

Nonfiction television writer speaks about the WGA strike: “We need to come together and take back the power of filmmaking”

Elliott Murtagh, Marc Wells

12 May 2023

The WWSW recently spoke to a nonfiction writer, who belongs to a section of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) that the union has not called out on strike. The WGA officialdom has decided not to include these writers in the Minimum Basic Agreement (MBA) demands and negotiations. We spoke about the current strike, artistic creativity and broader social issues.

WWSW: *Some of our readers may not be familiar with nonfiction writing for television and film. Can you explain what it is?*

Nonfiction writer: I work in nonfiction, and nonfiction basically comprises reality TV, docuseries, documentaries and true crime. The networks, studios and conglomerates have unfortunately referred to the nonfiction genre as “unscripted.” This is a misnomer intentionally used to claim the productions have no writers to prevent us, actual writers, from being covered under the WGA’s Minimum Basic Agreement contract.

The writing and scripted elements are done in both pre- and post-production. It is just not done in traditional screenplay format, as the intention of the nonfiction genre is to use reality and raw footage to tell a story.

Scenes, dialogue, narration, interview scripts and outlines, among many other elements throughout the nonfiction production process, are written and composed to tell a story that’s intended to be portrayed in a factual or truthful manner.

These conglomerates are trying to get as much of the profits as they can, while exploiting the writers as much as they can to reap these gains. When you see the salaries that some of these CEOs are making, and you see the small percentage of residuals that these writers are asking for, it’s nothing. It’s pennies compared to what these guys are making. It’s absurd. It’s just complete greed.

In nonfiction it’s a constant race to the bottom. Everyone’s hyper-competitive and rates constantly go down. I think in our field, the writer-producers were maybe making more in 2007 than they are now.

WWSW: *Most reality TV writers are not organized through the WGA, right?*

Nonfiction writer: Yes, and it’s such an odd thing because documentary television and documentary films are covered under the MBA.

In 2007, the Writers Guild was trying to get reality TV writers covered by the MBA contract, but currently, we’re basically being

steered down a path that seemingly shifts us away from this master agreement.

WWSW: *What you were saying about reality TV and documentaries being able to expose reality—social reality, in particular—is important. During the 100-day strike in 2007-2008 strike, there was the widespread emergence of unscripted material that was later used as the basis for the production of many very poor reality shows.*

Nonfiction writer: Unfortunately, there are some less than stellar—some would say trashy—reality shows that exist. It doesn’t provide as much value as something that we need as a society and that we want from the arts.

The conglomerates thoroughly exploit us and churn out an unlimited amount of material. Just throw mud against a wall and see if it sticks is the strategy. It leads to this kind of show just based around entertainment, sometimes sensationalism, which doesn’t provide a net benefit for society. They try to figure out an algorithm for what they think will get the most money in return. It’s just this constant cycle. Nonfiction is particularly crazy because it’s unrestrained.

But it’s still a lot of work to put these shows together, so I don’t want to degrade any of the writers because you have to put in a lot of creative effort to actually compose these shows.

The crux of it is that there’s a lack of artistic independence, so that people could be free to create what they would want to create. These studios keep siphoning power and money to themselves so that they get more and more control.

You can just see that they’re just casting this big net and trying to get viewers. It does devalue the artistic process and the capacity to explore certain ideas because it becomes this big machine. You can see the same thing going on in the scripted world as well.

WWSW: *If you did have artistic freedom in your area of work, what types of shows would you be interested in working on?*

Nonfiction writer: That’s a good question. There’s so much potential for the nonfiction genre and for writing and telling stories about people. It could be an important way, on a variety of levels, to expose a day in the life of an individual who might be trying to accomplish something amazing who is not even seen right now.

Or somebody who’s trying to challenge the status quo. Films, television, documentaries and reality shows about labor or about unions or about anything like that, or anything that can get people

to think about the working class.

But you don't really see that. There's no way that the stranglehold that these studios have would allow that because they're not going to fund programming that's going to challenge themselves. That's why we need to come together and take back some of the power of filmmaking.

WSWS: We see this struggle as not only against the corporations, but also against the trade union bureaucracy who consistently sell workers out. If WGA workers are talking about so many unresolved issues, they didn't just come out of the blue in 2023. Our movement calls on workers to form independent and democratically controlled rank-and-file committees to take power out of the hands of the union officials and fight for what workers actually need, not what corporations say is affordable. What you think about this?

Nonfiction writer: I completely agree on the rank-and-file committee issue.

Something that we have to be very cautious of is that the union leadership has learned to adapt with a veneer of progressivism and militancy while maintaining control in the hands of certain bureaucrats and leaders at the top. We've seen the way that these unions function is very top down.

I think it's vital that the workers try to have some say in this, in their own organizing, in their own workplace and their own strategy of building power and elevating the artistic value of their work. Everyone should have a say. There should be an overwhelming amount of democratic input in this process and the process of negotiations.

People increasingly realize they have no control, essentially, over their lives and over what's going on. No control, in many respects, in terms of creativity, in terms of artistic ability, in terms of being able to survive, pay their rent, pay their mortgage, feed their children.

I think the strike right now is super-important. I hope that the strike builds this consciousness—this need to have more of a direct say in things that are going on, to think critically, to ask questions and get involved. I think a lot of times these unions have an infrastructure that's been built up for so long.

I think it's not a way to effectively fight for change and transform the system. We need to take back some of the power of Hollywood. It's important that people have these kinds of groups where they can communicate together and try to actually have a say and help affect change that way.

In France you see the major protests going on there. I agree about the whole international approach. Hopefully, we can build the kind of infrastructure to do that.

WSWS: In our recent May Day rally, speeches focused on the interconnected processes of the rapid growth of the international class struggle on one hand and the reckless and escalating US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine on the other. What do you think about this dangerous and intensifying drive to world war? How do you think writers view this situation more broadly?

Nonfiction writer: I think writers are very much attuned to the horrors of war. Obviously, no one wants a nuclear war. People in general, but I think particularly the writers, everyone in the entertainment industry, are against that. We understand the

importance of preventing that at all costs.

I think people can see at this point that there is provocative and provoked aggression coming from the US towards Russia. I think that no one wants that. This isn't like the Iraq war. I think they were somehow able to build up this pro-war effort back then.

WSWS: The WGA strike is a lot more than just a strike. There are a lot of questions that it raises because it's happening at a very particular historic moment, when there's a convergence of class conflicts and it has the possibility of heading towards a very serious class confrontation.

Nonfiction writer: I agree. I think that we are at a pivotal moment in time where everything is erupting at once. People are becoming more aware of these contradictions and these issues, and everything has just come to a head. People see—and are calling out—that we're spending billions of dollars sending military weapons to Ukraine while there are homeless encampments on the street and infrastructure is collapsing at home.

Hollywood is essentially making shows about the rich and the wealthy, while vaguely touching on these larger issues, but in a way that's not really challenging.

You definitely don't see a lot of nonfiction work about it, which I think is probably the most important because that work shows real people experiencing this in real time and also could show the capacity for how things could change in real time.

I hope that a turn toward class questions provokes more of a realization of the necessity for nonfiction programming to discuss these issues. Again, it runs into the issue of who's in charge of the distribution of these films, who's funding them.

I think filmmaking is super-important. It's capable of showing you what's possible, it's capable of showing you what other people are experiencing, it's capable of putting you in someone else's shoes. We need to peel back the curtain and see what's going on. But to do that, we might have to change the system, change how things operate and change that from within, without and by whatever means we can.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact