if received, serve as an important source of income to sustain work, particularly when there are few other forms of income, for example, during the development stage of new ideas.

Strictly speaking, it is challenging, if not impossible, to compare screenwriters' earnings from traditional broadcasters, which employ a residual model, to those from SVODs, which often use a buyout model. In addition to the lack of transparency, several other factors contributed. The first is that screenwriters earn their fees over an extended period of development; for example, one writer told us that a 4 year development period was not uncommon. The amount of work over this time varies depending on the number of rewrites, which can increase as a result of differing expectations among people involved and the writer's experience (with newer writers potentially requiring more time and support). The second factor was that writers relied heavily on their agents to work out the details of their contract, and as a result, may be unclear on the details. This meant they had fewer expectations and were usually happy to rely on their agent to work out the details.

When presented with the chance to work for a new global platform of SVODs, on the condition of not receiving the residuals, only one writer participating in this project rejected the offer. In other examples, the substantial buyout provides the screenwriter with a substantial payment that enables them, for example, to cover parts of their house mortgage or make investments to secure their future. When it comes to successful shows, residuals can be significant. The data we obtained from the interviews suggested screenwriters would earn more from a contract which included a residual deal than from a buyout. However there may also be instances where a show is not a success, and would have not received any residuals. In these circumstances a 125% buyout might be a good deal. For most of the screenwriters, the script fee rates were on average in line with the annual earnings of comparable professions, especially considering the protracted time frame and the significant effort required to write a show. Most writers'

4. Netflix (2025) 'What We Watched the Second Half of 2024' 26 February 2025

5. Broadcasters' Audience Research Board <https://www.barb.co.uk/>

6. Writers Digital Payments, 2025

earnings were characterised by long periods of low income and, if they were lucky, by a sudden jump due to a successful programme. This meant that many authors welcomed the much-needed income an additional 25% buyout could bring.

Residuals are significant to screenwriters as a form of recognition of the original creation of an idea and work. From this perspective, the significance of residuals is as much symbolic as economic. Beyond the economic benefits, most writers agreed that working for SVODs may provide an opportunity to gain recognition on a global scale. Established screenwriters, in general, had benefited more from residuals and had stronger feelings about their importance. In contrast, newer screenwriters were more willing to accept buyouts and the recognition they may gain from writing for an SVOD. The impact of residuals varies depending on the stage of that career. A screenwriter with a strong reputation can request a high script fee or earn additional income as a showrunner or executive producer. In contrast writers in their early to mid-career can spend most of their time developing work. As a result, a screenwriter's career in the mid-to-low income range is more precarious because there is little certainty that the work will be picked up and produced. Without residuals to rely on during periods of low income, these writers had to use their savings, find alternative work or rely on family support to develop their work to a stage that might attract investment. At the same time, it is these screenwriters who are more willing to accept buyout contracts due to their lack of bargaining power and the need for additional work. While this split was not universal, the precarity of the industry meant that there was more pressure for newer writers to seize opportunities to work with streaming services.

### 1.3.2 WIDER IMPACT ON SCREENWRITERS

Beyond the more direct financial impact on screenwriters' earnings, our findings suggest that SVODs have had a significant impact on the development of screenwriters' careers. Many interviewees highlighted that SVODs may inadvertently limit opportunities for newer writers, which may have long-term consequences for encouraging new talent in the industry.

Previous avenues into the industry for new writers which would develop their skills and experiences, such as continuing series dramas (soaps and long-running serials), are becoming less popular with viewers<sup>7</sup>. SVODs tend to produce higher-budget shows, which makes them risk-averse. This results in more possibilities for experienced writers but fewer opportunities for, and investment in, new or inexperienced writers. The selection process for screenwriters relied on networking and working on previous projects, which also tended to favour experienced writers over newer, unknown voices. Some newer writers also utilised competitions to gain recognition, which provide the opportunity to work on an episode or in a writers' room, thereby gaining valuable experience. These provided opportunities to develop experience but also reinforced the low-paid work at the bottom end of the market. It is also unclear whether new opportunities are emerging for screenwriters from a broader range of diverse backgrounds and experiences. An analysis of development needs and diversity was not the primary aim of this study, but incidental findings suggest this area could be the focus of future research to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of streaming services on screenwriters' earnings.



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7. Staples, L. 'Are soaps in danger of extinction?' BBC Culture, 2022

# GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

**Accepted script:** The script moves from the development stage into pre-production, and the final script is accepted. There may still be minor alterations made by the producer at this stage, after which it becomes the shooting script.

**Buyout (assignment):** When the contract buys the rights to own a creative idea and creative work and its future uses. The writer relinquishes the right to ownership of the idea.

**Commissioning the script:** Developing a treatment or outline into a full script in discussion with a producer.

**Copyright:** Rights to an idea which has become fixed, i.e. the tangible form of an idea. In the case of screenwriters when it has been written down. Screenwriters have copyright ownership for original creative work which is then usually sold and transferred through assignment to a production company.

**Direct Licensing:** A business model where streaming platforms acquire content through direct purchase (also known as a buyout) instead of a traditional licensing agreement. In exchange for all of the rights to their work and any future revenues, the creator will receive a one-time payment.

**Format:** The original elements of a TV programme or series including setting, characters, themes and how the narrative develops.

**First day of principal photography:** First day of shooting where the writer earns the script fee and SUA.

**Licence:** Whereby a writer maintains ownership of licensed rights

**Minimum terms agreements:** Agreements negotiated through the WGGB on UK writers' rates and rights in TV, theatre, audio and some areas of film. These are the minimum terms writers are entitled to. Agreements are specific to the major broadcasters and producers stated. In the USA, comparable agreements under the WGA are referred to as the minimum basic agreement (MBA).

**Minimum fee:** Agreed minimum fee and attendance payments in the UK as set out in minimum terms agreements, negotiated through the WGGB with the major broadcasters and producers.

**Option Fee:** An agreement granting a producer exclusive right to purchase a screenplay during a specified period ("option period"). The producer or production company pays an "option fee" for this right.

**Post-production:** Changes made after filming in editing, may involve the writer in the case of original shows.

**Principal Photography:** The main phase of filmmaking, during which most scenes are shot.

**Producer:** An individual or company responsible for overseeing a television show's development, financing, and production.

**Residuals (Screenwriting):** Additional payments to the screenwriter beyond the initial project compensation, typically based on reruns, syndication, or other distribution outlets.

**Royalties:** Payments to owners or creators of intellectual property based on revenue from the sale or licence of that property.

**Screenplay competitions:** Contents where screenwriters submit their scripts for the chance to gain industry recognition or monetary rewards.

**Screenwriter:** A writer responsible for developing and writing a screenplay, television show, or video game. Their compensation is determined by factors like experience, perceived value by the producer, project type, budget, and, if they have an agent, their negotiation skills.



**Script fee:** The payment for delivery of an accepted script.

**Showrunner:** The key creative authority for a television series, tasked with supervising its development and production, and ensuring a consistent vision.

**Stepped Payments:** Incremental payments to a screenwriter for rewriting or editing a screenplay at various stages of development.

**Streamer:** A broad term that includes individuals or platforms providing online video content. This includes subscription services (SVOD) and advertising-based video-on-demand platforms (TVOD, HVOD, AVOD and FAST) which offer free access to content supported by advertising (e.g., YouTube and Crackle).

**Streaming Platforms:** Online services that deliver digital content, including films and TV shows, directly to users via the internet (e.g., Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+).

**Subscription Video on Demand (SVOD):** A business model where users pay a subscription fee to access a library of movies and TV programmes on-demand. Please note that SVOD is a specific type of payment model within the broader streaming landscape, and not all streaming platforms operate on this model.

**Subsequence Use Advance (SUA):** An advance earned on the first day of principal photography: the advance matches the script fee and covers fees due in respect of future uses as set out in the contract.

**Treatment (outline):** Developed storyline with scene-by-scene details (can be up to 40 pages).

**Writers Digital Payments (WDP):** Payments collected by the ALCS for screenwriters when their work is viewed on BBCiPlayer and ITV Hub, linked to how many times the show is viewed.

**Writers' Guild of America (WGA):** The Writers Guild of America is the common term for two divisions of labour unions (Writers Guild of America WGA and Writers Guild of America, West WGAW) representing writers in film, television, radio, and online media in the USA. It negotiates and advocates for compensation, credits, and creative rights issues on behalf of its members.

**Writers' Guild of Great Britain (WGGB):** A trade union representing UK screenwriters and other professional writers in TV, film, theatre, radio, books, comedy, poetry, animation and video games. Members also include emerging and aspiring writers. It advocates for and protects the interests of writers.

**Writers' room:** Story conferences run by a showrunner, usually paid through a separate daily fee.

## 2. CONTEXT, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The Subscription Video-On-Demand (SVOD) market has become the primary destination for watching film and TV. The industry has witnessed continued growth, “generating over “£3.3bn in 2022, up 21.5% year on year, driven by a combination of price rises and overall growth in subscriptions.”<sup>8</sup> SVOD providers built streaming systems and new licensing and publication models to allow the global viewership of the content<sup>9</sup>, which challenged the linear model of television, viewing habits, national media systems, and conventional ideas of what television represents.

### 2.1 Screenwriters' earnings and buyouts

The rise of SVODs has introduced significant changes to the market, including how screenwriters are paid. A major factor behind the change to screenwriters' earnings is the buyout model adopted by SVODs, where rights are assigned to production companies but with no future payments for reuse. In discussing the context of this study, this section outlines the shift to 'buyouts', officially known as direct licensing, and the challenges this has created for screenwriters. It will then set out the research design and methodology of the project.

#### 2.1.1 Direct Licencing (buyouts)

Broadcasters in the UK typically acquire the rights to distribute creative content through assignment, a form of traditional licensing. Traditional licensing involves an initial payment for the copyright ownership of creative material. It also includes future residual payments to actors, writers, and producers, recognising the reuse of material beyond the original broadcast. Direct licensing, on the other hand, involves the acquisition of ownership rights to a creative work with no future payments, often referred to as a 'buyout' in the entertainment industry. In the UK, broadcasters generally obtain assignment rights in return for future payments to the screenwriter for their work. However, recent newcomers into the market, such as Netflix or Disney+, are claimed to have shifted to direct licensing. This report examines the impact streaming services have had on screenwriters, particularly their earnings.

Streaming services, as more recent entrants into the market, have favoured direct licensing. Netflix plays a dominant role in the UK market and, over time, has shifted its business focus from collecting existing content to creating original content. Whereas Netflix's early success relied on licensed content like *The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013) and *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), over time, licensing and producing originals like *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018) and *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-) proved hugely popular, attracting new subscribers and building brand loyalty.<sup>10</sup> From SVODs' perspectives, originals and direct licensing offer advantages like exclusive global distribution, creative control, and the ability to tailor content to specific audience segments.

Netflix does not publicly disclose the specific percentage of its content acquired through direct licensing versus residual deals.<sup>11</sup> Direct licensing enhanced Netflix's ability to offer the content globally, providing a consistent worldwide experience, whereas licensing deals can vary regionally.<sup>12</sup> In the UK, producing UK-specific content, such as *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016-2023), helped target and expand Netflix's UK audience.<sup>13</sup> Direct licensing allows Netflix to secure exclusive titles and differentiate itself from rivals. By owning and producing content, Netflix attracts subscribers and builds a valuable library of intellectual

8. Ofcom, Media Nations UK 2023, 3 August 2023.

9. Mareike Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2018) <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5475331>>.

10. Brad Adgate, 'Studios Are Once Again Licensing TV And Movies To Rival Netflix', *Forbes*, 21 December 2023.

11. Statista Inc., 'Estimated Number of SVOD Subscribers Worldwide from 2020 to 2029, by Service (in Millions)', Statista, 2023.

12. Eric Rosenberg, 'Why Netflix Content Is Different Abroad', *Investopedia*, 15 July 2023.

13. Enders Analysis, 'Case Study: Netflix', September 2014, p. 1.

property.<sup>14 15</sup> This collection of intellectual property provides leverage for potential future deals with other platforms or lucrative merchandising opportunities.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.1.2 SVODS IMPACT ON SCREENWRITERS

Streaming platforms actively commission a wealth of original content<sup>17</sup> and may offer substantially higher purchase payments. In the USA, the overall median guaranteed compensation for a screenplay deal across streaming platforms is reported to be \$325,000.<sup>18</sup> Notably, this figure surpasses the median compensation for the first draft in traditional studios, which stands at “\$293,750 for a one-step deal and \$262,500 for multiple guaranteed steps.”<sup>19</sup> Netflix offers higher compensation for content, not only because it pays a premium for direct licensing but also because its deals often include “guaranteed steps”—typically ranging from two to five.<sup>20</sup> Steps refer to the number of times a script has been processed, and this additional work increases the compensation that screenwriters receive from streaming platforms for their content.<sup>21</sup>

Has this likewise translated into higher earnings for screenwriters? While there has been substantial research on the rise of streaming services in the USA, there is far less information available about the UK context. Far less still is known about the impact on screenwriters from a UK perspective. A recent report published by WGA on screenwriters in the USA argued that the transition to streaming has worsened the welfare of screenwriters.<sup>22</sup> The WGA report highlights how the shift to streaming has negatively impacted writers’ pay and working conditions.<sup>23</sup> According to the report, despite rising series budgets, median writer-producer pay has dropped 23% over the past decade, and half of all TV series writers now earn only the minimum rate, up from 33% a decade ago. Showrunners, too, face declining compensation, with 24% now working at the minimum rate. Streaming’s shorter series orders have led to more work for less pay, particularly for lower and mid-level writers. Screenwriters’ pay has stagnated, declining 14% over the last five years when adjusted for inflation.

It is argued that writers overall have seen a substantial drop in earnings in the UK since the COVID pandemic<sup>24</sup>, although it is not clear to what extent screenwriters have also been impacted. Screenwriters tend to earn more than the average writer, representing an important group within the UK creative industries<sup>25</sup>. In addition to earnings, the introduction of streaming services into the UK market is likely to impact screenwriters in other ways, including their potential opportunities and support offered for screenwriters development.

The Writers Guild of America (WGA) recently engaged in an extended strike in 2023. One of the main issues their campaign centred around was the lack of residuals paid by streaming companies to screenwriters. In October 2023, the WGA settled this strike around five areas related to SVOD: *An increase in the minimum rate by 18% and residuals by 26% for productions with a budget of \$30 million or more; Increased foreign streaming residuals; Viewership-based streaming bonus; Streaming Data Transparency; and Premium for Pilot & Backup Scripts*<sup>26</sup>. The writer would receive a bonus equal to 50% of the fixed and domestic residual if 20% of the subscribers watched the show in the first 90 days.

14. Richin Jose, ‘Will Netflix Become the Next Blockbuster?’, California Management Review Insights, 12 July 2021.

15. Tim Cross, ‘Are “IP Universes” the Key to Surviving the Streaming Wars?’, VideoWeek, 2021.

16. Amanda Cioletti, ‘Netflix Pulls Back the Curtain’, License Global, 8 June 2023.

17. Sonny Bunch, ‘Why the Studios Are Risking Everything’, The Atlantic, 29 July 2023.

18. Writers Guild of America West, ‘Screen Compensation Guide for Streaming Services’, Writers Guild of America West, 16 December 2022.

19. Writers Guild of America West, ‘Screen Compensation Guide’, Writers Guild of America West, n.d.

20. Writers Guild of America West, ‘Screen Compensation Guide for Streaming Services’.

21. Oliver Povey, ‘How Much Does Netflix Pay Screenwriters?’, Diario AS, 5 May 2023.

22. Anousha Sakoui, ‘Despite Streaming Boom, Median Writer Pay Has Fallen in Last Decade, WGA Report Says’, Los Angeles Times, 14 March 2023.

23. Writers Guild of America, ‘Writers Are Not Keeping Up’, WGA Contract 2023, 14 March 2023.

24. Create UK: ‘Authors’ Earnings in the UK’, 2023

25. Create UK, 2023

26. Summary of the 2023 WGA MBA

Additionally, the streaming services that signed the deal agreed to increase their transparency regarding viewing figures for original content, both domestically and internationally.

As UK writers work under UK law for UK subsidiaries, and are represented by the WGGB, the deal made between streaming services and the WGA does not apply to UK productions. In February 2024, a new deal was agreed upon between the WGGB and Netflix with the following terms: *minimum rates for programmes; a minimum SUA of 125% for a period of up to 10 years; an enhanced SUA rate for pre-purchasing beyond 10 years in fixed intervals; a fee for use for a non-Netflix service; and a minimum daily rate for a writers' room*<sup>27</sup>. As data collection for this report was nearing completion when the deal was reached, and related to events prior to the new deal, it was not possible to analyse an impact in the results. However, future contracts related to UK screenwriters working under the agreement will be an important area to explore in further studies.

## 2.3 Research Design

Against this backdrop, this report aimed to fill a knowledge gap by understanding the impact SVODs' buyout practices have on screenwriters' earnings in the UK. The primary objective was to examine how revenue flows, compensation structures, and working relationships between streaming services, agents and screenwriters have evolved, and how these changes impact writers' earnings. To that end, this study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to examine the evolving employment landscape for screenwriters in the video streaming era.

### 2.3.1 PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to reflect diverse perspectives across seniority levels and experience in both traditional broadcasting and SVOD platforms. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Participants must be at least 18 years old.
- They would have varying levels of experience, ranging from novice writers to those with high-profile credits.
- Participants must have experience working with either traditional broadcasters and/or SVOD services.

Participants were recruited through multiple channels:

1. A call for participation was circulated by the Writers' Guild of Great Britain (WGGB).
2. Direct outreach by researchers, including referrals from industry contacts and communication with screenwriting agents.
3. Snowball sampling, wherein initial participants referred additional interviewees.

This recruitment strategy ensured a range of perspectives, covering various types of contractual agreements, including buyouts and residuals, across a broad time frame.

### 2.3.2 SAMPLING

Purposive and snowball sampling may introduce selection bias, as participants could refer to those with similar experiences. This was mitigated by including various perspectives from across the industry, including screenwriters in television and film, as well as agents and representatives from the WGGB and ALCS.

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27. Summary of the 2024 WGGB / PMA / Netflix Agreement

### 2.3.3 DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexible yet focused discussions. A standardised interview guide (see Appendix) was used to explore the following key themes:

- Revenue distribution among screenwriters, streaming services, and producers.
- Changes in compensation structures with the rise of SVOD platforms.
- Comparative earnings between traditional broadcasters and SVOD services.
- The impact of SVOD commissioning practices on screenwriters' earnings, with particular emphasis on buyouts versus residuals.

The interview guide was developed based on a review of the existing literature on screenwriters' earnings and the streaming industry, ensuring that questions were relevant and aligned with key issues in the field. Open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences, resulting in rich and detailed responses.

Interviews were conducted via video conferencing, recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised to protect confidentiality.

The researchers remained cognizant of their potential influence on the data collection process, taking steps to minimise bias by maintaining an open-ended, neutral stance during interviews and ensuring transparency in coding procedures.

Interviews were conducted until data saturation, meaning no new significant themes or insights emerged, therefore ensuring the comprehensiveness of the findings.

### 2.3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, following an inductive coding process to identify patterns and themes that aligned with the research questions. NVivo software facilitated the systematic coding and organisation of data. Key thematic categories emerged, including:

- Distribution of revenue among stakeholders (screenwriters, streaming services, producers).
- Impact of buyout agreements versus residual-based compensation models.
- Differences in compensation practices between SVOD platforms and traditional broadcasters such as the BBC.

Through iterative coding and constant comparison, the analysis highlighted both shared experiences and distinct differences across participants. Special attention was given to variations in compensation models between SVOD services and traditional broadcasters.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, coding was cross-checked by multiple researchers to reduce bias and ensure consistency.





### 2.3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of York Ethics Committee under the School of Arts and Creative Technologies subcommittee. Participants were fully briefed on the study's purpose, their rights, and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviewing. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. To protect anonymity, identifying details were removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms were used in all published findings. Quotes in the report were checked with participants prior to publication to ensure anonymity.

### 2.3.6 LIMITATIONS

While this qualitative approach provides in-depth insights, it also has limitations. The sample size ( $n = 23$ ) was relatively small and geographically constrained to the United Kingdom. However, the sample reflects the small population of screenwriters in the UK. Although some participants shared insights from the U.S. market, the findings are primarily based on the UK context, which may limit generalizability to other regions where compensation models and labour regulations differ. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of recall bias or subjective interpretation of past events. Future studies could benefit from a larger, more geographically diverse sample and the inclusion of a mixed-methods approach to broaden the scope of the findings.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review examines the current knowledge about the impact of streaming services on screenwriters' earnings in the UK and provides a comparison with the US context. The section outlines what streaming services are and how their business model differs from that of traditional broadcasters in the UK. While there are multiple business models for streaming videos, this report focuses primarily on the Subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) model, where viewers pay a recurring fee (usually monthly) to access a library of video content or a one-time fee to watch a specific movie or TV Show. It then briefly sets out how screenwriters' labour is remunerated in television within the UK and the USA. Due to the US influence on broadcasting and streaming services in particular, it provides a helpful comparison and highlights potential issues that may extend to the UK context. However, it is also important to note that while the screen industries are highly international, there are significant differences between television production in the USA and the UK. The final section of this section looks specifically at screenwriters' earnings, both in the UK and the USA. Again, this section also highlights the differences between the UK and USA labour markets and laws, especially those related to unionisation.

### 3.1 Streaming Services

#### 3.1.1 BUSINESS MODELS

Streaming services offer alternative business models to traditional broadcasters in the UK media landscape, in terms of production, distribution, and broadcasting. For example, the BBC group operates as a conglomerate, split into Public Service Broadcasting, which receives funding from the licence fee, and BBC Commercial Holdings (BBC Studios, BBC Studioworks and BBC Global News).<sup>28</sup> BBC Studios, which includes production facilities, creates content internally. The BBC group also commissions work through independent production companies. It distributes content across its channels, such as BBC One and BBC iPlayer, and sells content globally via BBC Studios. BBC Studios also licences content to other broadcasters.

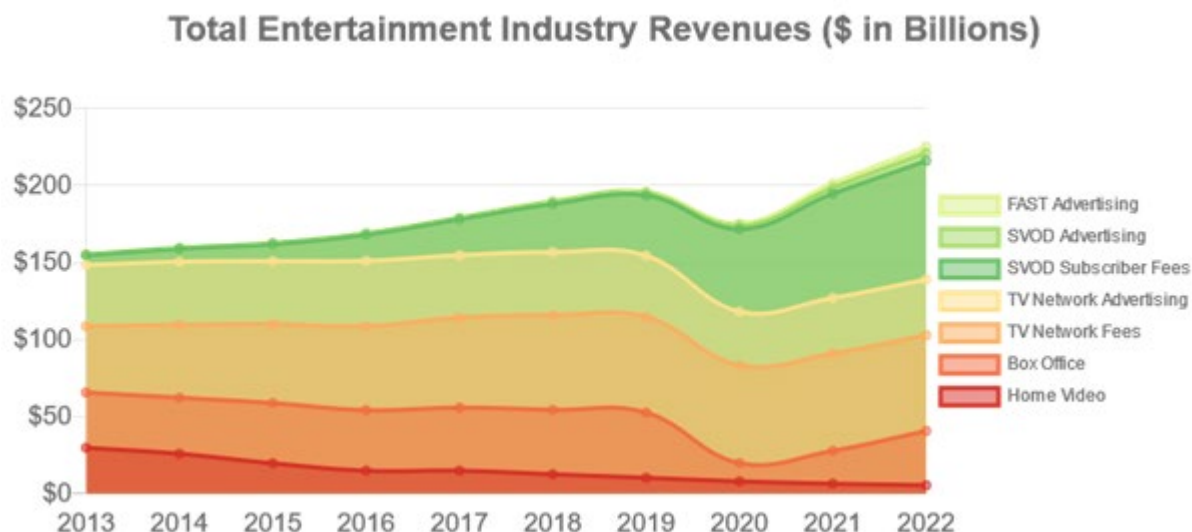
In contrast, streaming services operating under the SVOD model, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, fund the production of original content through independent production companies, collaborating with various studios and independent producers. SVODs distribute content exclusively through online platforms, relying on internet-based streaming rather than traditional broadcasting. SVODs provide consumers access to a library of movies and TV programmes they can watch at any time on any device. However, SVODs may collaborate with broadcasters for co-productions, sharing production costs and distribution rights. In contrast, while the BBC maintains a presence in both traditional and digital media, SVODs leverage their global reach and subscription models to fund and distribute diverse content.

#### 3.1.2 SVOD OPPORTUNITIES

New streaming models have brought about significant changes in the media landscape, including a shift in viewing from a fixed "primetime" to an "anytime" model, which allows viewers to control when and how they watch content. The rise of emerging SVODs has gradually created a unique market position as they grow their subscriber bases and drive demand for "big statement" programmes. All these changes carry significant implications, especially for existing commercial broadcasters who rely on advertising; substantial investments in costly content are less viable.<sup>29</sup>

28. The BBC Group, 'Departmental Overview 2022-23', 2023

29. Gillian D., 'Digitization and Changing Windowing Strategies in the Television Industry: Negotiating New Windows on the World', *Television & New Media*, 17 (2016), doi:10.1177/1527476416641194.



<Figure 1: The State of the Industry, 2023<sup>30</sup>>

Original content production has surged, partly due to the rise in SVOD investment. As shown in Figure 2, a recent analysis by The Economist estimated that Britain was the second largest producer of titles commissioned by major SVODs, with 123 new British series in 2024 (and the USA producing 505 new titles). Despite this growth, The Economist article documents that UK production companies and broadcasters are struggling with rising production costs, lack of investment and increased job insecurity.

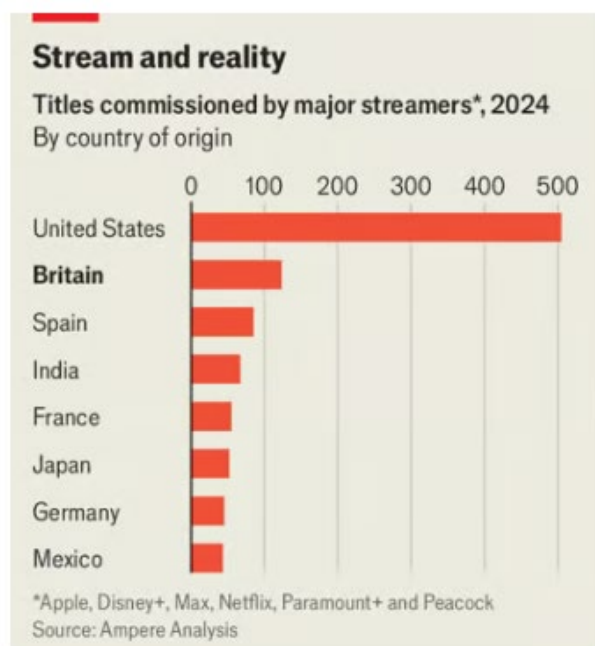
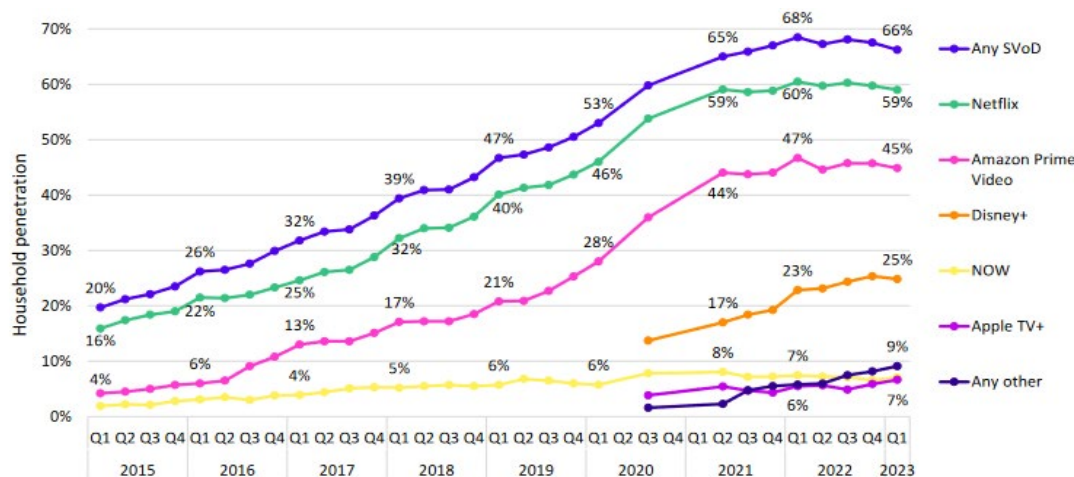


CHART: THE ECONOMIST

<Figure 2: Titles commissioned by Major SVODs by country in 2024<sup>31</sup>>

30. 'The State of the Industry' Friday 10th March, 2023 <https://www.wgacontract2023.org/updates/state-of-the-industry>

31. The Economist 'Are hits like "Adolescence" good or bad for Britain?' 2025



<Figure 3. SVOD Penetration of UK households, by provider: Q1 2015 to Q1 2023<sup>32</sup> >

SVODs have brought advantages, especially for consumers. Streaming allows audiences to break free from traditional broadcast schedules, offering flexibility in what and when content is viewed. They have led to experimentation with interactive content, such as *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), and a resurgence of shows initially cancelled by traditional broadcasters, like *Lucifer* (Fox/Netflix, 2016 – 2021) on streaming platforms like Netflix.<sup>33</sup> SVODs have expanded opportunities for screenwriters to collaborate with production partners. In contrast to when rejected shows had limited avenues within traditional media, creators now possess multiple options when presenting their concepts. The prospect of finding a partner enthusiastic about investing in their creative projects is enhanced. As a result, some argue that SVODs have created more opportunities for writers and have made residuals possible for shows that would not have been syndicated otherwise.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.1.3 SVOD CHALLENGES

Despite these advantages, the changing industry has also witnessed challenges. As SVODs' growth slowed in 2022 and the cost of living rose in early 2023, this has put a greater strain on household budgets compounded by SVOD service price increases. Following the accelerated subscription of SVOD during the pandemic, when the number of UK households subscribing to at least one service reached 68% in Q1 2022, this figure has since decreased slightly and plateaued at approximately two-thirds of households (66%, or 19 million) in Q1 2023.<sup>35</sup> Streaming content investments remain high but are becoming more prudent as SVODs shift their focus to profitability. As part of this, Netflix began to incorporate ad-supported tiers to continue its expansion. In addition, Netflix is organising password-sharing crackdowns in a bid to maximise the value of its users. In 2023, Netflix maintained its majority market share in the UK, with 59% of households subscribing.<sup>36</sup>

It has also allowed producers of content for traditional broadcasters to sell their content internationally on streaming platforms (or 'pre-purchase') for an additional percentage of the original fee known as 'rest of world rights' (usually at 33% of the original fee for up to seven years) as well as UK streaming rights for 5–15 years at 5–11% the original fee.<sup>37</sup> Production companies may be using a blended model of traditional broadcasting, followed by pre-sales to SVODs in the UK, after the initial five years at a fraction of the

32. Barb, 2025. Includes paid-for subscriptions and free trials. No data is available for Q2 2020, Q4 2020, and Q1 2021 due to the suspension of fieldwork due to the COVID-19 pandemic. 'Any other' includes Hayu, Discovery+, Paramount and Britbox.

33. Anthony De La Rosa, 'The Evolution of Residuals: How Streaming Changed the Model', Entertainment Partners, 2022.

34. David Robb, 'Are Streaming Residuals Being Slashed? As WGA's Own Data Shows, It's Complicated', Deadline, 15 April 2023.

35. Ofcom.

36. Ofcom.

37. Creator remuneration. Fifth Report of Session 2023–24 House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

fee they might have to pay under a residual model. The streaming model poses challenges because it deviates from the conventional television model where a show is aired in specific formats. SVODs also use varying criteria for defining content as “viewed.” Any shift toward basing residuals on a show’s performance would require agreement from streaming platforms to ensure the payment of additional residuals under the new framework.

## 3.2 Screenwriters pay

### 3.2.1 SCREENWRITERS PAYMENT STRUCTURES

This section sets out how writers in television are compensated for their work. Screenwriters operate as self-employed individuals, meaning that their working conditions and remuneration are primarily governed by the terms of the contracts they enter into rather than by standard employment laws such as minimum wage or statutory sick pay. As a result, it is common for screenwriters not to be compensated upfront for their work but rather to receive payments upon delivery of the output, particularly their script fee, which is paid on the first day of principal photography.<sup>38</sup> The commission varies based on the screenwriter’s experience, the quality of the script, nature of the project, and the production’s budget. It should also be noted that the commission for episodic writers may differ. To be considered to be a series creator, a writer should have written the majority of the pilot screenplay, the series pitch document and the series bible.<sup>39</sup> For episodic writing without being a series creator, screenwriters may be paid either per episode or every week.<sup>40</sup> Writers’ rooms may be included in a weekly rate or paid as a daily fee, depending on the contract.<sup>41</sup>

To secure a commission for original content, a writer or their agent typically pitches their script directly to the production company.<sup>42</sup> If a script sparks interest, the producer or studio might option the script and pay the screenwriter an option fee<sup>43</sup> to grant a producer or production company the right to buy the screenplay for a specific period, typically six to twelve months.<sup>44 45</sup> During this option period, the producer has sole possession of the screenplay and can make changes or further develop it.<sup>46</sup> However, they do not own the script outright, and the rights revert to the screenwriter if the option is not exercised. Screenwriters receive an upfront payment for the option, known as the option fee. This fee typically ranges from 5% to 10%<sup>47</sup> of the purchase price of the script. The option fee is the screenwriter’s sole compensation for the option period, and they are not entitled to any further payment unless the option is exercised.<sup>48</sup>

### 3.2.2 SCHEDULE OF PAYMENTS

When contracted as a screenwriter, the schedule outlines the timings and delivery of payments based on the outputs. A screenwriter is usually expected to write the storyline, treatment, first draft, second draft and the principal photography script. They also should undertake reasonable revisions requested from the producer. Each of these stages may have a payment associated with it as outlined in the contract. For example, the BBC PACT agreement with producers stipulates a minimum payment per minute of broadcast, spread over four payments (see appendix 6.1) . The total minimum payment includes one UK

38. Writers Guild of Great Britain, ‘Agreement For Television Production Between The Writers’ Guild of Great Britain and Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television’, 2002.

39. Writers Guild of Great Britain ‘The ‘Credited by’ Credit: A good practice guide for TV writers and those who work with them.’

40. Writers Guild of America West ‘Getting the Best Deal: Weekly Versus Episodic Pay’ May 2025.

41. Writers Guild of Great Britain ‘Showrunning in the UK: A Best Practice Guide’.

42. Rosamund Davies and Gauti Sigthorsson, *Introducing the Creative Industries : From Theory to Practice* (Sage Publications, 2013), p. 60.

43. Wallace Collins, ‘Understanding The Option Agreement For Your Screenplay’, Stage 32, 11 July 2017.

44. Rabeh Soofi, ‘Screenwriters’ Dealmaking Tips for Negotiating a Screenplay for a Film and Television Option/Purchase Agreement’, AXIS Legal Counsel, 20 November 2014.

45. Scott Kirkpatrick, ‘The Screenwriters Guide to Option Agreements’, Filmmaking Stuff, 18 December 2021.

46. Ken Miyamoto, ‘The Screenwriter’s Simple Guide to Screenplay Options’, ScreenCraft, 21 November 2019.

47. Soofi, 2014.

48. Donovan Rodriques, ‘Making the Deal – Selling or Buying a Screenplay’, Rodriques Law, PLLC, 15 November 2016.



Network Television transmission as well as simultaneous European cable transmission and worldwide non-theatrical use. Finally, the writer will also receive a SUA on the first day of principal photography of 100% of the total script fee as an advance for future uses.<sup>49</sup> The writer and producer also pay a small contribution to the Writers' Guild pension scheme (for Guild members), 4.5% and 6.8% of the script fee, respectively.<sup>50</sup> Although the agreements are voluntary, standard minimum terms are observed by most broadcasters and producers.<sup>51</sup>

A screenwriter may also receive payment if their work is repeated beyond the SUA, which may include 1 or 2 broadcasts depending on the amount of the SUA. In particular, a residual is usually paid if the work is repeated on a national broadcaster or licensed to an international distributor. Residuals are negotiated through the agent with the production company. For traditional broadcasters, these are typically based on minimum criteria as set out in WGGB minimum terms agreements, although agents can negotiate for better terms. Contracts may also include "format rights," which establish copyright for a show's concept, structure, and branding, particularly if the concept is reproduced, such as in another country.

'Catch-up' services, such as BBC iPlayer and ITV Hub, may make additional payments for the number of views a show receives, known as a Writers Digital Payment, which is distributed through the ALCS. At present, the Writers Digital Payment scheme does not include other distributors for online catch-up services. The recent update of the BBC Script Agreement for Television and Online in March 2024<sup>52</sup> set out a minimum payment per view for BBC shows licensed to other catch-up services going forward. However, production companies working with SVOD do not follow the 'pay-per-click' model.

### 3.3 Screenwriters' Earnings

Screenwriters' earnings have been scrutinised in recent years, with mixed trends observed in their income. While research on screenwriters' earnings in the UK is limited, a more extensive body of work is available concerning the compensation of screenwriters in the USA. Television and film production operate within a global system, and since the USA is the largest producer of television titles, including for SVODs, an analysis of data on US earnings is relevant to contextualise UK screenwriters' earnings. However, there are distinct differences between the payment structures UK and USA screenwriters. Although writers are represented by guilds in both countries, national employment laws and systems vary significantly. This section will first review the research on the earnings of UK screenwriters earnings before comparing them to the experience of USA screenwriters' earnings.

#### 3.3.1 UK SCREENWRITERS EARNINGS

Understanding the specifics of UK screenwriters' earnings is challenging due to the limited availability of data. As noted, because screenwriters are self-employed, their earnings are set out in the details of their contracts. The WGGB, on behalf of screenwriters, negotiates terms and conditions and minimum standards in agreements with producer associations and UK broadcasters. However, these are minimum rates; successful writers can expect significantly higher script fees and more advantageous terms on royalties, merchandising and other earnings.<sup>53</sup> In addition, participation in the WGGB is voluntary for screenwriters. The result is that contracts usually align or exceed the minimum standards, although it is also possible that the contract terms and conditions may be below these standards.<sup>54</sup> Contracts are also confidential making it challenging to obtain industry-level information, except through questionnaires and other voluntary forms of disclosure.

A recent survey on Authors' Earnings in the UK found that there has been a notable trend of writers' earnings decreasing within the UK. Based on the last UK-wide study, the average earnings of a writer in the UK in 2022 was only £7000.<sup>55</sup>

49. Writers Guild of Great Britain PACT Agreement, 2024

50. Writers Guild of Great Britain, PACT Agreement, 2024

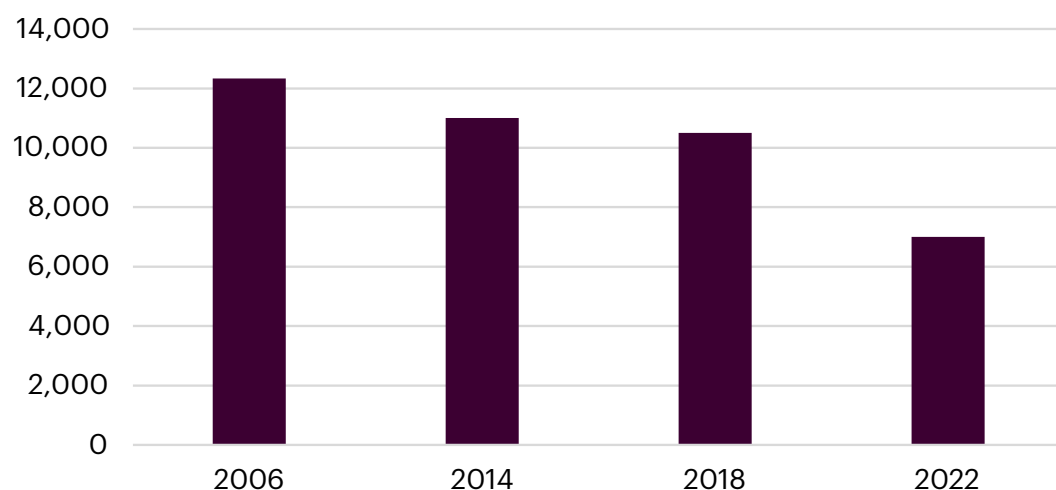
51. Memorandum submitted by the Writers' Guild of Great Britain 'Is there a British Film Industry?' Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, 2003.

52. Writers Guild of Great Britain, BBC script agreement for television and online, 2024

53. Memorandum submitted by the Writers' Guild of Great Britain 2003

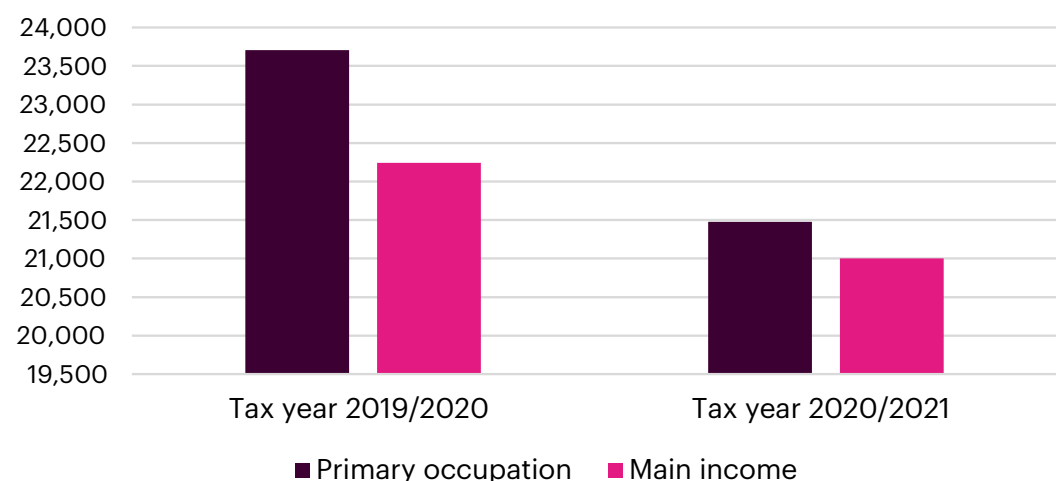
54. Memorandum submitted by the Writers' Guild of Great Britain 2003

55. Thomas, A., M. Battisti and M. Kretschmer, 'Authors' Earnings in the UK' Creative Industries Police and Evidence



<Figure 4. Median earnings from self-employed writing (£)<sup>56</sup>>

When focusing only on respondents in the survey who consider writing to be their primary occupation, the average income was £21,479 in 2022 (a 11.7% drop from the previous year). For those who see writing as their primary source of income, the average was £21,000.<sup>57</sup> This can be compared to an average annual salary of £21,888 (based on the average minimum wage of £9.50 an hour for a maximum of 48 hours a week in 2022). In other words, authors who consider writing to be their primary source of occupation or main source of income are earning less than a person on minimum wage.



<Figure 5. Median individual earnings (£) from writing and non-writing sources<sup>58</sup>>

Writing is characterised by a high level of wage inequality, with the top 10% of writers earning 47% of the total income for the population.<sup>59</sup> The field also has substantial demographic inequality, with women, black and mixed-race writers, very young and very old all earning less in comparison to the medium. While the COVID pandemic negatively impacted all groups of writers, it was notable that these demographic groups were more adversely affected than their counterparts during this time.

Centre, 2023

56. Thomas, et al 2023

57. Thomas, et al 2023

58. Thomas, et al 2023

59. CREATE UK, 2023

The CREATE survey in the UK found that in the audio-visual field, the average medium earnings was £25,000 in 2022.<sup>60</sup> Audio-visual included people who wrote for film, film documentaries, TV dramas, TV documentaries, children's TV, TV comedies, TV soaps, and radio, as well as those authors who work as consultants or translators for such productions. Scriptwriters' occupation had the highest median earnings of the different writing occupations at £42,000, indicating for screenwriters who successfully sell their scripts, the earnings can be rewarding. However, the ability to sell a script is limited due to the demand and supply of writers, and many writers also earn income from writing for several audio-visual media. The CREATE report suggests that despite the booming digital trend, the financial rewards do not seem to be filtering through to writers. It is also important to note that these figures indicate a dramatic decrease in earnings from the previous study, in 2018, where the average earnings of audio-visual writers were £35,000 (£25,000 in 2022). This is the same period over which SVODs have become more prevalent, and funding has decreased from national broadcasting, as discussed in previous sections. Their report also found that audio-visual authors were more likely to have received a buyout (40%) compared to the total sample of all writers (32%) (see Figures 6 and 7 below).

	TAX YEAR 2020/2021	TAX YEAR 2019/2020	TAX YEAR 2016/2017
<b>Observations</b>	236	199	531
<b>Median (nominal) (£)</b>	25,000	28,000	30,000
<b>Real median incomes (in 2021 pounds) (£)</b>	25,000	28,724	32,377
<b>Growth in real median incomes (compared to 2016/2017)</b>	-22.8%	-11.3%	N/A
<b>Growth in real median incomes (compared to preceding tax year)</b>	-13.0%	-11.3%	N/A

		TAX YEAR 2020/2021		TAX YEAR 2016/2017	
		Buy-out contracts	No buy-out	Buy-out contracts	No buy-out
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	Observations	395	857	660	1976
	Percentage (%)	32%	68%	25%	75%
	Median (£)	28,800	27,664	30,000	30,000
<b>AUDIO - VISUALS</b>	Observations	99	147	176	347
	Percentage (%)	40%	60%	34%	66%
	Median (£)	32,000	17,000	30,000	30,000

<Figure 7. Audio-visual authors receiving buyouts, 2018-2022<sup>62</sup>>

There is limited recent research on screenwriters' earnings in the UK beyond these studies. Little is known about how these figures are broken down into different incomes for screenwriters: for example, the percentage of screenwriters earnings from residuals as opposed to script fees and SUA's. As a result, this report compares what is known about UK screenwriters' earnings above with the USA experience, where more extensive research has been undertaken.

60. CREATE UK, 2023

61. CREATE UK 2023

62. CREATE UK 2023

### 3.3.2 USA SCREENWRITERS EARNINGS

The majority of data collected on the specifics of screenwriters' earnings from SVODs has focused on the US context. On the surface, screenwriters' earnings in the USA have increased over time, with total spending on screenwriters rising significantly. According to data from WGA analysed by Variety, total spending on screenwriters in the USA increased by 50% from 1995 to 2021, reaching \$1.5 billion.<sup>63</sup> However, a closer examination of this apparent increase in earnings suggests a less equitable situation. The rise in total spending on screenwriters was mirrored by a 50% increase in the total number of screenwriters in the USA between 1995 to 2021. Therefore the average screenwriter is in a similar position to their counterparts a generation earlier. The data also does not account for income earned from producing or for members of the WGA who are not currently earning from their writing. Additionally, the WGA has not released median salary information since 2014, making it difficult to gauge the current state of screenwriters' earnings accurately.<sup>64</sup>

In 2013-2014, 33% of USA Screenwriters for television were paid the minimum under the MBA (Minimum Basic Agreement), but by 2021-2022 this percentage increased to 49%. This trend featured across all levels, from staff runners to showrunners. In addition, the medium weekly pay for writer-producers decreased by 4% over the same decade; however when accounting for inflation the decrease is 23% in real terms.<sup>65</sup> In addition, the number of weeks for which lower- and medium-level writers are employed on a show for SVODs is reduced to 20-24 weeks (network shows tend to be between 35-42 weeks), except showrunners, who work on average 44 weeks. However, showrunners may not receive additional compensation for more extended work periods if they do not have 'span protection' (which sets a maximum of 2.4 weeks per episodic fee and is limited to writer-producers earning under \$400,000).<sup>66</sup>

Contracts signed with Netflix nearly always include two guaranteed 'steps' of work, where 'steps' refers to the number of times a script has been processed. At times as many as five steps can be included, meaning writers can charge more for their services. However, new screenwriters who are only offered a 1 step deal can then be susceptible to producers demanding unpaid work.<sup>67</sup>

According to statistics provided by the WGA, the compensation distribution varies based on the writer's background. Writers who are embarking on their screenwriting journey without prior screen credits are offered a median total guaranteed compensation of \$250,000. The upper limit for such compensation has been reported to reach \$1 million. Conversely, those with a history of two or more screen credits command a median compensation of \$450,000, with a maximum reported compensation as high as \$5 million.<sup>68</sup>

Over the past decade, the situation for TV series writers has deteriorated despite the increasing budgets of TV series. The WGA argues that the transition to streaming has enabled companies to underpay writers, resulting in more precarious and lower-paid working conditions. Furthermore, this decrease in over-scale pay, combined with inflation, has eroded gains in residuals. In 2022, residuals reached a peak at \$493.6 million, with 45% coming from streaming. The WGA contends that these developments are damaging to writers and emphasises the need for fair compensation in the changing landscape of television production.



63. Gene Maddaus, 'Is Writer Pay Up or Down? Depends How You Look at It', Variety, 3 April 2023.

64. Maddaus, 2023'

65. Writers Guild of America, 'Writers Are Not Keeping Up', WGA Contract 2023, 14 March 2023.

66. Writers Guild of America, 2023.

67. David Robb, 'WGA Seeking Overhaul Of Pay Scales In Contract Talks With Producers', Deadline, 14 March 2023.

68. WGAW 'Screen Compensation Guide for Streaming Services

### 3.3.3 RESIDUALS UNDER USA SVOD

In 2017, the WGA reported an unprecedented surge in residuals, reaching a staggering \$430.66 million, reaching an 11.8% increase over the previous year.<sup>69</sup> However, the WGA has accused SVODs of slashing residuals for writers. The WGA states that writers working on streaming shows are only paid two residual payments: one for domestic and one for foreign streaming.<sup>70</sup>

For example, for a Netflix one-hour episode written in the USA under the 2017 MBA, the first-year residual would be \$13,473 for domestic reuse and \$4,715 for foreign reuse. Low-budget SVOD programs have different residual calculations. A feature for a studio with a streaming platform may be classified as theatrical, and the residuals owed are 1.2% of a license fee for the SVOD reuse rather than the fixed residuals outlined here.<sup>71</sup>

The service's domestic subscriber tier influences the compensation structure for high-budget dramatic programs on SVODs in the USA. This subscriber tier is reviewed annually on July 1 to ensure that writer compensation aligns with audience growth. Over the past year, platforms such as Apple TV+, Paramount+, Peacock, and Hulu have gained more domestic subscribers, resulting in higher script fees and improved residuals for High Budget SVOD (HBSVOD) programs written after July 1, 2022.

As of July 1, 2022, the subscriber tiers for various SVOD services are categorised as follows:

Comestic Subscriber tiers as of July 1, 2022			
1-5 million	Over 5 million but fewer than 20 million	20 million to 45 million	> 45 million
BET+	Spectrum Originals	Apple TV+ Disney+ HBO Max Paramount+ Peacock	Amazon Hulu Netflix

<Table 1. Domestic Subscriber Tiers As of July 1, 2022<sup>72</sup>>

Script fees for high-budget programs vary depending on the subscriber tier. Streaming platforms with under 20 million subscribers pay script fees at other-than-network-primetime rates, while those with 20 million or more subscribers pay network primetime rates. Subscribers also impact residuals, with higher subscriber tiers leading to increased residuals for HBSVOD programs.

The formula for calculating residuals is Residual Base x Exhibition Year Percentage x Subscriber Factor. The number of domestic subscribers influences the subscriber factor, and residuals are paid annually after the first 90 days of viewing.

69. David A Goodman and others, 'Writers Guild of America West Annual Financial Report', 29 June 2018 <<https://www.wga.org/uploadedfiles/the-guild/annual-report/annualreport18.pdf>>.

70. Robb, 2023

71. Writers Guild of America West, 'Residuals for High-Budget Subscription Video on Demand (HBSVOD) Programs'

72. Writers Guild of America West, 2022 Streaming Service Subscriber Tiers



Subscriber Tier	Domestic Subscribers	Subscriber Factor
1	Under 1 million	20%
2	1 million to 5 million	40%
3	Over 5 million but fewer than 20 million	65%
4	20 million to 45 million	100%
5	Over 45 million	150%

<Table 2. Subscriber factor<sup>73</sup>>

The table below illustrates the increased residuals for the first year of domestic availability based on subscriber tiers:

Year 1 Domestic HBSVOD Residuals			
Domestic Subscribers	Half Hour Episode	One Hour Episode	Two Hour Movie
Under 1 million	–	–	–
1 million to 5 million	\$2,937	\$5,338	\$10,513
Over 5 million but fewer than 20 million	\$4,772	\$8,675	\$17,084
20 million to 45 million	\$7,342	\$13,346	\$26,283
Over 45 million	\$11,013	\$20,018	\$39,425

<Table 3. Year 1 Domestic HBSVOD Residuals<sup>74</sup>>

### 3.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the earnings of screenwriters present a complex picture. While total spending on screenwriters has increased, it has been accompanied by a rise in the number of writers, resulting in an average income comparable that of previous generations. Moreover, the shift towards streaming platforms has introduced challenges, including declining pay standards, shorter work periods, and concerns over residuals. Figures for writers in the UK also suggest a decline in earnings. However, a lack of research in the UK context means we understand the impact of SVOD on screenwriters' earnings in less detail, including whether they receive residuals or a buyout. To date, there is not a clear understanding of the broader impact of SVODs on the screen industries within the UK market, especially given the specific changes in the context of the UK broadcasting industry.

73. Writers Guild of America West, 2022 Streaming Service Subscriber Tiers

74. Writers Guild of America West, 2022 Streaming Service Subscriber Tiers

## 4. FINDINGS

**The only people thus far who, you know, see any benefit from successful streaming shows are the streamers.**

PARTICIPANT H

The following findings section explores the impact of SVOD services on UK screenwriters' earnings in the UK. In the first part, several relevant themes emerged regarding screenwriters' earnings. Firstly, it explores how screenwriters are paid by discussing the traditional model of earnings used by UK broadcasters, including the script fee, SUA and residuals. The report then examines SVODs as digital disruptors that introduced 'buyouts'. The first section concludes by analysing the impact on screenwriters' earnings by comparing buyouts with the traditional model from UK broadcasters.

The second part of the findings section discusses the broader context of these changes, examining how the screenwriters in our sample relate to industry-level changes that are taking place as well as the more specific relationships with other key actors including their agents and production companies.

The final section then examines the impact of buyouts on screenwriters, including the precarity of the work, the influence of subscriptions in defining success, and the lack of transparency that makes it difficult to assess the impact of buyouts compared to traditional residual modules. Finally it considers how screenwriters view the future of the industry, particularly in terms of developing new writers and working as freelancers.

### 4.1: Screenwriter's Earnings in the Digital Age

#### 4.2.3 SCREENWRITERS PAY

Most screenwriters we spoke to felt that their earnings were relatively low, given their role within the industry, especially compared to screenwriters in other countries: "[Screenwriters' earnings] are low. They're low, especially in the UK" (Participant R). A screenwriter's pay is highly related to their reputation. Agents use the writer's reputation to negotiate a higher rate because of their experience or if they have had recent success: "the more clout, the more experience, [when] you are hot off a great [production]" (Participant Q).

Pay was also important because it served as recognition of a screenwriter's status, reputation and experience. However, due to the UK context, most screenwriters were only aware of the minimum rates which are applicable to new writers. There is no set rate for more experienced writers, so an agent's knowledge of the market is essential to understanding the value of the work.

*You want the respect to be paid properly for what you do... It's like, well, what is the rate for somebody where I am? - Participant G*

In addition, the seeming oversupply of labour in the market often becomes a significant concern, often leading to individuals being treated as disposable and their worth devalued by demands for little or no compensation.

*So when we're told there's no money for anything, but there's plenty of money, it's just not coming to the writers or the program makers... It's the eternal problem of the creative being constantly being told by the industry, you're lucky to have your job. There's plenty of other people who could do your job. And actually, it's simply not true. There is a finite number of people who could do what I do... - Participant Q*

## 4.1.1 TRADITIONAL MODEL OF EARNINGS

### SCRIPT FEES AND SUAS

The screenwriters in our sample unanimously expressed the importance of their script fee and the SUA as their primary source of income. For national broadcasters working under the WGGB and PACT agreement, the script fee is matched by the SUA, effectively doubling the amount they earn upon completion of the script. In addition to this, they may earn residuals if the content is used beyond their advance.

*[The most important thing is] the script fee and the advance. Because obviously you've got some idea of what you're going to get, and when you're going to get it. Whereas royalties are always, you know, they're very nice to have but you don't want to plan your life around them, because you just never know. - Participant A<sup>75</sup>*

Earning the script fee and SUA is hugely important to writers as they can spend a significant amount of time in development work. Because of this, even when a show is successful, the writer may go through periods where their earnings are minimal until the script fee.

*[My main income] comes from the script fee.. I would say I'm annoyingly unrepresentative. Things went well in the first year, so it's probably higher than other people who created their own show quite quickly. But I think it does give a view of the ups and downs. The money is very concentrated in particular chunks and then nothing for months. - Participant N*

The script fee is usually based on the writers' experience, reputation and the rate from their previous work.

*We have certain rules, or like etiquettes, around your rate. You don't tend to renegotiate it until 18 months to a year after your last renegotiation. So if I landed a big X [streamer] show tomorrow, it would still probably be 37 grand an episode. - Participant H*

Interestingly many of the screenwriters only had a general idea of what their script fee was, as they often left the other details up to their agent to negotiate.

*Particularly at that point in my life, I didn't really know what my worth was. What a script fee would be and what would be reasonable. So [my agent] was invaluable in setting all those parameters. Once we get into production, there are a lot of associated fees, which are not necessarily about the script, but particularly because I'm the creator of the show, which creates other revenue streams. And as to what they are each individually worth, I would have no idea. - Participant N*

### RESIDUALS

If a show generates residuals, these payments are received at a later point, often years after the show is written. While the screenwriters we interviewed viewed residuals as an indicator of a successful original production, they noted that such occurrences were rare. Even when received, residuals were generally perceived as an unexpected bonus rather than a dependable source of income.

*And I got paid my full rate for X [UK broadcaster show], meaning I got the full deal. And that paid out its SUA in about six months. So I made loads of cash, comparatively, as royalties go because sometimes it's like, oh, a fiver. But I would get like a couple of grand a year off X. Because they repeat it so often it sells everywhere and things like that. That's the other thing you just don't get with X [streamer] shows. - Participant H*

75. Participants often used the terms residuals and royalties interchangeably. Royalties refer to payments to owners or creators of intellectual property based on revenue from the sale or licence of that property, while residuals are additional payments to the screenwriter beyond the initial project compensation, typically based on reruns, syndication, or other distribution outlets. We return to this point in the next section when discussing how screenwriters sometimes struggle to understand the technical details of their contracts. As a result, we acknowledge that the terms royalties and residuals were often used interchangeably in the interviews, and interpret their meaning from the context of the interviews rather than in their strict legal sense.

According to an interview, only around 10% of screenwriting earns residuals. If the work is an original, then it will also earn a format fee if the idea is used in other format: for example, if an original character or universe is applied in another piece of creative work or merchandising:

*So I'm like I'm top level in terms of earnings. So it has been sustainable, but I've still had lean years. I do not in any way rely on residuals. I look at what my real life earnings are going to be across the year and if I get a good, nice letter from ALCS that can go in the bank, pay the tax. A third of it is not mine, tax and VAT, there'll be a big tax bill this year. But I don't rely on it... I think, probably around 10% [of writers receive residuals]... the bulk of writers are coming into [new to] the industry or out of children's and Soaps, and there's very limited residuals from that. - Participant Q*

The amount that screenwriters earned from the same show also fluctuated: for example, reflecting how often it was shown on a foreign broadcaster:

*You get like 100 items, about two pounds each, in a six month period. Some of them have been bigger than others, but by and large, I've had since September 2021 roughly £2,000 and then March 22, roughly in the following six months after that £2,000, then £1,500, £2,200 and then randomly £8,000. So yeah, it can fluctuate depending on who's broadcasting what. - Participant H*

These additional payments were a marker of a successful show, and while very much welcomed, were by no means a guarantee. It was far from certain that screenwriters would receive residuals or that they would have a significant impact on their earnings, as they depend on a show having repeat showings. However, when writers did receive them, they could help writers continue to earn between jobs where there may be little income.

*I think in the past [residuals] that's how writers were able to survive in between gigs, you know. So I think it is a very important thing to have. - Participant R*

There is a belief amongst screenwriters that sustained success should translate into sustained financial reward. This long-term potential, an interviewee says, is what is eroded by full buyouts:

*You can sell something and never see anything from it again - a full buyout - often for less than it's worth. However, if you receive a percentage, that could sustain you creatively. If it's really successful, you could end up like J.K. Rowling, earning substantial residuals from your work. It's that feeling in the back of your mind that one day things could improve for you. If writers aren't receiving a percentage of their work, that hope is being taken away from us. - Participant L*

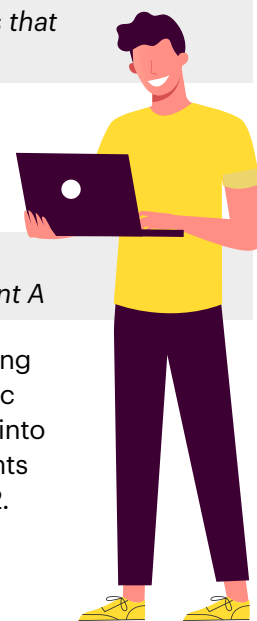
Some writers felt that residuals represented a more traditional form of earnings in the industry and that this income, which may have been more important in the past, was no longer certain:

*So I just feel like there's so little agency and you know, residuals, all those kinds of things that you would be guaranteed were guaranteed - Participant S*

Many writers appreciated that residuals could offer a long-term income for them, and many preferred this system because it gave the possibility of earning in the future, even if that amount was uncertain:

*I think not having a buyout is important because you never know what you might get. Even a small trickle of money... but you might get it sort of in years and years. - Participant A*

Although some writers received residuals, few writers in our sample had a good understanding of how they worked. Screenwriters understood and agreed, often passionately, with the basic principle that they should receive recognition for their work. However, they had little insight into how much they might earn and where these earnings came from, usually because their agents would negotiate the details of their contracts. We return to the role of agents in section 4.2.2.



## 4.1.2 DIGITAL DISRUPTORS: THE BUYOUT MODEL

### SVOD AND BUYOUTS

The entry of Netflix and other SVOD platforms into the UK commissioning landscape marked a significant shift in writers' payment structures. These platforms offered higher SUAs but did not provide ongoing residuals like traditional broadcasters. When USA SVODs entered the market, especially at the beginning, they often brought in new opportunities associated with generous pay:

*It's massive. It felt like boom time when the streamers first came. - Participant Q*

Despite potential long-term drawbacks, many interviewees generally welcomed the opportunity to work with SVODs.

*Presumably, my fee would go up if it was Netflix in comparison to what the BBC would pay because Netflix pays more. I don't know quite what that comparison will be but it'll certainly be more. - Participant K*

Notwithstanding potential long-term drawbacks, many screenwriters reported positive experiences—especially when the buyout SUA offered immediate payments that had a meaningful financial impact on their lives.

*I've never been paid anything like that in my life before. Totally changed my life. We were able to buy a house where... I mean, previous to this, I've not even been earning enough to even get rebates on my tax. - Participant P*

A buyout includes the script fee and an increased SUA, which replaced residuals (payments for future uses). Because the SVOD offered a buyout, this also meant that they had the rights to all future uses. Episodic writers particularly felt this difference, as they also did not have the rights to a format deal or the right to future uses of a creative idea.

*What happened when the streamers rode into town, again like the Wild West, is they wanted all rights forever and ever for 50 pence and a bag of Gobstoppers. They thought that would be fine and it was fine for anybody who had the format deals: you create the show. For episodic working writers that had quite a significant knock on as the years went by because residuals started to melt away - Participant Q*

This would also impact on other uses of the material which writers would traditionally receive payments for, such as DVD sales, international distribution or translations.

*I still get royalties for the seasons on X [traditional broadcaster]... for a long while I was still getting royalties for video and DVD sales, translation, and the international market. Because that's the other thing that kills you, is the streamers have international in perpetuity rights. So global rights... all these little pockets of income that you used to get for contributing just an episode of somebody's show are all just disappearing with the streamers. - Participant H*

The buyout model not only conflicted with the principle that screenwriters should share in a show's success, as outlined in the previous section, but also raised concerns about fairness—particularly when a show went on to achieve significant success:

*They were going to pay us another 12%, basically that was going to be the buyout. That's it, that's going to cover everything. You were like, wow, like 10 grand. That's a really popular show on X [streamer]. It's really successful. - Participant H*



Nevertheless, writers often have little choice but to accept the buyout model. Rather than negotiating directly with streaming platforms, they typically sign a contract with a production company. These companies, eager to offer attractive deals for SVODs, encourage writers to accept a buyout in order to increase the likelihood of securing funding for the project. At the same time, opportunities for a global media platform, where programmes may become a global hit, is challenging to resist.

*If you work with a production company, and they've offered you a percentage, that might not be on offer when that production company sends it to the distributor. They [the production company] might be like, hey, they're [the streamer] only going to accept this if it's a buyout. So can we change the contract? - Participant L*

## 'SUCCESS IS LIKE A LOTTERY'

Residuals are closely tied to the principle that a successful show should reward the creative producer for their idea and work. As noted in the literature review section, writers' earnings are highly unequally distributed across the population, with the top 10% earning 47% of the total income<sup>76</sup>. Although the probability of any given show achieving significant success is relatively slim, screenwriters viewed the buyout model as eliminating their opportunity to share in the potential rewards of such success.

*I just know how important they [residuals] are. If you've got a hit, and you never know if something's going to be a hit, then you should have a share in the profits. Mostly there are no residuals because things aren't hits. There's so much TV, but what you're doing is you're in a lottery. If you sign your rights away, it means that the streamer has won the lottery or the company has won the lottery. And you're still buying a ticket every week hoping that you're gonna survive. - Participant G*

As streaming platforms leveraged their financial resources to attract particular talent—occasionally offering exclusive contracts when necessary, established writers appear to have the most to gain in the new system.

*Some of the streamers have been paying huge amounts of money to writers to keep them on their channels... Now these numbers are unsustainable, but they're in a fight for survival to see who's going to be the two or three streamers to stay in the game... The streamers will give a huge chunk to one person to attract subscribers and as little as possible to everyone else. - Participant K*

Not all screenwriters are affected equally by this change. While the growing global and diverse subscriber base of SVODs might suggest increased opportunities for diverse writers, the reality is often the opposite. As streaming platforms focus more on producing blockbusters, their per-program investment has risen—making them more risk-averse. Consequently, competition for established writers has intensified (see section 4.3.4).

## WRITERS' ROOMS

Screenwriters' earnings have also changed with the introduction of the USA model of writers' rooms. In the USA, writers' rooms are the norm for long-running shows, where screenwriters earn a daily fee. Our interviews suggest that SVODs sometimes use this format in the UK.

*There are different ways to earn money with streamers. One is in the writers room, and I do get paid for most writers rooms I'm in and then you get paid for being in the writers room just for being there. And which has a weekly income and decent money. - Participant G*

Some writers found the experience of working in a writers' rooms to be a positive addition, not only in terms of the additional pay but also in the collaborative experience of writing with other writers.

*I think that they [writer's rooms] can be really fun, you get paid a weekly rate to take part in them. So that's always really great as a writer to have a weekly wage of some kind. Yeah, it's always nice to be in a room with other writers, to be honest, it's less lonely, to be part of the creation of something. - Participant P*

However, some writers had a more negative experience, saying that some SVODs may expect a writers' room without an additional day rate, including the writing room in the original script payments:

*And we had to fight for money constantly, because they wanted the US style writers rooms and things but they didn't want to pay me for it. Whereas if I do an eight episode for [UK broadcaster], they don't want a writers room. They will pay me for the work I do. - Participant H*

### 4.1.3 IMPACT ON SCREENWRITERS

#### SUAS WITHOUT RESIDUALS

Many interviewees reported that when SVODs first appeared, they offered fantastic deals. As such, some screenwriters responded positively, noting that SVODs' significantly higher SUA offset the drawbacks of residuals. At an early stage in a writer's career, a larger upfront SUA can make a significant impact.

*A breakthrough deal had come just as I signed the final contract to pay me 130% SUA rather than 100% which over six episodes was significantly useful. That's kind of paid off my mortgage. So it was a good deal... [How did you find a buyout compared to receiving residuals?] Very good actually. I mean, I think my royalty income will be minimal but that's fine. It suited me better to get compounded. - Participant B*

However, screenwriters reported that more recently, SVODs have been offering less and, even in some cases, the same as traditional broadcasters without residuals.

*I began my career like I was so excited by streamers, especially when they're offering you stupid money out in America, but now they're just offering you your money, but less for more work. And they might cancel your show after one season... So now if I want to work for [a streamer], I get paid my UK rate that I would get paid for the BBC, but without any of the benefits of royalties. So it's just a bum deal, really. - Participant H*

Although, in principle, the buyout model should have meant screenwriters were receiving a premium for allowing SVODs to use their content, many felt they were still earning wages comparable to those for traditional television series.

*If you've gone from getting 30, 100, or 150 grand to like 750 grand, you'd be like, it doesn't matter, it's great. But it's not, the rates have stagnated. And it's not reflected in the residuals which feels unfair. - Participant S*

In some extreme examples, screenwriters were paid very low wages by production companies for their scripts. These were typically for low-budget productions streamers might pick up, and only rarely developed further at a later stage:

*I mean, if you're doing an 85 page script for £250, we can assume that that's the below minimum wage. I don't think there's any way to prove that it's below minimum wage and if you agree to do it for below minimum wage, perhaps they're expecting you to do it in that [short of a] time. - Participant L*

Therefore, there was a wide gap between screenwriters who were earning a buyout rate of 130% for higher-budget productions and those who were earning very little for low-budget productions. Worryingly some screenwriters were also reporting that they were earning the same as their usual script fee and SUA without any additional payment for the buyout.

## MONEY NOW VS MONEY LATER

Several interviewees noted that buyout deals offered the advantage of immediate, larger payouts, which could help writers escape financially precarious situations and provide a short window to develop their next project.

*What 145% payment does is not plan your retirement but it plans for next year. If that's the only script you've written this year, that gives you a year off in which to write your next project and develop it so it's money now rather than money later. I think both work. I don't think anyone really appreciates the money now because everyone's used to the old system of residuals... But actually, the money now is a very, very good and very, very powerful thing. So it has its own way of working. You're not without your rewards under the streamer system. - Participant M*

Although residuals are not the primary earnings for the majority of screenwriters, several screenwriters referred to residuals as a pension or 'writer's nest egg' (Participant H). Many screenwriters opposed buyouts on the grounds that their potential financial security later in life would be compromised.

*The production company was not giving me any residual rights, because they said, 'Oh, that's what we're doing with the streamers now.' They'd offered me a really low buyout fee and I don't want a buyout fee. I understand what residuals are, they are a writer's pension. - Participant G*

## BONUSES AS THE NEW REWARD

Some SVODs have introduced their own incentive structure in the forms of bonuses for showrunners. This bonus is split between a screenwriter when they take on the role of showrunner and the production company, as a percentage of the budget. A selection of our sample viewed these bonuses as a positive development for more experienced screenwriters:

*I've worked with streamers, the streamers I've worked with have been great to work with really brilliant working experiences. I've earned quite a lot of money in both cases, mostly because of my EP [executive producer] credits... So you get bonuses and you get as a writer the pay structure is the higher up you go the more rewarded you are. ... what I did get afterwards was really a bigger share in the profits which brought my income right up. Not as a writer, but as a producer. - Participant G*

Participant P particularly highlighted the benefit of bonuses, or 'streamer premium', which could result in a significant payment on the first day of filming.

*You get paid what's called a [streamer] premium, which is 4% share of the net, so 4% share of the premium was £32,000. So that came in, in one chunk. It's those sorts of things that kind of feels worth it, because that saved me for a year. - Participant P*

However, bonuses can be complex to understand and unpredictable as it depends on the costs of production. Decisions taken by the production company may increase the budget and reduce the potential for a bonus. In addition the percentage is usually broken down between the various parties. This leads to conflicts of interest as a showrunner has to decide between what is in the best interest of the production and what is in the best interest of retaining their bonus.

*In the budget, 10% of the budget was the bonus, it was split between three or four parties, and you [as a showrunner] get like 10% of the 10%. When you look at it and you divide that number up, you're like, oh, wow, I could get like 400,000 pounds. But then they're like, no, no, no, because that budget is also contingency for the shoot. So you're then like cross purposes: am I going to make a decision is going [to cost more], well, no, let's not do that. Because I want my money at the end. Why is my pay that I've earned dependent on whether somebody else needs it or not? Why is it a favor, like a gift? - Participant H*

Bonuses also have another flaw in that they can be hard to audit. Screenwriters were hesitant to challenge SVODs on whether or not they had met the targets that would entitle them to receive their bonuses.

*That's all we've had: Just a buyout with the possibility of some bonuses if it hits like one or two [targets] on [the streamer], but again, it's really hard to get hold of that information... In your contract it says we have the right to employ our own solicitors to find that information. Really, like are you going to do that and what does it get that gives you a bad name because you're the kind of people that go 'and we want to see your books'. So you kind of kiss goodbye to any kind of idea of getting 4% of gross takings. You won't. I don't know any of my contemporaries that see that money or I've seen any of that one. - Participant S*

Although contracts may entitle screenwriters to a bonus if the show is successful, the reality of the power dynamics between screenwriters and SVODs and the lack of transparency from SVODs on their viewing figures means that bonuses may not be paid. This theme is returned to in later sections on power inequality and lack of transparency.

## 4.2 Screenwriter's Pay in a Global System

**I don't understand the business model, how are they making enough money to do it? I mean, somebody's making money, right? Somebody is, but I don't think the creatives are.**

PARTICIPANT P

This second part of the findings focuses on the global system of screen production within the accounts of screenwriters, exploring how these dynamics impact their earnings. Investment, production, and distribution may be shaped by both local and global dynamics that influence screenwriters' earnings. In other words, their work is a component of a larger system that involves various organisations and freelance professionals, all contributing through investment, creativity, and effort to support the creative process. Whilst working as independent, self-employed creatives, screenwriters are situated within specific national systems, local and global agreements, and power relations with businesses and governments that shape production. This section examines the global screen production system from the perspective of screenwriters, focusing on how these dynamics affect their earnings.

This section examines how the introduction of SVODs has challenged television production in the UK at an industry level. While television production is often aimed at a local or national audience, with some international sales, SVODs introduce a new digital model that opens up a global market. This section outlines some of these local and global tensions, and then examines how different stakeholders interact with screenwriters. These relationships between agents, producers, SVODs and screenwriters, as well as representative organisations such as writers' guilds, are crucial for understanding how changes impact screenwriters' earnings.

### 4.2.1. GLOBAL PRODUCTION

The screenwriters in our sample were from the UK, and the UK provided the local context for the production and distribution of the majority of their work. However, although UK broadcasters may receive funding from UK investment, they are also likely to receive investment from abroad as UK funding is not always sufficient (Participant K). When it comes to SVODs, this could mean that part or all of the funding may come from American investment.

*We got halfway to where we needed [for funding it, but] we were holding out to get further. While we're doing that a streamer suddenly got in touch and said, we'll fund all of it that's it. Deal done. Make it. We said heck yes... and we got a very good budget. - Participant B*

It is a common practice for a screenwriter to be hired by a UK production company, with financing potentially coming from both UK and US companies. Another recent way this might happen is the BBC may initially invest but use a 'pre-sale' the show as online content to a streaming service.

*The BBC licence fee doesn't support the making of basically any program. So what they have to do now is presale it. So they'll pre sale it to Netflix, usually or Disney. Sometimes they have an agreement with Britbox, internationally all of this. So that's to fund the production. - Participant O*

While there is a global system of production, there is also a strong sense of localism when producing content. One of the arguments screenwriters gave us for why SVODs come to the UK is that they want to produce content for local markets, and to do this they need to hire local writers:

*They might be adapting. I know that [X streamer] for instance, they are looking for more UK products... So they're looking for African products for Africa and they're looking for UK for UK and presumably in Europe it is the same in France and Germany and so forth... - Participant K*

Initially, UK screenwriters may have been contracted to the USA SVODs, and therefore under US law, however this quickly changed with the introduction of UK subsidiaries which would operate under the UK law.

*They're like you have to liaise with our UK arm and the UK arm is basically the 'made in Taiwan'. They are here so that they can pay us the cheap rates that we have. The cheap labour law so that we can be the cheap labour so that they can make much cheaper shows and not pay. - Participant H*

UK screenwriters are concerned on two fronts: not only do they fear being perceived as cheaper labour compared to their US counterparts, but they also worry about their creative input. There is a feeling among some that SVODs might shift towards commissioning fewer original, creative works in favour of "safer," more predictable shows believed to have broader appeal:

*I think a big fear is that production companies in this country will just become production companies for hire, they'll make 100 episodes of a show. But there'll be no creative input and that's not what we want either. - Participant Q*

Another difference is the number of SVODs now producing shows, which are all competing among themselves. As a result of the competition and overall economic trends, some SVODs were therefore reducing the amount of content they were producing:

*Streamers are reducing the amount of content they're putting on. I think [Streamer UK] has reduced by about 40% this year. Maybe less than that, I don't know. I think [another streamer] is doing the same, they're reducing by maybe 20% the content that they're actually commissioning for themselves. So we're not quite sure how it's going to go. - Participant K*

#### 4.2.2 AGENTS AND PRODUCTION COMPANIES

Agents are essential to securing a contract, and they play a diverse range of roles for screenwriters:

*They are basically my lawyer, my accountant, and my manager kind of rolled into one, they'll connect me with people, do the deal, negotiate the deals, discuss it all with me. And we've got accounting people who do all the dotting the i's, and crossing T's and payroll and all that stuff. But they look for opportunities, connect me to producers, connect me with channels, connect me to opportunities. - Participant H*

An agent plays a crucial role in shaping a screenwriter's career, and can have a significant impact on the success of a screenwriter's relationship with an SVOD.

*So creatively I've had really great experiences with streamers. Financially I've done well out of it but only because my mentor basically said, 'No, this person is worth more than this. You have to pay EP credits. You have to pay for the original story.' So I've always had extra payments for the extra work I've done. But I think that's down to the people that you work with, the allies I've got in the industry that I work with. - Participant G*



Many screenwriters saw agents as important to prevent the erosion of screenwriter wages, as a person who would help the screenwriter understand their value and appropriate script fee. A good agent will also secure future series and highlight previous successes to improve the rate.

*I always make my agent laugh. They negotiated a [show] contract which was a pretty decent contract for the time and I would have taken literally 50 pence and a bunch of flowers to write because I was so excited. The agents are very good at tempering your desperation... They go in and say this is a writer that did X episodes of the original series; they are now on a second one of the new reboot series. The agent knows the show inside out. So it's got to be reflected in the fee - Participant Q*

Screenwriters often have great trust in their agents, especially since they often struggle to understand the nuances of fairly complex contracts involving both the production company and the SVODs.

*I leave all the details of my contract to my agent. They're a top agency and a top agent. I know that they will do the best deal. I'll just sign it and then get on with the day. I'm actually the wrong person to ask about all this money business. - Participant K*

Once the SVOD was on board with the project, there was also a varying amount of engagement screenwriters had during pre-production. In some cases, the SVOD and broadcasters would give expensive notes, while in other cases, there was little engagement.

*I found writing for television, particularly with [the streamer], really hard, there's a lot of cooks in television, you're having to kind of please a lot of different people. And that's to do when you're just trying to kind of maintain your own voice or your own thing... There is a load of politics that you get kind of kept out of as a writer, probably for good reasons. - Participant P*

As the use of a buyout became common, some of our writers even told us that production companies had started to set up contracts in advance with a full buyout, even before pitching to an SVOD. Buyouts seem to be changing the industry expectations as production companies shift to this as the new normal:

*I go through a British company here and they'll try not to pay me [residuals]. They're developing different systems, British companies, maybe because they think the union's not strong enough here. They're trying it on. Instead of saying, 'Oh, the Americans have won, we'll follow that model.' It's like, 'we can get away with keeping more money.' I'm not particularly blaming the streamers for that. I'm blaming the in between company [the production company]... - Participant G*

## 4.3 SVODs as Digital Disruptors

The following section outlines some of the context that shapes how screenwriters' earnings are established. These features explain how the power dynamics from the global and local systems influence the recognition of screenwriters' work. While many of these features existed before SVODs, these findings suggest that SVODs amplify the precarious nature of screenwriters' work through a lack of transparency. Firstly, we highlight that screenwriting is precarious work, mainly due to the uncertainty stemming from power imbalances among screenwriters, production companies, and SVODs. It then outlines how SVODs have altered the concept of 'success', introducing a more commercial and technological perspective on the screen industries. It notes that transparency of data is a significant issue when compared to the traditional broadcasting model. It explores the impact on new and mid-career screenwriters, in particular, who may have fewer opportunities to move into more experienced roles. It then considers how the context of being self-employed, or freelancing, shapes not only how the work is agreed upon but also has implications for their status as employed and to be collectively represented through UK law and comments on the recent strikes in the USA through the WGA. Finally, it comments on the future of screenwriting in the UK, reflecting on the potential impact of SVODs in years to come.



### 4.3.1 PRECARIOUS WORK

Like many areas of the creative industries, screenwriting can be described as precarious work due to the high level of uncertainty. As freelancers, screenwriters typically write under a contract that pays them at specific points based on their outputs. They produce the script through various stages, most of which earn a small fee, but they do not receive the bulk of their payment until the script fee and SUA are paid on the first day of production. This can result in significant periods of development, during which little or no pay may be received.

*How long have those ideas been [in development]? Oh, that might be about an eight year period of those ideas being going through development. - Participant S*

Some writers also felt that SVODs added an extra sense of precarity, as there may be a greater tendency for shows to be taken up but then cancelled either before or during production, or mid-season. If this happens pre-production, the writer might only get a small fee but not the script fee for writing the episode:

*Another issue which streamers have brought is their willingness to cancel shows... half of my colleagues are in abject poverty. All their shows are being cancelled or they were only ever making two and a half grand an episode anyway - Participant H*

Screenwriters may not be able to influence the pace of development, and even when they reach milestones related to their contract, they rely on the funds being made available.

*My contract says they must pay me that fee (SUA), but that might not be for another year. So all I've had is 11 and a half grand. I was told in June that the contract will be named. I didn't sign the contract until the 30th of September, even though they kept saying, tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow, then the work was done in about three weeks. And they didn't pay me till Christmas. So that's like six months from the promise of a fee. - Participant O*

They are also vulnerable to the effect of changes brought in within their contractual terms, but where they had little control and ended up in a worse financial position (Participant S). As a result, the screenwriters we spoke to often felt their contracts were too insecure, and the terms often were in the favour of the production company, SVODs and broadcasters.

### 4.3.2 SUBSCRIPTIONS AND SUCCESS

While traditional UK broadcasters generally consider a successful show through viewership figures especially during peak hours, SVOD viewers' can watch or download shows at any time. SVODs found themselves competing fiercely for subscribers, betting on shows they thought would resonate with the broadest possible audience.

*Post-strike now everyone really wants Hijack, they want action shows, they want Mission Impossible. They want names, especially as they've had their number crunch, and the data's coming out, and most of these streamers, nobody's watching them. They want to try and recapture. They want to try and reinvent to bring back television, mass market appeal, big viewing figures. - Participant H*

While this seems like a subtle difference, whether new original content is seen as a success becomes linked to how many new subscribers it can bring into an SVOD. As a result, SVODs may focus more on where subscribers are geographically located:

*If you bring in a new audience, then you are*



*considered a successful show. So we brought in a brand new audience from X (region), who loved the show, and so we were considered a successful show to them. Even though, you know, critically, we didn't do great, but like, we were bringing in all these numbers from places that they don't usually have content for, who signed up for a membership. Whereas if you're a show, that's really great, but you're only bringing in the same people who already have a subscription, then you get cancelled, so it's quite brutal, like if you're not creating new memberships, then you're out. That's what I understand. - Participant P*

Success links back to the concept of localism, but is defined in a specific way that matches with SVODs' expectations. This broadly means producing UK dramas, especially period or historical dramas or other UK dramas that might have international appeal.

*The streamers don't want specifically UK stories. They're not interested in stories, particularly analysis and politics. They're interested in return series and their main concern is to get a returning series to get people to stay on their subscriptions. That's why they do drama. They don't do drama to tell stories. I think it is the story that we should tell. - Participant K*

[\*Some notable exceptions were discussed by participants including the recent international success of 'Baby Reindeer'].

### 4.3.3 TRANSPARENCY OF DATA AND ALGORITHMS

When it came to accessing success, writers in our sample highlighted the importance of algorithms being used by SVODs. While UK broadcasters commission work based on overall objectives and strategy, along with specific channel identities, the SVODs tended to use algorithms to assess the success of previous shows in making purchasing decisions:

*What I quite respect about the pitching process for the SVODs is that it is much more American. No we don't want this. Doesn't fit our algorithm. No, no, no. No. That's been my experience and I quite like that. Because the IP comes back to you and you take it to another place - Participant Q*

Algorithms played a crucial role in judging a show's success with its audience. While this information sometimes reached executive producers, and occasionally even writers, the assessment wasn't simply about overall viewership. Instead, these algorithms were scrutinised which in turn helped decide whether to produce future seasons:

*[The streamer] had like, just algorithms. Like everything is an algorithm, everything fits in with a certain audience in a certain part of the world... So after you've released a show on [the streamer], they call in the exec producers for a 10 day meeting and then one a bit later to talk them through the figures. And if the figures are looking good at the 10 days, that's good. Then if they're looking good at the 28 days, then that's brilliant. And that will mean a second series. They can tell who's watching, when they're stopping watching, when... or which exactly which bits they fizzle out on. Exactly which bits they stop watching on that sort of thing. So it's really analytical data driven. - Participant P*

Although screenwriters knew algorithms drive commissioning decisions for SVODs, many of the screenwriters we spoke to felt that SVODs were unwilling to share this information with screenwriters. They felt there was a lack of transparency in the success of shows because they were not provided access to the data:

*It was kind of wild west, because everyone just kept saying, "well, we don't know." And streamers kept saying, "Well, we haven't got the data." You're like, you base your whole business model on data and algorithms. How do you not have the data like that's just nonsense! - Participant S*

The transparency of streaming data was one of the key issues in the WGA strikes in the US, where screenwriters secured the concession to access streaming data for all shows. However, it is unclear yet whether this will give sufficient data for screenwriters to negotiate from a powerful position when it comes to future work.

#### 4.3.4 DEVELOPING NEW AND MID-CAREER WRITERS

This section examines whether the introduction of SVODs has created new opportunities for writers to benefit, both in terms of their earnings and broader experiences. Some SVODs support schemes that support the development of new writers; for example, the Screenwriters' Fellowship<sup>77</sup> run by Netflix and Sky offers screenwriters of Black, Asian and other racial and ethnic backgrounds bursary of £22,568 and opportunities to build experience by writing a spec script, having a paid placement in a writers room with a credit, working with an industry mentor and receiving recognition of their work needed to approach an agent. These awards can be helpful for new writers to create experiences through providing writing and networking opportunities.

Several of the writers discussed writing as a craft, and the development of new writers as an apprenticeship. While traditional broadcasting in the UK had common routes to gain experience, often working on a long-running soap or television programme, these opportunities are disappearing due to funding cuts and decreased viewership.

*It is a problem. Cheaper stuff, which is also a conduit for new writers as [UK soap] was, that's been axed. Extremely cheap stuff is failing as the very expensive stuff is sailing. So obviously the more expensive stuff is more of a venue for experienced writers and the showrunners of their generation. So that's a problem while the middle bracket... of those nice eight o'clock dramas, 12 or maybe 16 episodes a year or just six. They seem to be floundering. - Participant M*

SVODs typically favour investing in higher-budget productions. Due to intense competition among these platforms, they are becoming less willing to finance lower-budget shows. This trend means there are fewer opportunities for writers to progress from schemes designed to discover new talent to the experienced roles required for larger productions.

*The trouble is new talent is not coming through. They're not being supported to go forward from one or two credits, there's no kind of mid level, it's very difficult. - Participant O*

It is not unusual for new writers to struggle finding opportunities, but what is emerging is a trend where, once hired, they are quickly thrust into positions of significant responsibility without adequate support.

*People are invited into a writers room without the backup training and expected to produce high end drama without having had any apprenticeship. When it doesn't go quite right they get cast a drift again and they think it's their fault. When actually screenwriting it's an apprenticeship. It's a craft that you have to learn. - Participant G*

The industry has also come under scrutiny in recent years for a lack of diversity, especially for new and mid-career writers. When it comes to SVODs, writers equally express concerns around diversity and highlighted a tension: they often feel a pull between representing diverse "local" voices from across the UK – encompassing different nations, ethnicities, and identities – and the expectation to conform to a globalised perception of UK culture, as exemplified by successes like *The Crown*. While SVODs have certainly produced successful shows exploring a range of identities, their nature as commercial entities means this creative drive can still conflict with the financial imperative to attract subscribers rather than ensure cultural diversity. This can inadvertently limit opportunities for writers from minority backgrounds, as the roles offered to them can sometimes be limited to projects specifically focused on race or identity, which can reinforce stereotypes rather than break them down.

77. Skygroup, 'Netflix and Sky select six screenwriters for the inaugural Bisha K. Ali Talent Programme', 6 June 2022

*They employed me because they wanted my voice. But actually what they [SVODs] wanted was somebody who was going to deliver the thing that they wanted it to be. A lot of it for me and my producers was fighting to keep the stuff that we wanted to keep in. For them to get the show that they wanted. It's a really tricky one, because on the one hand, they say they want these voices. But on the other hand, actually, they've got quite a clear idea about what they really thought I'd have to fit in with. It is quite intense. - Participant P*

Our findings suggest that while there may be opportunities for new writers, unless the writer is supported through developing their craft, these could have a detrimental effect on the writer's career. This impact may also have an effect on the efforts to increase diversity in the industry, however we note this as an area for future research.

#### 4.3.5 FREELANCING AND GUILD AGREEMENTS

Screenwriters in the UK are considered freelancers or self-employed, meaning their terms and conditions are based on contract law rather than employment law. Many screenwriters expressed that they did not believe current legislation was sufficient to protect screenwriters from potential exploitation by organisations.

*I don't think there are particularly good laws in the UK protecting filmmakers at all. - Participant L*

In the USA and the UK, as in several other European countries, screenwriters' earnings are based on guild agreements, which are locally agreed in each country (in the UK, the WGGB). As UK screenwriters are considered freelancers, payments are set out in the terms of that specific contract. In the USA, the WGA has similar arrangements, however in general US union laws allow for greater scope to negotiate on behalf of all USA screenwriters.

*We don't have the same protections that the WGA has. So we don't have a continuous income, we are all freelancers, we don't get sick pay, we don't get pension, we also don't get guaranteed steps. Whereas they have guaranteed steps like you will have a minimum of X number of weeks in a [writers'] room or your script. - Participant O*

As a result, some screenwriters strongly felt that the UK law was not adequately protecting creative freelancers, which, in the longer term, could undermine the market.

*My impression is the UK is increasingly being seen as like the cheap option in that if Amazon, Netflix etc. make a show here, they don't have to pay any of that [residuals]. Our writers over here become a much more attractive option to them because they can sidestep all of that WGA stuff. Good in the short term in the UK writers get work, but in a way it's kind of undercutting things. - Participant N*

Although it's broadly possible for agents and screenwriters to compare earnings between the two countries, in practice, screenwriters' felt they lacked the power to negotiate similar rates. As one screenwriter put it: "The power of the streamers will be that they can just say no." (Participant H). In contrast, very few screenwriters were in a financial position where they were willing to say no when offered a contract to work with a streamer.

### 4.3.6 WGA STRIKE

Recent strikes in the USA had a profound impact on screenwriters, shutting down the industry and ultimately securing concessions from SVODs. Even though this guild did not cover UK screenwriters, they were also affected by the industry shutdown. However, unlike their American counterparts, UK screenwriters' terms haven't seen similar improvements.

*We've had to suffer from the trickle down impact of their whole industry on ours. So much of the strike shut down our industry because their money underpins our productions. We're not benefiting in the way that the WGA are because we can't strike. I mean, we can strike, we have had strikes before. - Participant O*

Many screenwriters were aware of the differences between the UK and USA strike laws. The primary difference is that the UK guild was not allowed to operate as a 'closed shop' or to have mandatory membership to work in the industry.

*If we were all in the guild, we would have more power. And it's thinking and acting as equity, whatever. I believe in anyone being able to come into an industry because that's how you live and breathe and become better and more diverse and all those things. But at the same time, if someone will do the work, for half of what you're doing it it means we all lose our agency, because we go off someone else will take it so and I'm fusing kind of what's happening with the streamers with the market, climate of the industry, but I think the two things rely on each other. - Participant S*

It is evident that any UK agreements with SVODs would need to be voluntary discussions and outline minimum terms similar to those other existing agreements.

*It does have to be much more compromise driven. Friendly thing. But we don't have any control over the broadcaster's. We can ask for things and try. But what we do have control is building community within British writers. And I think the WGGB does some of that, but I think that they could do more. - Participant N*

Many were also aware of the challenges the strike sought to address and the WGA's stance on residuals. The settlement with the WGA did give some limited recognition through residuals however the way that the residuals may be recognised was still very vague.

*I know that the WGA fought for residuals. But the word on the street is that the residuals [awarded as a result of the strike] are like 10 pence. They're making it very difficult for it to be counted as being watched, for example someone has to watch a third of an episode or something like that. It's very difficult to take action as it's very vague, so you can't determine the residuals in a very straightforward way. - Participant R*

*In relation to the WGGB, almost all of our participants were supportive of the WGGB's activities. However a few did note areas where the WGGB could support screenwriters further, for example around financial advice when being self-employed (Participant N)*

### 4.3.7 FUTURE OF SCREENWRITERS AND SVODS

Many of the screenwriters felt that they would have to engage with SVODs in the future if they wanted to continue to write because of the opportunities they offered and fewer options elsewhere.

*I know that we're talking about streamers but as a whole, everything's being squeezed. So it just means as a writer, you have less agency because work's hard to get. You either go well, do I want this thing to happen? What do I say no on the off chance that someone else is going to take it when things are difficult. - Participant S*

Some of the screenwriters anticipated that SVODs would continue to dominate production, even going so far as to believe that production companies would adopt the new buyout model as the de facto norm:

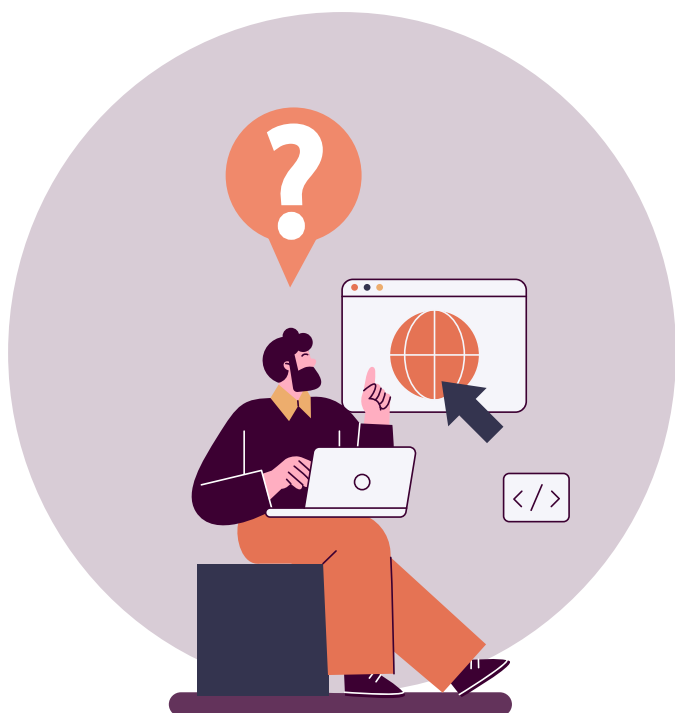
*The thing is on this particular thing, they hadn't even sold it to a streamer at that point there. [The production company] were saying 'if a streamer buys it, you won't have any rights [residuals]'. - Participant G*

Others thought that while SVODs would continue to dominate the production of new shows, a new model would have to emerge that differed from the current UK buyouts or the USA residual model.

*I think the trouble is that neither model is right. There needs to be something in the middle, and we haven't found it yet. Because the whole streaming age and the development of the way people consume content so fast and everything like that. It's moving faster than the models can adapt. - Participant O*

Finally, some screenwriters were less optimistic about the future of SVODs and whether the new model would last:

*The long term repercussions are how expensive these things are. 145% on the first day of principal photography, it's like it just seems like a financial model that can't last. Everyone's subscription prices are going up quite rapidly. They're going up and someone's gonna collapse, someone's gonna fold so I worry it's like the South Sea bubble... So yeah, it's got to burst in the end that's my worry. But then I think you know, we'll fall back on the BBC and start making those eight o'clock dramas for you know, one and a half million pounds per episode. Nice normal things like normal prices. If things do pop, then there's a very secure base to fall back on. So it's not bad. - Participant M*





## 5. CONCLUSIONS

**I'm glad this research is happening, because I do think they [streamers] have sort of got away with just sort of doing their own thing. Everybody is thrilled that there's lots of money involved. But actually, when you kind of work it out, you go, 'Oh, hang on a minute. That's not the greatest deal.' I think that's a good thing that needs to be ironed out.**

PARTICIPANT P

Screenwriters in this study generally welcomed or were open to new opportunities presented by SVODs. With a potential slowdown in the production of new shows for national broadcasters, streaming platforms offer writers an avenue, often with more available funding and, to some extent, greater creative license in the types of shows they produce. However, the overall number of subscriptions for streaming platforms is reported to have decreased in recent years, which could further limit these opportunities. Despite UK screen industries holding a historically strong position, current market uncertainty means that screenwriters need continued support from the government, the WGGB and the ALCS to maintain this creative sector. In particular, this report highlights potential issues in the future regarding the development of new skills and opportunities and recommends that action be taken to encourage streaming companies to continue investing in the production of new shows in the UK while also ensuring that screenwriters are appropriately rewarded for their creative work.

Our overall findings confirm the widespread use of the buyout model by production companies working with SVODs: all the UK screenwriters in our sample who had written for SVODs were offered buyout contracts. The introduction of SVODs commissioned content in the UK was directly linked to the increased use of buyouts, as opposed to the residual-based model in traditional broadcasting.

Buyouts offer more immediate income for writers, albeit at the expense of potential future earnings. When considering whether the residual or buyout model is preferable for screenwriters, it is worth noting that not all shows earn significant residuals for writers. At the same time the vast majority may receive only a small amount from residuals. Therefore, the buyouts offer writers a guaranteed instant boost in income, as opposed to the prospect of delayed income, if at all. It is important to note that buyouts affect writers differently. Inexperienced writers, who often have less bargaining power, no personal experience of residuals and who are more financially insecure, are more inclined to accept them. Conversely, screenwriters of successful shows are likely to benefit less from a buyout. They may be financially worse off, a fact demonstrated by the experiences of those who have received residuals from repeat broadcasts. This dynamic raises concerns for the future, as today's emerging writers may become tomorrow's established talent, eventually facing the long-term consequences of current buyout decisions. Residuals signify fair remuneration for creative ideas and a fair share for the success of a show. The removal of residuals, therefore, challenges the very concept of fair reward and sharing success from creative work.

Secondly, the increasing shift to digital platforms from traditional broadcasters may hinder the development of new skills and talent. In the UK, traditional broadcasters play a significant role in providing new and inexperienced writers with opportunities to write for long running series. However, with the changing landscape, especially related to the BBC license fee and the increasing popularity of SVODs, long-running series are being reduced and along with them, many of these opportunities to develop experience are lost. Our respondents reported that SVODs' focus on producing mega-hits has made them risk-averse, thereby limiting opportunities for inexperienced writers. While some SVODs offer opportunities for new writers, for example through directed schemes that encourage diversity and inclusion, these initiatives have limited scope to reach a wider number of writers. This signals a significant gap in nurturing new and mid-career screenwriters, which threatens the long-term health of the UK screen industry.

We hereby propose two key recommendations derived from our interview findings. We then note some of the project's limitations and promising avenues for future research.

## 5.1. Recommendations

### 1. More support is needed for screenwriters as freelancers to negotiate fair deals with streaming services and production companies.

Freelancers make critical contributions to the creative industries. Screenwriters strongly believe their creativity should be recognised and rewarded in the terms of their contracts. It is evident from this report that screenwriters would benefit from a stronger negotiating position with SVODs to ensure mutually beneficial contractual terms. The WGGB (Writers' Guild of Great Britain) plays a crucial role in establishing industry standards through national agreements that govern contracts. However, SVODs are generally outside of the agreements, except for the WGGB, Netflix UK and PMA deal signed on March 12, 2024. Sustained and, where appropriate, expanded advocacy by the WGGB could further strengthen screenwriters' confidence in the representation of their interests. Advocating for screenwriters on a collective scale with all SVODs (similar to the WGGB PACT agreement) is more likely to create a fair system which could benefit both screenwriters and SVODs. This could include setting out minimum terms for all SVODs, similar to the recent deal between the WGGB and Netflix. It could also involve steps by the UK government to support freelancers who operate under UK contractual law rather than UK employment law.

Because screenwriters are contracted on a freelance basis (as is frequently the case in TV and film, where around 30% of all staff freelance<sup>78</sup>), UK union laws prevent many forms of collective representation that may be enacted, as freelancing is not considered a form of employment. This is similar to other areas in the creative industries which extensively draw on freelancers and self-employed workers, such as journalism. Indeed, the National Union of Journalists has recently announced a campaign, #FairDeal4Freelances, to address the current lack of job protection and benefits for freelancers. It advocates for freelancers to have the right to organise in a trade union, to have a written contract with fair terms and conditions, prompt payment and equal treatment at work in terms of health and safety.

Recently interested parties such as the ALCS have advocated for a Freelance Commissioner as a dedicated channel for engaging with the freelancing workforce. The ALCS campaign aims to create an advocate for understanding how current support schemes may not adequately address the needs of freelancers and to build support specifically tailored to their needs. The ALCS campaign advocates improving the rights of freelancers, especially around tax laws which often do not reflect the fluctuation in income of freelancers; improving government skill policies such as apprenticeships, which could be extended into freelancing roles; addressing diversity and inequality issues in freelancing which often are overlooked; and improving policy makers' understanding of freelancers needs to provide better support, for example during the covid pandemic where much of the support did not apply to freelancers. Many of the issues raised in the ALCS campaign reflect the findings on screenwriters' earnings reported here.

Following campaigns such as those mentioned above, the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport has just announced a 10-year Creative Industries Sector Plan (June 23, 2025)<sup>79</sup>. Within this plan, a Creative Freelance Champion will be created as a new advocate for freelancers in the creative industries. At the moment, the terms of reference for the role have yet to be defined, although the plan indicates they will be developed with industry and the role will be a member of the Creative Industries Council.

It is highly encouraging that the DCMS has recognised the importance of freelancers in the recent plan and has created an advocate for creative freelancers. We want to highlight the importance of lawmakers working with unions and guilds in the UK to strengthen legislation protecting freelancers rights, especially in negotiations with large companies such as SVODs. Although screenwriters are highly skilled and contribute significant creative work to the screen industries, many screenwriters have relatively little power in negotiations compared to SVODs and production companies. The rise of new global platforms poses new challenges facing the screenwriters. Especially for newer screenwriters, this may lead to exploitation of their work with little reward if the production company uses poor practice. The newly appointed Creative Freelance Champion could also serve as a connector between freelancers, unions and industry, such as SVODs, to ensure fair compensation for creative work.

78. ALCS 'Briefing – Establishing a Freelancer Commissioner' N.D.

79. Creative Industries Sector Plan, 2025

## 2. To identify and support the development of skills and experience for new and mid-career writers as a priority for maintaining the long-term sustainability of the UK's screen industries.

There is currently a gap in the provision of skills training and developing for early and mid-career screenwriters. The Creative and Cultural Skills Council, whose remit was to promote skill development in the UK Creative Industries, was closed in 2023 due to a lack of funding from Arts Council England. It has, to a limited extent, been replaced by ScreenSkills, an industry-led body supported by BIFA funding, which offers bursaries for training development and training programmes to both new and established screenwriters. ScreenSkills also partners with production companies to encourage mentoring; for example, Dancing Ledge has collaborated with ScreenSkills to offer a Screenwriting Mentorship Scheme since 2018<sup>80</sup>. Other examples, such as the UK Screenwriters' Fellowship, have been supported by partnerships between Netflix and Sky, along with screenwriter Bisha K. Ali, offering six fellowships to work in a writers' room and receive their first credit. This illustrates that some SVODs are investing in new talent. However schemes tend to focus on a small number of aspiring writers. In practice, most skill development in the UK is offered through University programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate), although it is very challenging to estimate the number of graduates due to the wide variety of degrees in film, television and creative writing and the relatively low percentage of graduates within these fields who then work in screenwriting<sup>81</sup>.

Traditional avenues for developing new screenwriters in the UK include writing for Continuing Drama Series (or long-standing series such as soaps) on traditional broadcasters. Continuing drama series provide experiences similar to an apprenticeship, where writers learn their craft in a relatively supportive, collaborative and low-risk environment. However, these opportunities are increasingly challenging to secure as these traditional continuing drama series on TV are in decline or being moved onto streaming platforms where their future is less certain (for example the long-standing soap *Neighbours* was brought back on Amazon in 2022, only to be cancelled in February 2025<sup>82</sup>, while both *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale* announced a reduction in the hours aired each week in February 2025<sup>83</sup>). With these avenues decreasing, there is a concern in the writing community that new writers may struggle to develop the practical experience necessary to move from new to experienced writers. It is important that policymakers are aware of the impact of the changing financial landscape and how this may alter the long term viability of the screen industries in the UK.

Our findings support other accounts that UK television is experiencing a funding crisis (for example, the recent public statement by Peter Kosminsky, the director of *Wolf Hall*<sup>84</sup>). A report by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee has urged the government to introduce a levy on SVODs, requiring them to pay 5% of their subscriber revenue to help finance drama in the UK.<sup>85</sup> This report also calls for greater skills provision, noting that SVODs have in the past been opaque on the amount they invest in training. Our participants report that SVODs are increasingly focused on a smaller number of higher-budget productions. We recommend that more attention be paid to the development of writing skills and experience in the early and mid-stages of screenwriters' careers, and especially to promoting the inclusion of screenwriters from diverse backgrounds. This could be achieved through collaboration with SVODs to pinpoint effective methods for nurturing emerging talent.

Our report urges the UK government to enhance financial support for UK screenwriters through investing in skills and experience within the UK creative industries. This should encompass not only projects and infrastructure for TV and film production but also the career development of writers through skill development and training. This investment should work in conjunction with industry to provide invaluable on-the-job experience that complements training in educational settings. The UK government can play a vital role in encouraging SVODs to invest in new talent through schemes, such as the UK Screenwriters'

80. Dancing Ledge, Screenskills Screenwriting Mentorship Scheme, 2025

81. HESA Open Data and Statistics

82. BBC News 'Neighbours cancelled again, two years after revival', 21st February 2025

83. BBC News, 'Emmerdale and Coronation Street schedules face cut backs', 4th February 2025

84. BBC News, 'UK TV industry in crisis, says Wolf Hall director', 23rd of March 2025

85. Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 'British film and high-end television', 10 April 2025

Fellowship, which can provide invaluable experience for new writers. Funding for training, mentoring and developing innovative, creative outputs for television, from both public and private investment, would facilitate job creation, economic growth and innovation in the industry, continuing the UK's legacy as a thriving TV and film production location.

## 5.2 Limitations

### 1. Sample Representation and Selection

The study's primary limitation lies in its sample composition, which exclusively included writers affiliated with WGGB. While the WGGB represents a significant portion of professional UK screenwriters across various career stages, the perspectives of non-union writers' perspectives may offer different insights. However, given the high rate of guild membership among professional UK screenwriters and our diverse sample across career stages, this limitation's impact on our findings is minimal.

### 2. Stakeholder Representation

A potential limitation was the absence of direct input from the SVOD platforms. While their perspective could have provided additional context regarding compensation models, content commissioning, and writer development strategies, this limitation did not significantly impact our core findings, which aimed to explore screenwriters' perspectives on the changes. The study's primary focus was on analysing the effects of the transition from residual-based compensation to direct licensing rather than the SVODs platform's decision-making rationale. Additionally, interviews with agents who regularly interact with SVOD commissioned producers provided substantial indirect insights into platform operations. Future research could explore the platform's strategic decision-making processes to complement this study's findings.

### 3. Geographic and Temporal Constraints

This study's focus on the UK market, although appropriate for its scope, limits the generalisability of its findings to other markets with different regulatory environments and industry practices. Additionally, this research was conducted during a period of significant and rapid industry change, including advancement in technology, the WGA strikes and the announcement of the WGGB-Netflix UK agreement. Specific details in this report may become less relevant as the industry continues to change, and these limitations necessitate ongoing research as the industry evolves.

## 5.3 Avenues for Future Research

### 1. Quantitative Analysis – Contract and Earning Modelling

The field may benefit from more sophisticated quantitative research that utilises statistical modelling to explore the relationship between contract structures and career outcomes. Future studies could consider employing longitudinal data analysis and predictive modelling to forecast screenwriter potential earnings across a range of contract scenarios, incorporating variables such as SVOD viewership analytics, platform market share, and content longevity. Developing comprehensive econometric models to compare the financial impact of buyout agreements with residual-based compensation would offer valuable insights. Additionally, applying machine learning algorithms to identify patterns in contract structures could reveal previously unrecognised factors that influence career sustainability. A closer examination of how different compensation models impact creative risk-taking, project selection, and career trajectory could be insightful. Practical outcomes might include the development of data-driven evaluation tools for writers and their representatives to evaluate contract offers across both the immediate and long-term. Ultimately, this research could contribute to the creation of empirically validated frameworks that the WGGB may leverage to negotiate more equitable compensation structures.

## 2. Impact Analysis of the WGGB-Netflix Agreement

The March 2024 agreement between WGGB, Netflix UK, and PMA represents a significant shift in the relationship between streaming platforms and writers' unions in the UK. The timeline of this project made it impossible to analyse the effects of the new agreement on writers' earnings. Future research could examine how this agreement affects screenwriters' working conditions, compensation, and career trajectories. Additionally, studies could investigate whether this agreement influences other streaming platforms to re-evaluate writer compensation and development strategies in the UK. Longitudinal studies could provide insight into whether this agreement affects early-career screenwriter development and mid-career writer retention.

## 3. Diversity and Career Development Research

Although this study touched on industry diversity, significant research opportunities remain for examining the barriers and opportunities faced by underrepresented voices in screenwriting. It may be beneficial to investigate early and mid-career development pathways, particularly assessing the effectiveness of current diversity initiatives and identifying systemic barriers to entry.

Future research could examine how the reduced availability of traditional development routes, such as writers' rooms in soap operas, impacts emerging writers from diverse backgrounds. Studies might also assess the efficacy of alternative development routes, including writing competitions and mentorship programs, in supporting diverse talent. Longitudinal research would be valuable for understanding how different compensation models affect career sustainability across demographic groups.

## 4. Global Comparative Analysis

Conducting a comparative analysis of screenwriting industries across key content-producing nations could offer valuable insights for the UK market. Research could focus on markets with established domestic production sectors, such as South Korea, France, and Germany, where streaming platforms have made significant investments. Research might examine the influence of regulatory frameworks, cultural policies, and industry structures on writer development and compensation practices. A comparative analysis of union agreements, development programs, and the balance between domestically funded and internationally co-produced projects may help identify best practices that could strengthen the UK's creative industries.

## 5. Impact of Artificial Intelligence

Future research could explore the evolving role of AI in screenwriting and its implications for the industry. Research might examine current AI applications in writing assistance, story development, and script analysis while also investigating writers' perceptions of and engagement with these technologies. Important areas for exploration include the legal and ethical implications of AI integration, particularly regarding intellectual property rights, creative attribution, and fair compensation. Additionally, studies could assess how AI tools transform traditional writing workflows, impact employment, and reshape skill requirements for screenwriters across various career stages. This research may support policy recommendations for managing AI integration while safeguarding writers' creative and economic interests.

## 6. APPENDICES

### 6.1 BBC Script fees (2021 rates)

	Per minute	E.g. per 60 minutes
Teleplays	£213	£12,780
Series	£196	£11,760
Dramatisations	£142	£8,520
Adaptations	£88	£5,280
Educational Drama	£129	£7,740

\*New writers fee 20% less than the minimum rate

(a) 25% of the Fee is payable on commissioning of a scene by scene treatment; (b) 25% of the Fee is payable on commissioning of the Script; (c) 25% of the Fee is payable on Delivery of the first draft, and no further payment is due in respect of a second or third draft; (d) 25% of the Fee is payable on Acceptance.

(BBC script agreement for television and online V4, 2021)

<https://www.bbc.com/writerslicence/documents/script-agreement-tv-online-sato-final.pdf>

### 6.2 Additional Sources

#### RATES AND PAY FOR UK SCREENWRITERS

Authors' Earnings in the UK: Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre Policy Brief

<https://pec.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Authors-Earnings-in-the-UK-Creative-PEC-Policy-Brief-August-2023-Designed-v2.pdf>

Rates and Agreements WGA

<https://writersguild.org.uk/rates-agreements/>

#### CAMPAIGNS

Streaming and fair pay for writers – WGGB motion passes at TUC Congress

<https://writersguild.org.uk/streaming-and-fair-pay-for-writers-wggb-motion-passes-at-tuc-congress/>

Summary of the 2023 WGA MBA

<https://www.wgacontract2023.org/the-campaign/summary-of-the-2023-wga-mba>

Writers Are Not Keeping Up

<https://www.wgacontract2023.org/updates/bulletins/writers-are-not-keeping-up>



## 6.4 Interview Guides

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR WRITERS:

#### Part 1: Background questions

1. Can you tell us broadly about your experience as a screenwriter - how long have you worked in the screen industries, have you worked in any related industries, and which medium (Film, TV) do you generally write for?
2. Can you tell us about your relationship with your agent (if they have an agent), and how important is this relationship in securing contracts? (aim to explore how they work together, how the agent negotiates on their behalf and how much of their earnings the agent may take)
3. Can you tell us about your relationship with producers and / or directors and how important this is for securing and delivering the work?
4. To what extent does SVOD work contribute to your overall earnings? (what percentage of your work is for SVOD compared to traditional producers)
5. How has your experience of the SVOD model been different from traditional models?
6. What is your relationship with SVODs like compared to traditional producers?
7. Has the SVOD model altered your relationship with your agent?
8. Has the SVOD model altered your relationship with screenwriting?

#### Part 2: How does the money flow in the video streaming age?

9. From your knowledge, how is the revenue split between stakeholders? What is your view on this split?
10. How have contractual terms changed, if applicable?
11. Do your contracts specifically consider foreign stream subscriptions and if so how are these dealt with?
12. To what extent is viewer streaming viewership data transparent to you (international and domestic)?

#### Part 3: How do screenwriters get paid in the video streaming age?

13. What is your view about the subscription model? From your experience, does the subscription model of revenue for streaming services impact your overall earnings (as opposed to a residual model)?
14. Have you experienced a change in when or how you get paid from streaming services compared to traditional producers?
  - a. Do you make use of advance payment as part of your SVOD contract? If so, what percentage? How does this compare to experiences you have had with traditional producers?
  - b. Do your contracts tend to use steps in their payments, and at which points?
  - c. Did you receive pay for residuals under the traditional model? Has that changed under SVOD?
  - d. Do you usually get paid a weekly pay as a staff writer (if applicable)?
  - e. Do you receive writer's room premiums and if so how are these set up?

#### Part 4: What are the impacts of SVODs commissioning practice on screenwriters' earnings?

15. What is the overall impact of SVOD on your earnings?
16. What did you think initially of the agreed SVOD/Netflix deal (125%)? Did your view of this deal change over time and in what way?
17. What do you think are some of the positive & negative ways in which earnings have been impacted?
18. Are there any other areas you would like to discuss or feel that we have not covered?

#### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR AGENTS:

##### Part 1: Background questions

1. Can you tell us broadly about your experience as an agent - how long have you worked in the screen industries, have you worked in any related industries, and what type of work / client do you generally negotiate contracts for? Do they work for an agency or as an independent agent?
2. Can you tell us about your relationship with screenwriters and writer-directors, and how important is this relationship in securing contracts?
3. Can you tell us about your relationship with producers and how important this is for securing and delivering the work?
4. To what extent does SVOD work contribute to your overall earnings? (what percentage of your work is for SVOD compared to traditional producers)
5. How has your experience of the SVOD model been different from traditional models?
6. What is your relationship with SVODs like compared to traditional producers?
7. Has the SVOD model altered your relationship with screenwriters?

##### Part 2: How does the money flow in the video streaming age?

8. From your knowledge, how is the revenue split between stakeholders? What is your view on this split?
9. From your experience, how does the subscription model of revenue for streaming services affect screenwriters' earnings?
10. Do your contracts specifically consider foreign stream subscriptions and if so how are these dealt with?
11. To what extent is viewer streaming data transparent to you (international and domestic)?



**Part 3: How do screenwriters get paid in the video streaming age?**

- 12.** Have you experienced a change in how screenwriters get paid from streaming services compared to traditional producers?
- a.** Do you make use of advance payment as part of SVOD contracts? If so, what percentage? How does this compare to experiences you have had with traditional producers?
  - b.** Do you usually include a weekly pay for staff writers (if applicable)?
  - c.** Do you include writer's room premiums and if so how are these used?
- 13.** Have you experienced a change in when screenwriters get paid from streaming services compared to traditional producers?
- a.** Did you negotiate pay for residuals under the traditional model? Has that changed under SVOD?
  - b.** Do the contracts tend to use steps in their payments, and at which points?

**Part 4: What are the impacts of SVODs commissioning practice on screenwriters' earnings?**

- 14.** What is the overall impact of SVOD on screenwriters' earnings?
- 15.** What did you think initially of the agreed SVOD/Netflix deal (125%)? Did your view of this deal change over time and in what way?
- 16.** What do you think are some of the positive & negative ways in which earnings have been impacted?
- 17.** Are there any other areas you would like to discuss or feel that we have not covered?

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