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Reality Check for Production Companies: Why Writers on Reality Television Are Entitled to Overtime Pay

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REALITY CHECK FOR PRODUCTION COMPANIES: WHY WRITERS ON REALITY TELEVISION ARE ENTITLED TO OVERTIME PAY

I. INTRODUCTION

In an unprecedented move, a major television network recently announced plans to shake-up its prime-time lineup and devote the first hour each night to low-cost, unscripted shows.1 This decision echoes a growing trend as networks reduce their dependence on traditional, scripted programs to fill their prime-time lineups.2 When Survivor debuted on CBS in 2000, it brought with it a dramatic change in network programming as reality television shifted from a marginal sideshow to a network standard.3 As of November 2006, reality television occupied about fifteen hours of prime-time programming.4 Comparatively, sitcoms only fill about ten hours of the same prime-time slots.5 Although reality shows present themselves as unscripted productions, these shows use “writers” to produce story lines in order to build drama.6 Unfortunately, the pay for reality writers is meager compared to writers on scripted shows.7 The recent reality writer strike on America’s Next Top Model,8 in which twelve reality writers went on strike

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2. Id.
3. Id.
4. Id. This figure has dropped in the last two years, which has led some skeptics, including Dean Valentine, the former head of Disney’s television unit and president of UPN, to question the staying power of reality television. He also predicts that the generic sitcom is not coming back. Despite the fact there are fewer hours of reality television than two years ago, “a resurgence of sitcoms is unlikely . . . because younger audiences prefer short, interactive entertainment found on websites such as YouTube.”
5. Id.
6. Rodney Ho, Labor Dispute Raises Curtain on Writers of TV Reality, ATLANTA J. CONST., Sept. 4, 2006, at 1A.
7. See id. (noting that while a writer on a reality show may be paid in the range of $600–$2,000 a week, reality writers are often paid about 1/4 of what a comparable writer on a drama series receives). This is due in part to the fact most reality shows are not covered by guild contracts. The median salary for a writer who is a member of the guild is $106,756.
to protest the lack of pension, credits, and health benefits, exemplifies the ongoing tension with reality writers.

Writers on reality shows often find themselves working sixteen-hour days, fifteen days in a row, while receiving less pay than the average writer who is a member of the Writers Guild of America, West ("WGAw"). With even more unscripted shows expected to debut and the number of nightly prime-time sitcoms shrinking, labor tensions in Hollywood are growing as television writers worry about the market for their services. While there are opportunities for writers in reality television, the poor pay and lack of benefits is a constant concern.

One reason reality television writers receive poor pay is that production companies attempt to maneuver their way around wage and hour laws by labeling these workers "exempt" to avoid payment of overtime. Exempt employees are salaried professionals who do not receive overtime. There are various types of exemptions, but the category of exemption applicable to writers on reality television shows is that of "creative professional." The issue is whether the writers on reality television legally fit into this exempt category in order for production companies to avoid liability under wage and hour law. While the entertainment industry tends to attract people who define themselves as creative, companies cannot simply label employees exempt without considering their underlying job functions.

This Comment will show that production companies cannot circumvent wage and hour compliance by claiming writers are creative to the same extent as writers on scripted sitcoms. Part II of this Comment will provide a background on reality television and explore the relevant portions of the Fair Labor Standards Act ("FLSA") and California exemption regulations. Part III will analyze California's application of exempt status

9. Ho, supra note 6.
12. See, e.g., Sharon Waxman, Union Plans to File Suit for Reality TV Workers, N.Y. TIMES, June 29, 2005, at E1 (discussing how the Writers Guild of America plans to file a lawsuit against networks and production companies, based on a perceived breach of California overtime laws).
14. See 29 C.F.R. § 541.302(a) (2006) ("To qualify for the creative professional exemption, an employee's primary duty must be the performance of work requiring invention, imagination, originality or talent in a recognized field of artistic or creative endeavor as opposed to routine mental, manual, mechanical or physical work. The exemption does not apply to work which can be produced by a person with general manual or intellectual ability or training.").
15. Id. § 541.2.
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in *Sharp v. Next Entertainment*\(^\text{16}\) and *Shriver v. Rocket Science Laboratories*,\(^\text{17}\) two recent class action lawsuits filed by reality writers. Subsequently, Part III will examine significant cases on the creative professional exemption and analyze the reality writer's role to determine whether the creative exemption should apply. This author will pay particular attention to California law, which is more protective of employees than federal regulations, thus controlling for suits filed in the state. Finally, Part IV examines possible solutions, such as unionization, which may give reality writers more pay and might be less costly than restitution for lost overtime pay. This Comment will establish that from a legal standpoint, as defined by the FLSA regulations and the California Wage Orders, reality writers should be entitled to overtime pay because their work is not sufficiently creative in character.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Reality Writers and the Lack of Overtime Pay

Unscripted television has captured the public’s fascination since the days of *Candid Camera*.\(^\text{18}\) While unscripted television may not be a new genre, the concept of writers scripting “reality” is a recent phenomenon. Cementing reality writers' entrance into the world of reality television was the success of MTV's *The Real World*, which debuted in 1992.\(^\text{19}\) This series introduced the idea of placing seven strangers in a house and recording the drama that ensued.\(^\text{20}\) *The Real World* rarely dealt with complex real-life issues, contrary to the impression provided by the title. The “characters” on the show were supposed to be archetypes of youth culture, whose interactions would exhibit the sort of melodramatic behavior


\(\text{18. Candid Camera was a long-running television series that started in 1948. The premise of the show was to film ordinary people being confronted by unusual situations. Candid Camera, http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0040034/#Comment (last visited Nov. 27, 2006).}\)


that would drive a scripted TV program. The reality writers on the series originated certain stylistic conventions, such as switching between on-screen events and after-the-fact confessional that serve as narration.

Reality shows do not often officially use the term "writer." In fact, many production companies avoid calling anyone a writer, hoping to circumvent guild coverage by the WGAw. Story producers, field producers, segments producers, and various other types of producers and editors often perform writing on a reality show. At the same time, production companies often refer to these people as writers internally. This Comment will refer to any person whose writing shapes the story on a reality show as an employee.

The year 2000 ushered in mainstream success for reality television. Since then, major networks have attempted to fill their summer line-ups with reality programming, as the reality genre's success and economic incentives became increasingly apparent. Not surprisingly, the recent vintage of reality programming borrowed the stylistic conventions introduced by The Real World, while shows such as Survivor created the special living environment where producers designed the format of the show and controlled the day-to-day activities. Reality television is now firmly rooted as a television genre. Networks depend on reality programming because production of reality shows costs less than new scripted shows and generates higher ratings than repeats.

22. Id.
24. Id. Job titles do not determine exempt status. In order for an exemption to apply, an employee's specific job duties and salary must meet all the requirements of the Department of Labor's regulations. 29 C.F.R. § 541.2 (2006). The issue of unionization, while related in many respects is a separate matter and not to be confused with whether an employee is exempt. See Part IV, infra.
25. Reality United, supra note 23. Editors who are not on reality shows often perform much of the same tasks as do their reality show counterpart. See Bartsch, supra note 10. However, editors are normally part of the Motion Picture Editors Guild (MPEG). It is debatable as to whether the appropriate forum for editors on reality shows would in fact be the MPEG, as opposed to WGAw.
27. Verrier, supra note 1.
30. See Carter, supra note 28 ("Reality series still have lower costs than scripted shows, though they no longer qualify as dirt-cheap programming. Most reality series approach a
Yet, since the early days of The Real World viewers have questioned the authenticity of the reality programming.31 Designed to be entertaining on television, reality shows have a traditional “dramatic narrative model.”32 To keep the audiences’ attention there must be elements of conflict and resolution.33 Before being aired storylines are shaped. Essentially, the writers at production companies must filter hundreds of hours of videotape and shape coherent episodes.34

In July of 2006, a labor dispute at America’s Next Top Model fixated the public’s attention on the issue of “reality” in reality television.35 The twelve writers of the program went on strike protesting the lack of pay, credits, and benefits, and desired to join the Writers Guild union.36 And, this uprising was not unique, as writers on reality shows have complained of working sixteen-hour-days, fifteen days in a row while receiving less pay than the average writer who is a member of WGAw.37 In fact, over 1,000 writers, editors, and producers have signed with the WGAw in order to force reality production companies and the networks to negotiate a union contract.38

Reality television, burgeoning with success, eventually left the sidelines and began头lining on network and cable television. However, heightened success brought a stark juxtaposition between the reality of production companies’ goals and the compensation goals of employees on reality television. Production companies see reality television as a way to minimize costs.39 There are no high priced actors to pay on the soap-opera styled reality programs. Workers on reality shows are generally non-unionized and as such do not receive benefits, like health insurance or pensions.40 Additionally, a scripted show will have a larger production staff than its reality television counterpart.41 A scripted show on average

31. See Klosterman, supra note 19 (explaining how critics of the show questioned the veracity of every plot twist).
32. Ho, supra note 6.
33. Id.
34. Id.
36. Ho, supra note 6.
38. Waxman, supra note 12.
40. Id.
41. Id. The larger production staff on a scripted show includes camera operators, scriptwriters and union actors. Comparatively, reality programming mostly uses editors,
will cost around one million to two million dollars, whereas the average reality programming only costs a network about $700,000.42

Writers on reality shows want to realize the benefits that writers see on scripted television if they are going to work long hours.43 If unionized, reality writers would receive the same pay and benefits that go to unionized workers of other network shows.44 Currently, "to the extent that there are writers [on reality television], they are not treated like writers on other shows."45 Two class action lawsuits are currently pending that involve reality television employees: Sharp v. Next Entertainment46 and Shriver v. Rocket Science Laboratories.47 These lawsuits allege unfair labor practices against such companies as Fox, ABC, and other major production studios that rely on reality television for low budget productions.48 Attempting to recoup some of their perceived economic losses, reality writers seek restitution for lost overtime pay.49 However, in order to receive overtime pay, law requires that writers perform work that is not creative in nature.50 Otherwise, law classifies them as salaried employees whose finished work product does not correlate with the number of hours spent on a project.51

B. Problem: Longstanding Production Practices May Lead to Liability for Wage and Hour Claims

The two class action suits previously referenced reflect an issue faced by all employers in every industry: the correct classification of employees as exempt or nonexempt. Minimum wage and overtime regulations are not applicable to exempt employees.52 Employers cannot simply maneuver their way around wage and hour law by labeling workers exempt and paying them a salary.53 Employees must be salaried professionals before production companies and networks can legally allow employees to work

42. Id.
43. Waxman, supra note 12.
44. Rendon, supra note 39.
45. Id.
49. See, e.g., Complaint at 10, id.
52. Id.
53. 29 C.F.R. § 541.2.
long hours without overtime. Nonetheless, many production companies of reality television shows continue to pay flat salaries to their writers. FLSA requires that most employees in the United States be paid at least the federal minimum wage for all hours worked and overtime pay at time and one-half the regular rate of pay for all hours worked over forty hours in a workweek. However, FLSA provides an exemption from both minimum wage and overtime pay for employees employed as bona fide executive, administrative, professional and outside sales employees. Within the professional exemption, there is a further division between the learned professional and creative professional.

To claim a creative professional exemption under the FLSA, a production company’s employees must perform original and creative work. An employee’s primary duty must be the performance of work requiring invention, imagination, originality, or talent, and it must be in a recognized field of artistic or creative endeavor. Under federal law, recognized artistic endeavors include “music, writing, acting and the graphic arts.” Courts construe these categories very narrowly with specific attention paid to the plain meaning of the statutory language and intent of Congress. Exemption as a creative professional depends on the extent of the invention, imagination, originality, or talent exercised by the employee.

This Comment focuses on the application of California law because of the state’s close ties to the entertainment industry. While California regulations are “intended to be construed in accordance with” federal law, sometimes federal and state laws differ. California imposes law most

55. See, e.g., Ho, supra note 6 (stating that some writers on reality television work eighteen to twenty hours a day for a flat salary based on weekly commensuration).
57. Id. § 213(a)(1).
58. 29 C.F.R. § 541.302.
59. Id. § 541.302(b).
60. Id. § 541.302(b), .700.
61. Id. § 541.302(b).
62. See A.H. Phillips, Inc. v. Walling, 324 U.S. 490, 491,493 (1945) (discussing whether an interstate grocery chain store system is an ‘establishment’ within the meaning of the Fair Labor Standards Act and holding that “to extend an exemption to other than those plainly and unmistakably within its terms and spirit is to abuse the interpretative process and to frustrate the announced will of the people”); see also Abshire v. County of Kern, 908 F.2d 483, 485–86 (9th Cir. 1990) (“Employers who claim that an exemption applies to their employees . . . must show that the employees fit ‘plainly and unmistakably within [the exemption’s] terms.’”).
63. 29 C.F.R § 541.302(b), .700.
favorable to the employee. The dispositive factors under California law include the amount of discretion and independent judgment exercised by the employee as well as whether an employee in California devoted more than fifty-percent of his or her time to exempt activities. As it currently stands, California law controls because it protects employees more than federal law.

C. History of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)

Congress enacted the FLSA partly because of its concerns over substandard working conditions. Congress had several goals for this law, one of which was to eliminate extremely low wages and excessively long work weeks. Another of Congress’ goals was to help “those employees who lack sufficient bargaining power to secure . . . a minimum subsistence wage.” Among the many exemptions under the FLSA are “white-collar workers”—the executive, professional, and administrative employees. Congress relied on the Department of Labor (“DOL”) to determine whether occupations were exempt. The DOL defines exempt categories of employees. Interpretations are only the views of the DOL and “do not have the force of law”—they are merely suggestions that courts may


67. Cal. Lab. Code § 515(c) (West 2003) (creating an exception when the employee spends more than fifty percent or more of his or her work time in the learned or artistic profession). But see 29 C.F.R § 541.700(b) (“Time alone, however, is not the sole test, and nothing in this section requires that exempt employees spend more than 50 percent of their time performing exempt work.”).

68. Chen et al., supra note 65.


70. Id.


74. See id. § 541 (categorizing employees as executive, administrative, professional, computer, etc.).
choose to follow.\textsuperscript{75} The DOL may add or delete occupations classified under the regulations.\textsuperscript{76} The exempt categories may expand as new occupations come into existence, even if the DOL did not originally contemplate these new vocations.\textsuperscript{77} For example, journalists were not originally included in exemptions, but since 2004, the revised Code of Federal Regulations specifically addresses journalists under the creative professional exemption.\textsuperscript{78}

\textbf{D. The Professional Exemption}

The FLSA recognizes eleven categories of workers, ranging from amusement park employees\textsuperscript{79} to babysitters,\textsuperscript{80} who are exempt from minimum wage and overtime compensation.\textsuperscript{81} The FLSA also provides an exemption for white-collar employees, which applies to individuals "employed in a bona fide executive, administrative, or professional capacity..."\textsuperscript{82}

Learned\textsuperscript{83} and creative\textsuperscript{84} professionals are two subcategories of the professional exemption. Learned professionals are those whose primary duty is to perform work that requires "advanced knowledge in a field of science or learning customarily acquired by a prolonged course of specialized intellectual instruction."\textsuperscript{85} Examples of learned professionals include individuals in law, medicine, and ministry.\textsuperscript{86} Trades learned through apprenticeships do not qualify as professional even though they may require a great amount of skill or specialized knowledge.\textsuperscript{87} In other words, no exemption exists for occupations where employees develop


\textsuperscript{76} See Edward D. Cavanaugh, \textit{Journalists as Professionals: Rethinking the Professional Exemption Under the Fair Labor Standards Act}, 16 \textit{Loy. L.A. Ent. L.J.} 277, 278 (1995) ("In November 1985, the Department of Labor ("DOL") published an advanced notice of proposal rulemaking in the Federal Register, inviting views of the public as to whether the DOL should reconsider the status of various professions under the FLSA and its regulations.").

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{78} 29 C.F.R. § 541.302(d).


\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Id.} § 213(a)(1).

\textsuperscript{83} 29 C.F.R. § 541.301.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Id.} § 541.302.

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Id.} § 541.301(a).

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Id.} § 541.301(c).

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Id.} § 541.301(d).
skills primarily through experience.\footnote{Id. ("[T]he learned professional exemption is available to the occasional lawyer who has not gone to law school... However, the learned professional exemption is not available for occupations that customarily may be performed with only the general knowledge acquired by an academic degree in any field...
\footnote{29 C.F.R. § 541.302(a) (2006).}\footnote{See id.}\footnote{§ 541.302(c) ("This requirement generally is met by actors, musicians, composers, conductors, and soloists. This requirement is generally not met by a person who is employed as a copyist, as an ‘animator’ of motion-picture cartoons, or as a retoucher of photographs, since such work is not properly described as creative in character.
\footnote{Id. § 541.302(a).}\footnote{See U.S. GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE, FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT: WHITE-COLLAR EXEMPTIONS IN THE MODERN WORKPLACE, GAO/HEHS-99, at 5–6 (Sept. 24, 1999) (stating exempt salaried workers become cheaper “when they work over 40 hours”).}\footnote{Id. § 541.118(a) (2006).}}")}.  

The focus of this Comment is on the creative professional. The creative professional is an employee who engages in “the performance of work requiring invention, imagination, originality or talent.”\footnote{Id. ("[T]he learned professional exemption is available to the occasional lawyer who has not gone to law school... However, the learned professional exemption is not available for occupations that customarily may be performed with only the general knowledge acquired by an academic degree in any field...
\footnote{29 C.F.R. § 541.302(a) (2006).}\footnote{See id.}\footnote{§ 541.302(c) ("This requirement generally is met by actors, musicians, composers, conductors, and soloists. This requirement is generally not met by a person who is employed as a copyist, as an ‘animator’ of motion-picture cartoons, or as a retoucher of photographs, since such work is not properly described as creative in character.
\footnote{Id. § 541.302(a).}\footnote{See U.S. GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE, FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT: WHITE-COLLAR EXEMPTIONS IN THE MODERN WORKPLACE, GAO/HEHS-99, at 5–6 (Sept. 24, 1999) (stating exempt salaried workers become cheaper “when they work over 40 hours”).}\footnote{Id. § 541.118(a) (2006).})")} The creative professional classification encompasses a reality writer’s job to a greater extent than any other exempt classification. This Comment investigates whether reality television writers are professionals and exempt from coverage under the FLSA or whether they qualify as wage earners and FLSA includes them in its coverage.

In determining whether writers are creative professionals, one must examine their job functions and determine whether their work requires invention, imagination, originality, or talent.\footnote{See id.} The statute does not encompass all artistic or creative activities—an employee’s function must still be within a recognized field.\footnote{Id. § 541.302(a).} Finally, “[t]he exemption does not apply to work which can be produced by a person with general manual or intellectual ability or training.”\footnote{Id. § 541.118(a) (2006).}

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\textbf{E. Primary Duty Test for the Professional Exemption}
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One possible justification behind the white-collar exemption is that the value an employer places on work performed by professional employees is unrelated to the number of hours worked.\footnote{See U.S. GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE, FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT: WHITE-COLLAR EXEMPTIONS IN THE MODERN WORKPLACE, GAO/HEHS-99, at 5–6 (Sept. 24, 1999) (stating exempt salaried workers become cheaper “when they work over 40 hours”).} As a result, professionals are neither paid more for working more hours a week nor paid less for working fewer hours in a given week.\footnote{Id.} Professionals receive a salary for a predetermined amount of compensation that is “not subject to reduction because of variations in the quantity or quality of the work performed.”\footnote{Id. § 541.118(a).} Therefore, the threshold requirement for any exempt
employee is that he or she receives a statutory minimum salary. Upon meeting the statutory minimum, the employee’s job duties must meet the conditions set forth in the applicable exemption.

Prior to 2004, courts analyzed an employee’s duties under either the long or short test. The new regulations eliminated both tests and replaced them with a single standard test, which combines factors from its two predecessors. It is important, however, to understand the application of the regulations prior to 2004, because the new regulations “preserve the case law that existed under the old regulations.” Prior to 2004, if an employee earned between $170 and $250 per week, courts applied the long test. The long duties test required “the ‘consistent’ exercise of discretion and judgment in the employee’s work.” Exempt work had to be “predominantly intellectual and varied in character.” Further, the test required that the results of the work “depend primarily on [the employee’s] invention, imagination, or talent.” Finally, the test mandated that an employee spend at least eighty percent of his or her time on qualifying work.

Courts found the short test more applicable to creative professionals. In Sherwood v. Washington Post, the court found it was not appropriate to use language from the long test for creative professionals. Under the short test, courts used a two-prong analysis to...

96. Id. § 541.300(a)(1).
97. See id. § 541.602(a).
99. Id.
100. Id.
101. Id.; see also Wage & Hour Op. Ltr., No. FLSA2005-19 (Dep’t of Labor Aug. 2, 2005) (reiterating that the New Regulations were designed to clarify, rather than substantively change, existing law).
103. Id. at 64.
104. Id.
105. Id.
106. Id.
108. The long test required that the result of the employees work depend primarily on the employee’s invention, imagination and talent. The short test requires only that the primary duty be work requiring invention, imagination, or talent. See id. (holding that the reporter was an exempt professional because his primary duties consisted of work requiring invention
determine whether an employee qualified as an exempt creative professional.109 The test required an employee’s compensation be a salary or fee basis of at least $250 per week, and a primary duty consisting of “work requiring invention, imagination, or talent in a recognized field of artistic endeavor.”110

The 2004 regulations eliminated the short and long tests and imposed a standard duties test while raising the minimum salary level to $455 per week.111 Under the standard duties test, the court must focus on the employee’s primary duty in order to determine exempt status.112 The regulations also eliminated the requirement that the employees devote a certain percentage of time to exempt activities.113 Consequently, the 2004 regulations created a simplified way to determine whether reality television workers would qualify as exempt employees.

F. California Legislation and Interpretation

The California Industrial Welfare Commission (“IWC”) is the state agency empowered to formulate regulations governing minimum wage, maximum hours, and overtime pay in California.114 The IWC law incorporated federal professional employee exemptions in its wage orders.115 Wage Order Twelve aims specifically at regulating wages, hours, and working conditions in the motion picture industry, including television film production.116 Similar to federal law, the provisions of the wage order do not apply to persons employed in administrative, executive, or professional capacities.117 The IWC provides a test for determining whether an employee’s duties meet the requirements for an exemption, with the exemptions to be “narrowly construed against employers seeking

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109. See id. at 1478–79.
110. See id. § 600(a) (2006) (setting the FLSA minimum salary basis at $455 per week, which translates into $23,660 per annum).
111. Id. § 541.700(a).
112. Id. § 541.700(b) (advising that employees devote over fifty-percent of their time to exempt duties, but that “time alone, however is not the sole test. . .”).
113. CAL. LAB. CODE § 1173 (West 2003).
115. Id. § 11120(2)(K) (defining “motion picture industry” expansively to include not only motion pictures, but television and theatrical productions including “motion pictures for entertainment, commercial, religious, or education purposes, whether made by film, tape, or otherwise”).
116. Id. § 11120(1)(A).
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To assert them.\(^{118}\) To qualify as exempt under this category, an employee must primarily engage in duties that meet the test for the exemption under FLSA.\(^ {119}\) But unlike federal law, an employee must earn "no less than two times the state minimum wage for full-time employment."\(^ {120}\) Therefore, an employee’s monthly salary must be at least $2,600 for exempt status in California.\(^ {121}\)

There are two other differences between FLSA and California law that make it more difficult for an employer to prove an employee is exempt. First, unlike federal law, California requires an employee to customarily and regularly exercise discretion and independent judgment in performing his or her duties in order to be exempt.\(^ {122}\) Second, "primarily" in California means more than fifty percent of an employee’s time is devoted to nonexempt activities.\(^ {123}\)

III. IMPLICATIONS FOR PENDING CLASS ACTION SUITS

Arguably, applying the creative professional exemption to reality television writers would ultimately fail if litigated in court. While no court has yet ruled on this specific issue, a series of journalism-related cases indicate that a production company cannot successfully assert that its employees are exempt creative professionals.\(^ {124}\) Reality writers’ ability to expertly merge sound and images is due to their extraordinary diligence, intelligence, and accuracy, not to a legally qualitative creative ability. This section will analyze California’s application of exempt status and predict

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\(^{119}\) CAL. CODE REGS. tit. 8, § 11120(1)(a)(1)(e).

\(^{120}\) Id. § 11120(1)(a)(3)(d).

\(^{121}\) See Assemb. 1835, 2006-2007 Reg. Sess. (Ca. 2006) (increasing the minimum wage to $7.50). Therefore, the calculation for the minimum exempt salary per month in California is as follows: $7.50 (minimum wage) x 2 x 40 (hours per week) x 52 (weeks per year) / 12 (months) = $2,600 per month. The average monthly salary of a reality writer is somewhere between $2,400 and $8,000; see also Ho, supra note 6 (discussing weekly salary level on average of $600-$2,000 a week). This indicates that at the lower limits the salary would not even pass the salary basis test under California law, while the upper limit far exceeds the minimum salary basis.

\(^{122}\) CAL. CODE REGS. tit. 8, § 11120(3)(c).

\(^{123}\) CAL. LAB. CODE § 515(e) (West 2003).

\(^{124}\) See generally Reich v. Gateway Press Inc., 13 F.3d 685 (3d Cir. 1994) (concluding that journalists are covered by FLSA and not exempt employees); Dalheim v. KDFM-TV, 918 F.2d 1220 (5th Cir. 1990) (finding that reporters primary duties were not creative); Wang v. Chinese Daily News, Inc., 435 F. Supp. 2d 1042 (C.D. Cal. 2006) (explaining that only a minority of employees perform creative work); Reich v. Newspapers of New Eng., Inc., 834 F. Supp. 530 (D.N.H. 1993) (holding that reporters were not exempt employees).
its effect on *Sharp v. Next Entertainment*\(^{125}\) and *Shriver v. Rocket Science Laboratories, L.L.C.*,\(^{126}\) two recent class action suits filed by reality television writers.

The Fifth Circuit observed that issues involving the professional exemption under the FLSA are “intensely factbound and case specific[,]” which suggests that a summary judgment standard is not appropriate for these cases.\(^{127}\) In proceeding to trial, California law has two requirements that are inherently different from the federal standard. First, the employee must spend more than fifty percent of his or her work time engaging in creative duties.\(^{128}\) Second, the employee must customarily and regularly exercise discretion and independent judgment in performing duties in the learned or creative profession.\(^{129}\) Close scrutiny of these two requirements reveals that the defendants in these class action suits will not prevail.

First, the reality writers allege in the complaint that they spent a large quantity of hours in post-production.\(^{130}\) In *Shriver*, the writers claim they performed “a variety of storytelling functions in the production of reality televisions [sic] series,” including taking story notes that were used later to shape the editing process.\(^{131}\) However, the plaintiffs also emphasized they used “numerous hours of video footage” to create stories.\(^{132}\) The use of numerous hours of footage implies that reality writers were spending a substantial part of their workday cataloguing, as opposed to actually shaping the editing process. Further, Plaintiffs gave a detailed list of tasks performed in postproduction such as editing scenes, splicing dialogue and individual words, adding music, sound effects, and narration.\(^{133}\)

Second, Plaintiffs emphasized their total lack of discretion.\(^{134}\) Plaintiffs stressed that the “storytelling product is reviewed by producers, including network executives who have final approval over content.”\(^{135}\) In order to prevail, Plaintiffs must establish that the editors do more than simply review the Plaintiffs’ work. The plaintiffs must prove that a handful

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127. *Dalheim*, 918 F.2d at 1226.
128. *Id.* § 515(e).
129. *Id.* § 515(a).
131. *Id.*
132. *Id.*
133. *Id.*
134. *Id.*
135. *Id.*
of editors and producers were ultimately responsible for the content of the episodes. This element might prove difficult because before disseminating a final product, it is customary in many professional environments for associates to first review each other’s work. If the writers can prove that management is actually dictating the content of the episode, the work probably will not be exempt.136

A. Establishing a Framework for Analysis

Most viewers are aware that reality television’s success is not due to its authenticity. Unseen reality television editors, producers, and writers have more control over the stories than the onscreen participants do. However, in order for the plaintiffs in Shriver and Sharp to win, the question is whether the job functions of the writers are actually legally creative. The previous sections of this Comment have clarified the statutory scheme of the creative professional and the application of the doctrine. Using the class action complaints as a guidepost for analysis, this part of the Comment delves further into the specific duties of the reality writer, and determines that it does not fit into the described exemption under California law. Since California law encompasses the FLSA,137 jurisprudence established outside of the state is still relevant to understand the individual components of the regulations. The two main differences, discretion and increased primary duty, will receive added emphasis.

The creative professional is one whose primary duty must be “the performance of work requiring invention, imagination, originality or talent....”138 Exactly how do courts define what is inventive, imaginative, original or talented work? Few cases have litigated the issue of whether or not the creative professional is applicable to private sector work environments.139 Nonetheless, a line of cases has developed that finally addresses the issue by examining whether journalists fit within the creative exemption.140 Courts will consider a number of factors in making

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136. See, e.g., Dalheim v. KDFW-TV, 918 F.2d 1220, 1229 (5th Cir. 1990) (holding that the reporters were nonexempt because “their day-to-day work is in large part dictated by management”); Sherwood v. Wash. Post, 871 F. Supp. 1471, 1482 (D.D.C. 1994) (holding that Sherwood was exempt because he “was not a robot run by his editors”).
137. CHEN ET AL., supra note 65, at ¶ 11:707.
138. 29 C.F.R. § 541.302(a) (2006).
140. See Reich v. Gateway Press, Inc., 13 F.3d 685 (3rd Cir. 1994).
their determination of what they consider creative work.\textsuperscript{141} The regulations distinguish creative work as requiring "invention, imagination, originality or talent" as opposed to work which requires "intelligence, diligence and accuracy."\textsuperscript{142} The issue of exemption is fact-sensitive, with no one fact necessarily controlling.\textsuperscript{143} This Comment creates a framework for comparing the analytical guidelines established by courts in journalism cases and applies these standards of invention, imagination, originality or talent to those required of the writers on reality television shows. Finally, this Comment will assess whether the reality writers can perform their activities without dependence on intelligence, diligence, or accuracy. The framework created will help to predict the success of the claims and defenses established by the parties to the pending class action suits.

\textbf{B. Reality Writers Lack the Requisite Invention & Imagination Required by the Regulations}

Imagination and invention are two essential elements that courts look at to determine creativity.\textsuperscript{144} Journalists, like other professionals, fulfill the duty requirements for the creative professional exemption when their primary duty requires invention or imagination.\textsuperscript{145} Since invention is defined as "a product of the imagination[,]"\textsuperscript{146} this concept receives less emphasis from the courts, often being subsumed within the topic of imagination. Due to the implicit assumption that imagination is a naturally occurring byproduct of invention, the courts have not made a meaningful distinction between the two topics. As such, this Comment will not attempt to create a separate category where none exists. Instead, the analysis will focus on imagination, a concept to which the courts have given rigorous attention.\textsuperscript{147} The courts have expanded on the DOL guidelines and interpreted imagination to mean the ability to develop "a fresh angle on a complicated topic."\textsuperscript{148} Journalists are not exempt creative professionals if they only collect, organize, and record information that is routine or already public, or if they do not contribute a unique interpretation or analysis to a news product.\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{141} See 29 C.F.R. §541.302(c).
\textsuperscript{142} Id.
\textsuperscript{143} Dalheim v. KDFW-TV, 918 F.2d 1220, 1226–27 (5th Cir. 1990).
\textsuperscript{144} 29 C.F.R. § 541.302(a).
\textsuperscript{145} 29 C.F.R. § 541.302(d).
\textsuperscript{146} MERRIAM–WEBSTER ONLINE, http://www.m-w.com (last visited Nov. 7, 2006).
\textsuperscript{147} See Reich v. Gateway Press, Inc., 13 F.3d 685 (3d. Cir. 1994).
\textsuperscript{148} Id. at 700.
\textsuperscript{149} See id.
For example, in *Reich v. Gateway Press, Inc.*, the court held that the reporters' work did not require any special imagination "[in] developing an entirely fresh angle on a complicated topic." The reporters' primary duty was to collect information that was already out in the community and simply combine it into a single source. The reporters simply followed press releases, attended meetings, and recorded their findings in an article. The court held that there was no imagination involved because reporters merely took information that was already available and did not develop a new angle.

Arguably, there is imagination involved in the reality writers taking recorded video footage and creating a television show. For example, a reality writer's job involves creating "a beginning, middle, and end, with character development, goals, conflict, and resolution." Scripted television and reality series both must have "sympathetic characters, interesting settings, and a sequence of events that inspires curiosity." Reality writers do more than attend press releases and record the events in an accurate manner. Rather, reality writers create back-stories, emotional journeys, and dynamic progressions for their characters. The reality writer's job is more than passively collecting information; instead, they have an active involvement in the creation of an episode to develop a story. The process might actually involve distributing a synopsis and proposed story beat to the shooting crew in order to collect all the required subtleties of the narrative. This active involvement is more than simply attending a press release.

Based on the above description, a reality writer's duties are creative through characters, arcs, emotions, and active involvement in plot. Nevertheless, further review reveals that the process merely involves taking bits and pieces of recorded footage and combining them into a single source. This process of editing is no different from the facts presented in

150. *Id.*
151. *Id.*
152. *Id.*
155. *Id.*
156. See *id.*
158. See *id.*
159. *Id.*
160. See *id.*
Gateway Press where the court held the work was not imaginative because the reporters’ primary duty was to collect information that was already out in the community and combine it in a single source.161 Although reality writers are creating traditional dramatic narratives, this creative process is distinguishable from writing for a scripted television drama. "The main component in writing" for reality television is throwing away extra footage.162 Rather than developing their own lines, reality writers catalogue footage, which is similar to facts “already out in the community,” to find essential quotes and images.163 Reality writers then take their words, interviews and quotes and combine the elements into a single thirty-minute television program. This process is the same as combining lunch menus and press releases into a single article. Moreover, even assuming that a reality writer’s job involves imagination, there is still the problem of the primary duty requirement.

1. Reality Writers’ Primary Duty Will Fail California’s Stricter Test

Under California law, courts are required to determine whether more than fifty percent of an employee’s time is devoted to non-exempt activities.164 In considering primary duty, courts must remember that there are employees who work in a creative environment, but whose duties remain functional in nature.165 An illustration of the stringent requirement for primary duty is in Dalheim v. KDFW-TV.166 Applying the primary duty standard under FLSA, Dalheim held that news reporters are unable to meet even the lower standard.167 In this case, while reporters did occasionally do creative work, under Dalheim, that work must be more than simply from “time-to-time.”168 Since California’s primary duty requirement is even more stringent than that which the Fifth Circuit applied in Dalheim, it is unlikely that the reality writers would be able to fulfill California’s requirement.

162. Ho, supra note 6 (“In Reality TV world, writers have to phrase out key quotes and moments as opposed to scripting actual lines.”).
163. Compare Gateway Press, 13 F.3d at 700 (discussing duties of newspaper writers), with Ho, supra note 6 (discussing duties of reality television writers).
164. CAL. LAB. CODE § 515(e) (West 2003).
165. Dalheim v. KDFW-TV, 918 F.2d 1220, 1229 (5th Cir. 1990).
166. See id. at 1228–29.
167. See id. at 1229.
168. See id.
REALITY CHECK FOR PRODUCTION COMPANIES

Although a reality writer is responsible for creating emotions and articulating a story, a majority of the writers’ time is spent sorting and “throwing away” video footage.\(^{169}\) For example, to generate a thirty-minute episode, reality writers might have to catalogue about six days worth of footage.\(^{170}\) Often, writers on reality television may even have to go through dozens of tapes simply to find one specific word.\(^{171}\) In light of the primary duty requirement, using one’s imagination does not appear to take up more than fifty percent of a reality writer’s time. Similar to Gateway Press, where the court held that the reporters’ primary duty was to collect information that was already public and combine it into a single source,\(^{172}\) reality writers combine footage to make a single episode.\(^{173}\) Moreover, even if the reality writers’ job function involves imagination, they do not spend most of their time on imaginative tasks but, instead on searching for and cataloguing specific scenes.\(^{174}\) For these reasons, it is unlikely that a court would find that writers on reality shows satisfy the primary duty requirement.

C. Reality Writers Lack Originality Required by the Regulations

Originality is another essential element that courts look at to determine creativity.\(^{175}\) Current regulations include originality as part of assessing whether an employee’s primary duty requires creativity.\(^{176}\) While the old regulations contained no originality requirement,\(^{177}\) courts nonetheless considered originality as a factor in determining creativity.\(^{178}\) Courts interpret originality as the capacity to think or act independently.\(^{179}\)

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169. Ho, supra note 6.
173. See Rupel, supra note 170.
174. See id.
175. 29 C.F.R. § 541.302(a) (2006).
176. See id.
177. Compare Sherwood v. Wash. Post, 871 F. Supp. 1471, 1479 (D.D.C. 1994) (citing to the old regulations), with id. (including originality as part of the current regulations.).
179. See Wang v. Chinese Daily News, Inc., 435 F. Supp. 2d 1042, 1052 (C.D. Cal. 2006) (“Reporters also do not qualify as exempt creative professionals if their work product is subject to substantial control by the employer.”).
Thus, a court does not consider an employee whose work product is subject to substantial control by the employer to be acting or thinking independently, and therefore his or her work lacks legally quantifiable originality.180 In California, the regulations go even further and require that the employee "customarily and regularly exercises discretion and independent judgment in the performance of duties."181

For example, in Dalheim v. KDFW-TV, the court held that because management heavily dictated the news reporters’ duties, their work was not original and thus not exempt under FLSA.182 Some of the findings of fact revealed that the reporters received "the story that the station intend[ed] they cover, what they [were] expected to shoot, and the intended angle or focus of the story."183 The court found that because the reporters lacked the ability to control their own work product, their work was not original.184 In comparison, in Sherwood v. Washington Post the court found that the reporter’s duties did require a degree of originality.185 It was critical to the court’s ultimate finding that Sherwood “was not a robot run by his editors.”186 The court held that because his job required him to “maintain a wide network of sources, write engaging, imaginative prose, and produce stories containing thoughtful analysis of complex issues[,]” Sherwood’s work was not subject to substantial control by management but, rather was original in character.187

Reality television writers will be unable to prove their work is original in character because of the constant input from their supervisors.188 These writers are more like robots because executives control every aspect of the writers work—from the making of a scene to the completion of an episode.189 For instance, a writer needs to discuss the multiple ways to end a particular scene with a story producer as opposed to making a decision on his or her own.190 Usually, reality writers work in teams to shape an episode; afterwards their work is subject to substantial input from executive

180. See id.
182. Dalheim v. KDFW-TV, 918 F.2d 1220, 1229 (5th Cir. 1990).
183. Id.
184. See id.
185. See Sherwood, 871 F. Supp. at 1482 (“His job required him to originate his own story ideas . . . ”).
186. Id.
187. Id.
188. See Stradel, supra note 154.
189. See Bartsch, supra note 10.
190. See id.
and network screenings. An executive producer watches the writer’s cut and then provides notes that can eradicate weeks worth of work. This level of supervision is similar to Dalheim, where the station simply assigned to reporters the story they needed to cover. Unlike Sherwood, who worked with sources, wrote imaginative prose, and produced thoughtful analysis of complex issues, reality television writers are forced literally to “pen the executive producer’s inspired, proposed story.”

If the reality writers in Shriver and Sharp can effectively demonstrate this seeming lack of discretion, this evidence will go a long way toward meeting their burden of proof on this element. Furthermore, since California requires that employees who work in a professional capacity use discretion and independent judgment in the performance of their duties, it is unlikely that employers can demonstrate that reality writers meet this more stringent application. Due to the forceful direction of an executive producer’s insight, it is likely that in Shriver and Sharp a court will find that the primary duty of a reality writer does not requires originality.

D. Reality Writers Lack Talent Required by the Regulations

Talent is another essential element included in the current regulations, and courts look to talent in determining whether an employee’s primary duty requires creativity. Talent is the opposite of general ability. The exercise of talent requires an advanced skill or expertise. An exempt employee’s primary duty must not consist of routine or standard tasks.

For example, in Gateway Press, the court held that the employees’ primary duty consisted of routine labor that only required a general ability and was therefore lacking a unique talent. In that case, the Secretary of Labor successfully argued that FLSA covered journalists; thus, they were
not exempt employees.\textsuperscript{203} Gateway Press was a small newspaper with a local orientation and outlook.\textsuperscript{204} As a result, the reporters' job duties did not require a "unique talent in finding informants or sources that may give access to difficult-to-obtain information."\textsuperscript{205} In the court's view, while the reporters might have occasionally performed creative work, their primary duty was "routine fact gathering, work that could be done with 'general manual or intellectual ability and training.'\textsuperscript{206} Nevertheless, some gathering of facts could constitute exempt work.\textsuperscript{207} The Gateway Press court referred to several specific jobs where fact gathering might be exempt, such as "an investigative journalist for the Philadelphia Inquirer or Washington Post, or a bureau chief for the New York Times."\textsuperscript{208} The key element in the holding of Gateway is that routine fact gathering does not require unique talent.\textsuperscript{209}

Unlike investigative journalism, reality television writing merely requires a general ability. The role of a reality writer is to find a way to fill in the missing gaps in a story.\textsuperscript{210} As explained by a career writer for reality television, filling in the missing gaps involves searching for "footage that may have happened days or weeks apart that are [sic] about the same topic."\textsuperscript{211} This aspect of reality writing is similar to the duties of the nonexempt employees in Gateway Press whose routine fact gathering did not give them access to difficult-to-obtain information.\textsuperscript{212} The reality writers' work does not involve difficult-to-obtain-information, but consists of collecting information from recorded footage.\textsuperscript{213}

Additionally, work performed on a reality show is not similar to that performed by an investigative journalist due to the lack of complexity involved in a reality writer's job duties. For example, a typical writer on a reality show will gather facts from recorded footage to create simple story lines, such as the break-up of an end-of-the-summer romance.\textsuperscript{214} One example from a stereotypical reality show involves a writer who uses interview bites and a visual to show the main character solemnly taking his

\textsuperscript{203} Id. at 700.
\textsuperscript{204} Id. at 688.
\textsuperscript{205} Gateway Press, Inc., 13 F.3d at 700.
\textsuperscript{206} Id.
\textsuperscript{207} Id.
\textsuperscript{208} Id.
\textsuperscript{209} Id.
\textsuperscript{210} Rupel, supra note 170.
\textsuperscript{211} Id.
\textsuperscript{212} See Gateway Press, 13 F.3d at 700.
\textsuperscript{213} See Rupel supra note 170.
\textsuperscript{214} Id.
Generating an episode about teenage puppy love only requires using general manual or intellectual ability; it does not require complex investigation. Due to inane fact gathering, the reality writer’s primary duty is more similar to work performed by a small local newspaper affiliate, like the employees in Gateway Press, than work performed by “an investigative journalist for the Philadelphia Inquirer or Washington Post, or a bureau chief for the New York Times.”

To illustrate, Sherwood v. Washington Post is a case that actually involved a prestigious paper, The Washington Post. The court in that case agreed with the Gateway Press holding, finding that fact gathering for larger papers involved talent. In Sherwood, the court compared the reporting jobs at The Washington Post with those at Gateway Press. The court agreed with Gateway Press, insofar as it held that “local, weekly newspaper reporters, whose primary duties consisted of gathering facts for publications such as school lunch menus and wedding announcements,” did not meet the requirements of the creative professional exemption. However, the reporting job at The Washington Post required “talent” that was not required at the hypothetical smaller local paper. Reporters covered multifaceted topics “such as complex D.C. politics, Virginia politics, and vice presidential candidates, not school lunch menus and church news.”

Ultimately, the court found that the job of a Washington Post reporter was a “prestigious, competitive job among journalists.” Talent seems to encompass more than just skill beyond a general ability. Talent, in a somewhat paradoxical twist, incorporates the idea that the reputation of the newspaper dictates the likelihood that the employees themselves are talented. Thus, it seems the higher the prestige of the paper, the greater the probability that the paper’s employees are talented and creative professionals. Conversely, the smaller and less important the paper, the
less likely it is that the paper’s employees are talented.

The primary duty of a reality writer is not similar to that of a Washington Post reporter. Reality writers take recorded footage and shape issues to engage the viewer’s empathy, create tension, and provide turning points in the arc of a show’s characters.\(^\text{224}\) Further, industry veterans such as talent agent Jerry Katzman, claim reality writing requires talent.\(^\text{225}\) Alternatively, the job duties of a reality writer are more similar to writing about school lunch menus and wedding announcements than covering D.C. politics. On a reality program, the writer’s talent involves searching through footage to ensure that they actually have the shot they want, such as “the shot of Dane vomiting on Krystal . . . and if so, [that] it’s vomit and not just spit, and that it’s Krystal and not Madison."\(^\text{226}\) This is in sharp contrast to investigating the intricacies of the running platform for a D.C. mayoral candidate. If talent consists of covering complex topics, then scripting shots of a main character vomiting does not require much talent. Further, if the reputation of the employer dictates the likelihood that its employees themselves are talented, then reality writing is not at the top of the totem-pole. “In the writing culture of Hollywood, the top level is movie screenwriting, the middle is TV, the bottom is reality.”\(^\text{227}\) Therefore, it is very unlikely that a court would find that a reality writer’s job function involves talent, which is an essential step in determining whether an employee satisfies the creative professional’s exemption.

E. Reality Writers’ Work Depends Primarily on Intelligence, Diligence and Accuracy

Another significant element that courts use to determine whether an employee’s work is creative is “intelligence, diligence and accuracy.”\(^\text{228}\) The regulations define creative work as requiring “invention, imagination, originality or talent.”\(^\text{229}\) Courts interpret “intelligence, diligence and accuracy” as any variety of work that is dependent on the employee being “consistent and repetitive.”\(^\text{230}\) It is also important that a court “distinguish

\(^{224}\) See Bartsch, supra note 10.
\(^{225}\) See, e.g., Ho, supra note 6.
\(^{226}\) Stradel, supra note 154.
\(^{229}\) 29 C.F.R. § 541.302(b).
between those persons whose work is creative in nature from those who work in a medium capable of bearing creative expression, but whose duties are nevertheless functional in nature.\footnote{231} Courts recognize that the majority of reporters are engaged in "work which depends primarily on intelligence, diligence, and accuracy."\footnote{232} The perception that "only a minority of reporters engage in work depending on invention, imagination, and talent" establishes a presumption that reporters are typically uncreative.\footnote{233}

For example, in \textit{Dalheim v. KDFW-TV}, the Fifth Circuit held that the employees' primary duties did not consist of creative work, but instead involved "diligence and intelligence."\footnote{234} KDFW-TV claimed that the daily responsibilities of their employees were creative because the reporters "meld[ed] language and visual images into an informative and memorable presentation."\footnote{235} The Fifth Circuit disagreed and found that the development of memorable presentations comprised of sound and pictures reflected the reporter's dependence on accuracy, diligence and intelligence.\footnote{236}

The court reviewed the trial court's determinations and inferences from fact (i.e. that a reporter's work is uncreative) only for clear error, and concluded that the trial court did not err in holding that the reporters were nonexempt professionals.\footnote{237} The trial court concluded that melding sound and pictures did not equate to creativity.\footnote{238} The reporters' use of special effects and graphics did not change the underlying implication that this type of work only requires "intelligence, diligence and accuracy."\footnote{239} The television station argued that the use of graphics in a "consistent and repetitive" manner was necessary for viewers to be comfortable with watching the program.\footnote{240} Under \textit{Dalheim}, it is not the finished product that courts consider in their determination of creativity. It is the employees' underlying task to which a court would look to determine whether their

\begin{footnotes}
\item[231] Dalheim, 918 F.2d at 1229.
\item[233] Id.
\item[234] Dalheim, 918 F.2d at 1229.
\item[235] Id. at 1228–29.
\item[236] Id. at 1229.
\item[237] Id.; see Cavanaugh, supra note 76, at 298 (noting that a not clearly erroneous finding is not dispositive of the issues raised in this case—"[i]ts decision, however, was hardly a ringing endorsement of the district court's ruling below").
\item[238] Dalheim, 918 F.2d at 1229.
\item[239] Dalheim v. KDFW–TV, 706 F. Supp. 493, 502 (N.D. Tex, 1988) aff'd 918 F.2d 1220 (5th Cir. 1990) (rejecting the argument that "use of special effects or graphics" has any effect on the fact that reporters are directed by management).
\item[240] Id. ( "[G]raphics are...used...where...there are several points or statements which the viewer needs to keep in mind simultaneously.").
\end{footnotes}
duties are functional in nature.  

Similarly, writers on reality television do not utilize creativity in their work, but instead, create episodes using “intelligence, diligence and accuracy.” The role of a reality writer is to create a compelling story for an episode using recorded footage.  

The duties of both news reporters and reality writers are similarly repetitive in nature. In particular, one technique reality writers use to make improvements to a story is frankenbyting. This technique involves a process of selective editing, creating the illusion that participants on reality shows said things that they never actually said. 

In order to create these “improvements,” reality writers have to watch tapes, find the right word, cut the scenes together and check to make sure the word matches with the rest of the dialogue.  

Frankenbyting does not require creativity, but involves diligence and accuracy in order to create a finished product. The process of frankenbyting is functional in nature because reality writers must listen to numerous hours of interviews just to find one specific word. 

Further, just as reporters meld sound and picture in a way that an audience can understand, frankenbyting requires accuracy and diligence in order to maintain the continuity of the footage with the audio that came from a different scene.

Alternatively, in Reich v. Newspapers of New England, the court held that a photojournalist’s duties lacked the requisite imagination, invention or talent because the reporter spent more than fifty-percent of his time on standardized work. Acknowledging that there are creative aspects to photojournalism, the reporter admitted that the majority of his work was run-of-the-mill and standardized. The reporter attributed his lack of creativity to the absence of a personal statement in his work. The court agreed that a photojournalist’s work is not creative art because they “try to photograph reality, as it happens, without embellishment, without taking sides.”

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241. Dalheim, 918 F.2d at 1229.
242. Rupel, supra note 170.
244. Id.
245. Frankenbyting, supra note 171.
246. Id.
247. Id.
249. Id.
250. Id.
251. Id.
statement would distinguish creative work from work that depends on intelligence, diligence and accuracy.

Unlike reporters, photography without embellishment is exactly the opposite of what writers on reality shows do. The frankenbyte is the most potent tool reality writers possess for manipulating a viewer's perception of reality. A frankenbyte allows writers of reality shows to manufacture conflicts, characters, and other elements of the plot by extracting only interesting elements from the recorded footage. Generally, this type of work is more similar to a personal statement because it allows writers on reality television to insert their own interpretation of events and embellish on the reality of the situation.

For example, on America's Next Top Model, a dilemma faced the writers: how do you make a show interesting when you have a closed universe of two-dimensional archetypes of pretty-but-dumb girls? To address this dilemma, the writers embellished on reality by creating religious confrontations. More specifically, by combining a multitude of interviews and footage, the reality writers used salient outtakes to create a story driven by conflict between Christians and Atheists. Thus, unlike the photojournalist, the reality writers did more than merely combine footage as it happens without embellishment or taking sides.

Nevertheless, this type of work is usually not that similar to creating a personal statement because the ultimate goal in frankenbyting is often to approximate the missing scene, not to create a new one. Reality writers often approximate scenes in order to fill missing footage when something occurs off camera. For example, in one show, the main character ended his relationship with his girlfriend off camera. Accordingly, the reality writers had to explain what happened by melding sound and interview techniques to create the missing scene. Sorting through hours of footage to create drama between two polarized groups is ultimately not that different than melding language and visual images to create a memorable

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253. See id.
255. Id.
256. Id.
257. Rupel, supra note 170.
258. Id.
259. Id.
260. Id.
presentation, as the KDFW-TV reporters did.\footnote{261}

Since creating an interesting reality show can be difficult, writers on reality programs must be incredibly skillful, intelligent and diligent. In order to create a coherent episode, the writer must sort through hours of interviews to find scenes that have similar emotional beats and voice tone, and shape the material into a new topic.\footnote{262} For example, in order to depict accurately an emotional break-up, reality writers must be diligent in finding footage depicting the same angry body language or similar looks of frustration.\footnote{263}

In some situations, courts recognized that only a minority of employees perform creative work, while the majority is engaged in work requiring intelligence, diligence, and accuracy.\footnote{264} A court could find that reality writers are unable to overcome their burden by proving they perform in a creative work environment. First, courts often hold that melding sound and images is not necessarily creative because of the routine nature in which the task is completed.\footnote{265} Second, the fact that reality writers are embellishing storylines is not dispositive because their actions can also be interpreted as creating scenes to approximate the missing ones.\footnote{266} Finally, even if writers are embellishing on reality, their primary duty involves watching and cataloguing numerous hours of footage, merely to find a missing word.\footnote{267} This type of work requires intelligence, diligence and accuracy rather than creative genius. Nevertheless, while reality television writers are not creative in the eyes of the law, they deserve recognition for the skill it takes to produce compelling narratives.

IV. FUTURE COMPENSATION ARRANGEMENTS

This Comment predicts that in the two pending class action suits, production companies will be liable to reality writers for overtime compensation because employers improperly classified them as exempt creative professionals. The success of these lawsuits might encourage production companies to look for alternatives to simply paying overtime to their employees. One possible solution is to allow the writers on the reality shows to unionize under the WGA. Hello Doggie, the production company

\footnote{261}{See Dalheim, 918 F.2d at 1229.} \footnote{262}{Rupel, supra note 170.} \footnote{263}{Id.} \footnote{264}{See Wang v. Chinese Daily News, Inc., 435 F. Supp. 2d 1042, 1052 (C.D. Cal. 2006).} \footnote{265}{Dalheim, 918 F.2d at 1229.} \footnote{266}{See Rupel, supra note 170.} \footnote{267}{Frankenbyting, supra note 171.}

While The Daily Show is not a soap-opera styled reality program, it does involve a similar format. Researchers scanning major newspapers create guidelines for the show and then give possible topics to the writers.\footnote{269}{Comedy Central, The Daily Show, http://www.comedycentral.com/shows/the_daily_show/about_the_show.jhtml (last visited Apr. 26, 2007).} After the writers meet to discuss headline material for the lead news segment, the actors perform the material in a variety-style format.\footnote{270}{Id.} The WGA considers the unionization of the writers on The Daily Show to be a major victory for reality writers.\footnote{271}{Id.} The writers on The Daily Show will see significant increases in their compensation, in line with the compensation received by writers on other late night comedy variety shows.\footnote{272}{Id.} Further, writers will be paid residuals for additional runs of the program and for foreign broadcasts.\footnote{273}{Id.} A provision giving writers added coverage from the Writers Guild-Industry Health Fund is included in the agreement, as well as pension benefits.\footnote{274}{Id.} While many writers for reality shows consider unionization the most viable option in order to gain the benefits they seek, the issue still remains as to whether production companies will accept unionization as a solution.  

There is a generalized belief in the entrainment industry that collective bargaining can ward off wage and hour lawsuits. However, in unionized settings, while workers cannot bring certain types of civil claims, courts have allowed workers to maintain wage and hour lawsuits outside the established grievance and arbitration system.\footnote{275}{Valles v. Ivy Hill Corp., 410 F.3d 1071, 1076 (9th Cir. 2005) (“[T]he [Supreme] Court has sought to preserve state authority in areas involving minimum labor standards.”).} Wage and hour obligations reflect a minimum standard set by law regardless of the collective bargaining agreement.\footnote{276}{See id. (recognizing that parties cannot use a collective bargaining agreement to waive negotiable state rights conferred on employees by state law).}  

Collective bargaining does have attractive aspects even if employees may still bring lawsuits under the collective bargaining agreements. There
are three elements that must be present for a collective bargaining agreement to be valid: (1) the minimum wages, hours, and working conditions for the employee; (2) a regular rate of pay that is at least thirty-percent above the state minimum wage; and (3) "premium wage rates" for all overtime hours worked. Essentially, while employers must still pay a straight wage that is thirty-percent higher than the state minimum wage, they do not have to pay time and one-half for all overtime, as is required under state law.\textsuperscript{277} Thus, a collective bargaining agreement between reality writers and production companies could be a viable arrangement. Writers of reality programming could receive many of the benefits they covet, such as pension and health care, while production companies could pay a straight wage to their employees. Such a straight wage would be significantly less than the time and one-half required without such a collective bargaining agreement.

While a collective bargaining arrangement might work for the WGA, it might not work for all parties involved. If the guild covered reality writers, such coverage would result in writing credits.\textsuperscript{278} The pending wage and hour lawsuits are such contested issues for the entertainment industry because giving credit to reality writers could destroy the illusion that reality television portrays situations that naturally happen.\textsuperscript{279} One executive for a production company conceded that "reality show producers definitely do not want to see a 'written by' credit on their shows. It is important that people think it's real."\textsuperscript{280} This same executive said that a better solution would be to make a separate agreement to increase pay and health insurance, but does not want reality writers covered by a union contract.\textsuperscript{281}

Once guild contracts cover writers on reality television, the line between reality and scripted television writers becomes blurred. Do contestants on reality shows become members of the Screen Actors Guild? And if everyone is a member, will reality shows still be much more profitable? Producers are reluctant to create a slippery slope where, once reality writers have a guild contract, every one involved in creating a reality show will aspire to have a union contract. For these reasons, producers do not want to see a collective bargaining agreement, and guild members want reality shows considered "scripted."\textsuperscript{282}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[	extsuperscript{277}] CAL. CODE REGS. tit. 8, § 11120(3)(a)(1)(2002).
\item[	extsuperscript{278}] See Booth, supra note 227.
\item[	extsuperscript{279}] Id.
\item[	extsuperscript{280}] Id.
\item[	extsuperscript{281}] See id.
\item[	extsuperscript{282}] See id.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
This leads to both sides promulgating arguments that are entirely opposite from their stated position throughout this Comment. For example, in order to get reality writers covered under guild contracts, the WGA will need to claim there is a lot of creativity going on behind the scenes, including copious amounts of typing and manipulation. Further, the producers in this stage of argument will claim "writers on reality are not really writing in the traditional sense. There is no script. What they are doing is shaping the shows, which is different." What is clear is that neither executives nor reality writers want to declare their position in this initial class action lawsuit for fear that an opposing party in a future lawsuit will use it against them.

V. CONCLUSION

This Comment demonstrates that attempts to apply the creative professional exemption to writers on reality television will ultimately fail in the two pending class action suits. A reality writer's ability to blend sound and images masterfully might be creative, but that ability is due to their extraordinary diligence, intelligence, and accuracy. A reality writer's performance of his or her primary job duties does not require invention, imagination, originality or talent as defined and explained by court decisions discussing the requirements for a creative professional. Ironically, in order to receive overtime pay, the law requires that reality writers perform work that is not creative. Alternatively, if reality writer's work is creative, they are designated as salaried employees, and not entitled to overtime compensation.

283. Compare id. (stating that the WGA asserts that reality writers are creative professionals) with Shriver v. Rocket Sci. Labs, L.L.C., No. BC338746 (Cal. Super. Ct. L.A. County filed Aug. 23, 2005) (alleging that the reality writers are not sufficiently creative to be exempt from overtime pay).
284. See Booth, supra note 227.
285. Id. (stating that, while lawsuits are pending, it is nearly impossible to get an executive or production company to comment on the high demand for unionization. Specifically, "[t]he executives decline to comment," said Todd Beck, a spokesman for Bunin-Murray, the progenitors of reality shows including "The Simple Life" and "The Real World." "They don't want to talk about it at this time," said Pam Gollum, spokeswoman for Nash Entertainment, producers of "Meet My Folks" and "For Love or Money").
287. See id.
This Comment establishes that reality writers should be entitled to overtime pay because their work lacks legally sufficient creative character. Thus, this Comment suggests that, although production companies are reluctant to work with unionized writers, it might be a smarter option to pursue a collective bargaining agreement than to be forced to pay costly overtime compensation.

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