

Workers in Canadian factual TV are not ‘living the dream’

Most people working in Canada’s factual TV industry put in long hours, have little employment security and virtually no safety net. These were some of the troubling findings of a survey of 328 workers conducted online between May and July 2013.

Canada’s factual TV industry has mushroomed over the last decade, bringing shows such as Amazing Race Canada, Come Dine with Me Canada, Property Brothers and Million Dollar Neighbourhood to Canadian viewers.

“I hope I don’t lose my job for filling out this form.”

The growth and success of the industry has depended upon hundreds of skilled and committed workers who often toil in difficult and even unsafe conditions with no voice to make change. Existing union contracts do not cover independent unscripted television production and the vast majority of the workers do not belong to a union.

The survey results draw a picture of a workforce that sacrifices personal lives and, in some cases, well-being to deliver Canadian television to our screens. Respondents tell the story of a fractured industry in which some people are able to do the work they want to do and get well paid well for it while many others are barely scraping by.

“There is nothing to protect workers in factual TV. Exploitation is common and labour laws are commonly broken. Any worker who dares to complain about working conditions and other labour matters rightly fears blacklisting in the entire industry.”

“Factual TV employees need better access to the safety nets in place to help Canadians in more stable work. I know people who have done very well for themselves and others who can’t even afford to go to the dentist or pay for medications.”

Who are Canada's factual TV workers?

Three-quarters of those who answered the survey have worked in the industry for more than six years; 86% usually work in Toronto. Some two-thirds (65%) are between the ages of 30 and 49; 44% identified as women and 11% as people of colour.

"Days are far too long and far too random. Makes it almost impossible to maintain personal relationships with family and friends."

Two-thirds, or 66%, of the respondents reported working as freelancers. Only 30% are considered employees, with access to benefits such as Employment Insurance, employer contributions to the Canada Pension Plan and paid sick leave. A large majority, 69%, are not members of a union or professional association.

What are their working conditions?

Nearly 60% said they worked at least 45 hours per week, compared to the Canadian average of 36.6 hours per week (HRSDC). One-fifth of the respondents said they worked 10 hours per day in their last or current job. Some 30% report that they often don't get 12 hours off between the end of one shift and the start of the next; a similar number reports that they often don't get 2 consecutive days off per week. Half of the workers are often expected to work nights and/or weekends with no notice. Meanwhile, 40% report having been told to take unpaid days off with little or no notice.

But while the work is intense when it is available, workers also face lean months of the year – generally in winter – when there is little work.

"I typically only have full-time work four to five months out of the year, and have barely been able to get by."

More than one-third (35%) were not working at the time of the survey. Of those, only 11% were receiving Employment Insurance benefits. More than 80% of those not working reported they had no replacement income.

Nearly one-third (31%) report working in situations that were unsafe, while 37% report witnessing situations that were unsafe for others. Examples of unsafe conditions provided by people who work in the industry include being required to drive after working a long day, or a stretch of long days, and

"I had pneumonia and had to take three or four days off. That was a loss of \$1,600 that month – the cost of my mortgage."

working on a construction site without proper safety equipment – say, on a home reno show.

Two-thirds of the workers lose their pay when they are sick.

Meanwhile, 30% have expressed concerns about working conditions and more than one-third (37%) of those have felt targeted for speaking up. More than one-third (37%) of all

workers also report having been bullied by a superior. This number is higher (40%) for the workers who identify as people of colour, and much higher (48%) for those who identify as women.

One-quarter of the workers (26%) who identify as people of colour strongly agree with the statement, "I have been discriminated against in factual TV," and 22% of those who identify as women somewhat or strongly agree with that statement.

"Because so many young people work in the factual TV industry, they are often afraid to speak out. As an older person, I have spoken out and been... punished for it."

A second report on the survey results will be issued shortly that will focus on issues related to pay and will include the pay ranges respondents reported for the top 10 job functions.

For more information or to sign up to the Factual TV Working Group, contact Karen Wirsig (karen@cmg.ca) at 416-591-5333, ext. 222.

Summary of key results

How old are you?

20-29	12%
30-39	38%
40-49	27%
50-59	14%
60 or older	3%

Do you identify as:

A woman:	44%
A person of colour:	11%
An indigenous person:	1%
A person with a disability:	1%

Where do you usually work?

Toronto	86%
Vancouver	4%
Montreal	2%
Ottawa	1%
Winnipeg	1%

Are you a member of any union or professional organization in the industry?

No: 69%
Yes: 31%

What is your most recent employment status in factual TV?

Freelancer	66%
Employee	30%
unpaid intern	1%

How long have you worked in factual TV?

More than 10 years	42%
6-10 years	32%
1-5 years	23%
Less than 12 months	3%

What proportion of your income is derived from factual TV?

100%	55%
80-100%	22%
60-80%	6%
40-60%	3%
20-40%	3%
Less than 20%	3%

Which role did you fill in your most recent job in factual TV?

Editor	15%
Director	9%
Story Editor	8%
Series Producer	7%
Associate Producer	6%
Production Manager	6%
Story Producer	5%
Director of Photography	5%
Researcher	5%

In your most recent job, how many hours did you work in a typical week?

40-60 hours	44%
More than 60 hours	24%
Total above 40 hours	68%
45+ hours	59%

If you haven't worked in factual TV this month, how long ago did you work?

1 to 6 months ago	24%
7 to 12 months ago	6%
More than a year ago	5%
Total not working	35%

If not working, are you receiving benefits to replace your income?

No	82%
Employment Insurance	11%
Other	7%