

Submission to ‘Living online: the long-term impact on wellbeing’ inquiry

Introduction

The Authors’ Licensing & Collecting Society (ALCS) is a not-for-profit organisation for the benefit of all kinds of writers. Set up in 1977 and owned by its members, ALCS collects money due for licensed secondary uses of authors’ work and currently has over 110,000 members. At Westminster, it is also proud to provide support for the All Party Parliamentary Writers Group (APWG).

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the increased reliance on digital technology has had an acute impact on the creative sector and its workforce, in particular writers. ALCS believes that, as authors continue to make a vital contribution to UK culture, it is important to inform the Committee how the transitioning working environment is affecting writers.

Work

How will any long-term trend towards increased reliance on digital technology affect job opportunities and working conditions? What sectors are likely to see the biggest changes? What impact might these changes have on job satisfaction?

Authors’ earnings

Our creative industries are central contributors to the UK’s culture and economy and as a result it should be viable to make a living as a writer within the creative workforce. Authors’ earnings have experienced a decline of 42% since 2005 and this figure has not taken into account the more recent negative impact of COVID. The Society of Authors estimates that 57% of writers have seen incomes decline since COVID-19, with more affected with each passing month.

The resultant move towards a digital working environment has had a big impact, as creators often rely on multiple streams of income to support their creative work and working at home and online has decreased the number of opportunities for authors to find employment outside of writing.

In a recent supplementary inquiry session with the APWG, issues surrounding moving content online were raised and how this will affect job opportunities or future earnings. The beginning of lockdown saw parts of the creative sector offering content online for free to give the public content and entertainment to consume in these unprecedented times. There is concern, therefore, that expectations that digital content would be free to the user at all times has been reinforced, despite the business models authors may rely on to sustain their work.

The fact is that with an industry booming and creative content being consumed more than ever, not least online, there is no fair reason for such a sharp decline in earnings.

In order to combat this trend, there needs to be consistent work around issues such as fair contracts, tax and benefit rules and appropriate remuneration from digital rights for authors – most of whom are freelance – that will ensure that writing as a career, in all its forms, is not reserved for the independently wealthy.

Will different parts of the UK be affected differently? Does an increased reliance on digital technology offer opportunities to improve economic wellbeing in different parts of the UK?

Regional Writers

Creative industries have hitherto been centred around London, particularly the publishing industry. This means the creative industries have not been representative of the talent in writing that can be found in every region of the UK and opportunities available across the country have been limited.

The move towards a digital working environment provides an opportunity to diversify writing and make the creative sector a more inclusive environment. With the necessity of proximity to London less of a concern, opportunities can be taken to empower regional writing development agencies, for instance, and increase investment to support new publishing ventures across the country.

We would encourage the implementation of the recommendations made in the [Common People](#) report, a collaboration between England's regional writing agencies, which looked at how opportunities can be opened up to different socio-economic classes and areas of the country.

Social Interactions and Wellbeing

Will any increasing reliance on digital technology affect the social interactions of different groups – older people, children, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, home-workers – in different ways? What are the particular social implications for those who cannot, or choose not to, use the internet?

The educational wellbeing of children was also highlighted as a worry by children's authors during the recent supplementary inquiry held by the APWG.

The time spent out of school during the initial lockdown has raised concerns about the priorities in budgets and the curriculum going forward, with writers pointing out that school visits and school libraries may come low down on the list.

While it is understandable that making up for lost time in terms of educational development is important, exposing children to creative works of an educational and fictional kind is also vital.

School visits allow children to engage with authors and explore their imagination, but will be put at risk in the future, if these do not fit into the core curriculum. Such visits also contribute to a previously reliable part of the varied income streams of writers, who are now being pushed to consider other career options due to the possibility that these sources will not return to normal.

Other – Accessibility of Digital Content

How can online digital content be made more accessible to the user?

Removal of VAT on audiobooks

The move to use more digital technology has adjusted the way in which creative works are consumed. This has been particularly evident since the outbreak of COVID-19, which has resulted in many people spending more time at home, meaning access to content online has become vital.

ALCS welcomed the Government's decision in May 2020 to remove the VAT charge on ebooks, as we believed it was a measure that would go a long way to making literature widely accessible.

However, this did not extend to audiobooks which are vitally important to families and readers with visual impairments. For a modest reduction in revenue, the removal of this remaining tax anomaly from audiobooks would help in two ways: it would ensure that authors' works gain further reach and that people who rely on digital content, during these difficult times and beyond, are not discriminated against and are able to access what they need at a lower price.