

THE CHALLENGE FOR FUTURE TALENT

Stephen Tallamy, chief technology officer, EditShare discusses the importance of learning your craft

The difficulties of making our industry attractive to young people, then giving them the required education and development programme, have all been discussed regularly. But I see another level of complications ahead of us, and I believe we need to start the debate now.

Some people start as runners; some start with a degree at the growing number of universities that are providing media education, many of them excellent. But they all meet at the same point: they become assistants in their chosen specialisation.

These are real, important roles. Editors need edit assistants to take on the preparation work, organising content into bins and so on. The structure applies across the industry: script supervisors have assistants; composers have assistants; colourists have assistants. These roles are important to get the work done in a timely manner. And – this is very important – they give the assistants a real understanding of what the job is about.

What the assistants gain is a real, deep understanding of what good work is, and how it is constructed. What are the steps involved in making great work? How do you navigate the pressures of time and budget and other steps in the production workflow to achieve what you need to do to be the best editor or script supervisor or whatever.

Those who have gone down the degree route, and will often have had the opportunity to do their own projects with professional-grade equipment, will not have had the stimulation of working with someone who has been doing this job for real for many years. They will not have been subject to the time and budget pressures which are critical in the real world.

For anyone who went to IBC this year, there was one mantra heard everywhere: 'AI is set to transform the industry'. Setting aside for the moment just how realistic it is to depend upon AI – which is not and can never be creative, just analytical of existing work – this idea has a potentially catastrophic effect on this unofficial apprenticeship system.

A benefit of AI is that it can automate the dull, repetitive tasks traditionally offloaded to assistants. But if these tasks are taken away from assistants, then how do people make the transition from carrying cappuccinos (or finishing the degree project) to fully-fledged members of the profession?



On a major drama series production, the director and script supervisor realise that they are in danger of running over time, so they need a scene to be tightened, without losing key material but taking it up a pace. Today, that task could be handed to the script assistant, who gets terrific experience in creating dramatic dialogue, learning about pacing and – through working with actors and director – understanding what works and what is not practical or convincing to say.

Or the script supervisor could ask ChatGPT to do it.

When you are scoring a movie or a premium television series, the headline composer – like Hans Zimmer or Debbie Wiseman – will create a suite of themes, musical

ideas which convey each character, along with sketches on how they will be used to convey different aspects of the drama. This is how music adds to the audience's understanding of what is happening.

If you need a few seconds to underscore a particular scene, or you need to adapt an orchestral idea for a string quartet, then the music assistant will write it. Often the composer will use assistants to orchestrate large sections of the score. What happens when the, already very developed, music AI tools can create variations on a theme and fit them to a scene?

AI can only reflect what it has learned. It will study existing material and apply what it has learned. And, as the use of AI grows, so it will be trapped in a feedback loop, learning not from real creativity but from increasing amounts of AI-generated material, and unable to evaluate objectively; 'good or bad, it has been done before so I must add it to my set of rules'.

Great work involves understanding the rules, the structures and conventions of our industry, then turning those ideas on their heads to create something original and exciting. But how can you do that if you do not understand the fundamentals because you have never had the opportunity to do it for real?

Using technology to lower the barrier to entry in our industry is a very good thing, and I am entirely in favour. But democratisation does not mean that everyone can do something without learning how creativity really works. I do not have the answers to how we continue to develop practical talents across the industry. But I know we have to start the debate. ■