Negotiated Pipelines to Screenwriting Work on The Black List

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Abstract

This article argues that media professionalization services and their customers negotiate the role of aspirants in media industries. Using the screenwriting website The Black List as a case study, this article analyzes the company's history, interface, promotional materials, and reception, arguing that The Black List has sought to formalize and standardize the professionalization process for aspiring and professional screenwriters alike as part of a broader entrepreneurial effort to digitalize film development writ large, assessing the value of unproduced film projects according to a universal standard. For aspiring media producers, professionalization services like The Black List are not marginal players in media industries but rather the front lines in an ongoing debate about who has the right to make media. While services like The Black List offer users relatively low-risk means to seek professionalization, they also reproduce imbalanced concentrations of media power, often under the guise of democratizing media culture.

Keywords: *paraindustry, professionalization, screenwriting, the how-to screenwriting industry, aspiration, platforms*

This article is about the how-to companies that sell professionalization tools, opportunities, and advice to aspiring screenwriters. In trade coverage and industry scholarship, how-to companies and their customers are often rendered mechanical or passive, respectively: market-driven machines or exploited dupes. Stephen Galloway described many screenwriting professionalization services as "schemes designed to prey on the Hollywood dreams of gullible strivers."[1] Referencing the broader range of professionalization services, John T. Caldwell described some how-to vendors as "bottom-feeders that opportunistically sell access and insights to desperate aspirants."[2] Schemers and the desperate can be found throughout

media industries. However, the industries that sell professionalization tools and services to aspirants are worth critical attention because their workers are often sincere in their efforts to professionalize customers and because their customers are anything but passive. Rather, professionalization services and their customers collaboratively define media work at the industry's borderlands.

Among the most legitimized professionalization services is The Black List, a platform that connects aspiring and professional screenwriters with development workers looking for writers and scripts. Funneling screenwriters and development workers into distinct camps, with different application procedures, logins, and interfaces, the platform appeals to a wide range of participants but profits from its screenwriter users, who use the site to "break in" to the film industry or bolster careers. In turn, screenwriter users pay a monthly fee to host downloadable copies of their screenplays on the site—$30 a month for most users, or less for members of approved screenwriting unions. In addition, screenwriter users are strongly encouraged to purchase feedback reports (at $100 per screenplay) from The Black List's freelance readers. These fees are the primary source of revenue for The Black List, which does not take a cut of deals made through the site or charge industry users for access. Rather, development workers can search the site's archive of screenplays for free after going through a verification process, which requires new users to supply a work email and an IMDb or LinkedIn profile. Through its discounts for union writers and its free use for development workers, The Black List courts the participation of professional media workers to lend industrial legitimacy to the platform.

Trade publications have lent further legitimacy to The Black List by describing the service as transcendent in the broader industry that appeals to amateur screenwriters.[3] However, the platform's creators and most valued users insist that The Black List is not a space for amateurs but rather an industrial space intended to digitalize film development writ large, creating more accessible pipelines to media careers in the process. Analyzing promotional materials, trade publications, and an interview I conducted with the site's co-founder Franklin Leonard, I draw out the history of the Black List brand, revealing that the current platform reflects the latest step in Leonard's long-term efforts to revolutionize film development with what he describes as "perfect information"—the concentration of all salable screenplays in a singular archive. In pursuit of perfect information, The Black List promotes screenwriting as a meritocracy in ways that obscure systemic inequities in the film industry. Examining online discussions about the platform among the site's users, I argue that the site's users are equally if not more insistent that The Black List is a space for development workers, not amateurs.[4]

The Black List as Paraindustry

As intermediaries between media industry workers and the public, commercial professionalization services across media industries are valuable and accessible sites for industry research. Although their accounts of media work are inevitably shaped by their commercial imperatives and industrial spin, professionalization services participate in what Caldwell

describes as the paraindustry—the range of industrial self-theorizations that form mediated contact zones between media workers, production cultures, and the public.[5] As distant as they might seem from the beating heart of industry, such contact zones are, Caldwell argues, "actually more real than industry's mythological centers."[6] Because media workers use the paraindustry strategically to narrativize their work, researching the paraindustry enables scholars to analyze visible negotiations of power within and between media work worlds and the public. Screenwriting work is precarious, and professional screenwriters often take on paraindustrial work to earn supplementary income. Building on this fact, research into the screenwriting paraindustry has often exposed the efforts of professional screenwriters to jockey for power, mythologize the work of the screenwriter, and accumulate career capital through how-to products, including screenwriting manuals and professionalization platforms.[7]

However, screenwriting professionalization services like The Black List incorporate the work of varied participants beyond professional screenwriters, including script readers, programmers, administrators, executives, and aspiring screenwriters. As valuable as paraindustrial contact zones might be for the study of professional creative work, this article argues that commercial professionalization products and services are also worth critical attention as contact zones between full-time professionalization vendors and aspiring media producers. Not all workers for how-to screenwriting services can be folded into the camp of screenwriters earning extra income; many work full-time in the industry that appeals to aspiring media producers, dependent for their primary income on the perceived legitimacy of professionalization services as industrial spaces. For aspirants, platforms like The Black List are also crucial spaces, particularly for their efforts to negotiate their positions in the media industries—not as "desperate" amateurs but as heterogeneous communities of media workers who use professionalization services strategically to legitimize their work. Understanding professionalization services and the role they play as pipelines to media work requires understanding the value they pose for their less examined participants.

Aspirants and the companies that serve them are often dismissed as marginal in media industries. However, this article builds on the conviction that scholars should listen when apparent outsiders in media industries claim that they are laboring on industry's behalf. [8] Indeed, for aspirants and how-to workers, professionalization services are not marginal but rather play a central role in defining the boundaries of media work. To be sure, platforms like The Black List hype their significance to the broader media industries in ways that deserve skepticism. But, the fact remains that many aspiring media producers—particularly those who cannot afford to migrate to media capitals or otherwise pursue precarious careers—invest in and rely on such services as accessible pipelines to media industry work. As a result, professionalization services play an important and underexamined role in the reproduction of what Couldry describes as media power—the concentration of the power to discursively construct reality within insular media institutions.[9] As Couldry argues, the spaces where media work worlds and the public collide are crucial borderlands where the terms of media power are negotiated. Selling aspirants the chance for entry into industry, The Black List works collaboratively with its valued users to reproduce media power under the guise of democratizing media culture.

In particular, I argue, The Black List caters to a distinctive community of aspiring screenwriters—what the site describes as "emerging screenwriters." It is important to acknowledge that aspiring media producers have varied expectations and degrees of investment in their careers: While some take on casual speculative work with a vague hope that their creative work will develop into a career, other aspirants have firmer expectations that their aspirational work will pay off.[10] Firmly committed to professionalization, emerging screenwriters claim semi-professional status over and above other aspirants by virtue of their greater familiarity with industry trends and their outspoken investment in the idea that anyone with talent, dedication, and the right work ethic can succeed in Hollywood. As the history of The Black List reveals, emerging screenwriters have played active, sometimes contentious, roles in shaping the platform's affordances. Ultimately, The Black List and its emerging screenwriters collaborate to construct the platform as an industrial space for professionals and "emerging" professionals, hierarchizing aspirants between those who are worthy of careers and those who, by virtue of their lack of commitment to industry needs and ideals, should be left behind.

The Quest for "Perfect Information"

Although the current version of The Black List platform launched in 2012, the Black List brand dates back to 2005, when its co-founder Franklin Leonard was working as a junior development executive in the film industry. As Leonard explained in a 2020 *NPR* interview, "Every junior executive lives in constant fear of the trade story that breaks about some exciting new script that they didn't know about."[11] It occurred to Leonard that junior execs collectively had the information that could make their lives easier: which screenplays were worth reading. Leonard reached out to every junior exec he'd met, asking them to send him the names of their ten favorite unproduced screenplays of the year. Leonard tabulated the results and anonymously published the list as "The Black List." Circulating far beyond Leonard's network and repeated in years to come, The Black List has since become an annual industry event. In 2014, *The Washington Post* described the survey as "Hollywood's last best hope for smart screenplays,"[12] and *The Atlantic* described the survey in 2017 as "the Hollywood list everyone wants to be on."[13] Similar plaudits were published by *The A.V. Club*, *The Verge*, *LA Weekly*, NPR, and *The Los Angeles Times*, with most suggesting that The Black List is a welcome means to promote original content in an era of sequels and adaptations.[14] As a result of the annual survey and its popularity, Leonard has become a prominent name in the world of screenwriting.

Leonard met Dino Simone, a software engineer, in 2009, when they began discussing a way to build on that reputation. They came up with an idea for a platform that would use a system of tags and a recommendations algorithm to help development executives quickly find screenplays that were right for their needs.[15] In October of 2011, Leonard and Simone co-founded and launched a platform that would track "Hollywood's most popular scripts in real time" for established development workers.[16] Building on the name-recognition of Leonard's annual survey, they named the platform The Black List. However, this first iteration of The Black List platform differs from the consumer-facing platform that exists today in a few important ways: (1) the site mirrored the Black List survey's reliance on screenplays by writers who

were, if not already well-established in the film industry, already professionalized and managed by representation as prominent agencies; and (2) the site charged industry professionals for access to the site's archive of screenplays. While this first iteration of The Black List platform reproduced the concentration of social capital that characterizes the film industry at its most profitable centers, that same exclusivity also limited the potential for the site to generate scalable revenue from a purposefully small pool of users.

The following year, in October of 2012, The Black List platform relaunched with a different business model—its current form. Although the platform still enables industry members to receive personalized recommendations, industry members now use the site for free, and the platform generates its primary revenue from aspiring screenwriters. In the attention economy that structures The Black List, access to recommendations for screenplays and writers is the "free lunch" that lures producers to the site so that their (potential) attention can then be purchased by screenwriters, who use the platform as a speculative market for career opportunities. While development workers are encouraged to experience the site as a search engine for labor and intellectual property, the commercial dependence of the platform on screenwriter subscription fees reveals the site's participation in a more prosaic political economy, the sort of pay-to-play model that often characterizes professionalization services across media industries.[17]

In both his interactions with the press and Black List users, Leonard has positioned himself as the face of the company, no doubt in part because his experience as a development executive and the creator of the Black List survey helped legitimize the service as an industrial space. His efforts to serve as the public face of The Black List extended to our interview, which I initially intended to conduct with an employee of the platform. Instead, at the employee's suggestion, Leonard generously agreed to do the interview himself. Bearing in mind the self-theorizing that complicates industry disclosures, particularly from industry decision makers,[18] I weigh Leonard's statements about The Black List against the visible history of the platform in trade publications, the site's interface, and conversations about the platform among users and screenwriters online. In our conversation, I asked Leonard about The Black List's transition from a business-facing platform to one that monetized aspiration. Leonard responded that the current iteration of The Black List emerged in part because he had fielded continual requests for advice from aspiring screenwriters. Leonard claimed that, when aspirants asked him for career advice, he never had an adequate answer beyond "pack up the family, move to LA, get a job at Starbucks, and network until someone pays attention to you"—a move that he acknowledged was not feasible for many. Citing his own experience entering the film industry as "a Black kid from west central Georgia," Leonard claimed that the connections he made to industry professionals while a student at Harvard enabled him to join the film industry.

Leonard: I would not have been able to make it out here if it had not been for that. And I know damn well there are more talented people than me out there who don't have that direct line. And so, I've always been sensitive to the way in which these access issues pervert a labor market. And so, I was like, okay, well, what if we could build something that would allow people, if they did have a good script, to indicate that it's a good script in a way that the industry would pay attention to.

Here, Leonard describes the consumer-facing version of The Black List platform as a new means to make screenwriting more equitable and accessible. However, Leonard also made it clear in our interview and elsewhere that he regards The Black List as an industry tool, first and foremost, not a service for amateurs. In a 2013 Reddit AMA, Leonard claimed that The Black List was "working toward a comprehensive database of every single script that anyone with the resources to get a movie made may want to be aware of."[19] Leonard wrote further that the company was "on an education tour both within the writing community and the agency and management company world explaining the benefits of listing scripts on the site."[20] Campaigning for professional writers to host their scripts on The Black List, Leonard positioned the database as a means to profit not only from aspirants but more broadly from the digital flow of unproduced scripts. For Leonard, making screenwriting more democratic and making script development more efficient are not opposing but compatible—and even intertwined—ambitions.

Twarog: What change [to the film industry] do you think would be most substantial for helping people discover talent more equitably?

Leonard: If everybody in the industry used The Black List exclusively, the industry would be functioning a lot more efficiently. That's why I built the company.

Later in our interview, Leonard expanded on the above:

Leonard: If you go all the way back to Adam Smith, the notion of a free market requires perfect information. . . . But within this marketplace of screenplays, there hasn't been. To be able to create an infrastructure that allows for that ultimately benefits the best writers because it means there'll be increased demand for their work.

Positioning The Black List as the Invisible Hand in script development, Leonard describes a vision of a free market in which even amateurs can participate and in which the "best writers" will naturally emerge—a more meritocratic space that achieves its ideals by gathering, categorizing, and assigning value to every unsold screenplay on the market.

Much like the broader development industry in which it participates, The Black List acknowledges and takes steps to rectify systemic inequities through programs created to support marginalized creators.[21] However, the commercial success of The Black List both as a marketplace governed by perfect information and as an accessible pipeline for screenwriting careers depends on the shared conviction of the platform's creators and users that screenwriting can be made meritocratic through universal standards of quality for speculative screenplays. However, meritocracies are premised on the understanding that, while those with merit should succeed, others "deserve" to be left behind.[22] Meritocracies inevitably advantage those deemed to have "merit" in ways that benefit the privileged, obscuring systemic inequalities and forms of oppression. In their efforts to make screenwriting more equitable by making it more meritocratic, the creators of The Black List are not disrupting industry practices but rather reproducing widespread discourses of meritocracy and individualism in media industries that have consistently rendered inequities in media work more difficult to acknowledge and address.[23] Moreover, by relying on the same pool of script readers as the development industry and by enabling development users on The Black List to

seek out established and well-connected writers, The Black List assigns merit to speculative screenplays and writers in ways that reproduce the biases and hierarchies that shape hiring practices for screenwriters beyond the site.

On The Black List, merit takes different forms for professional screenwriters than it does for aspirants in ways that reproduce rather than disrupt industry hierarchies. Professional screenwriters can demonstrate their value to industry members on The Black List by listing their industry connections on their writer profiles—their agents, managers, and any financing or attachments their screenplays may already have. While it's certainly possible for development workers to use The Black List to seek out unknown and inexperienced writers, the website enables industry members to engage in the same culture of homophily that governs hiring practices beyond the site. Work opportunities in the film industry broadly are governed by an informal but entrenched culture of hiring acquaintances and mutual acquaintances, which reproduces raced, gendered, and classed inequities across the film industry.[24] A careful study of screenwriting work by Wreyford (2017) confirms that hiring practices in screenwriting fail to live up to the meritocratic ideals often espoused by industry professionals, reflecting the implicit biases of disproportionately white and male decision makers in film.[25]

Conversely, visibility for aspirants on The Black List requires continual payment. Lacking the same industry connections as their professional counterparts, aspirants demonstrate their merit by purchasing reader reports for their screenplays and then making their scores visible to development workers. Development workers browsing the platform are then encouraged to weigh a screenplay's scores against the site's ever-shifting average. Both to improve their scores and to make their screenplays more visible, screenwriter users can (and often do) purchase multiple evaluations over time, alongside the monthly subscription they pay to host their scripts on the platform. Screenplays on The Black List are not only scored but ranked in a continuously updating list of the "best" screenplays on the site: the "Real Time Top List," which screenwriter users can access through an "Industry View" feature. The list provides development workers with a first place to look for potential projects, but it also indicates to screenwriter users that the site's standards for quality can be mastered—screenwriters who visit the Real Time Top List are encouraged to "see where your scripts land" using a tool that compares user screenplay scores to the site average and to the cutoff for the Real Time Top List.[26]

Script readers for The Black List thus play a crucial role in defining merit on the site. Black List readers are required to have, as the site's hiring page explains, "a minimum of one year, full-time experience (i.e. not interns) reading as, at least, employed first filters for major Hollywood financiers, studios, networks, production companies, agencies, or management companies."[27] In a 2013 interview, Leonard further claimed that the site's readers are experienced professionals who are "either between jobs or taking the careers in different direction [*sic*]."[28] In other words, Black List readers are freelance workers already entrenched in industrial work. When I asked Leonard what steps he took to ensure that Black List readers could represent diverse audiences, he emphasized that readers were asked to focus on quality rather than industry lore that might lead them to dismiss less apparently marketable projects.

> ***Leonard:*** Our readers know very clearly that if there's any explicit signs of bias in their evaluations, they won't be reading with us for very long at all. . . . We don't tell people to evaluate based on whether they think it's going to make a lot of money, or that the industry's going to go crazy for it. It's very simple. Rate a script from 1 to 10 based on how enthusiastically you would recommend it to a peer or a superior in the industry to read.

Here, Leonard suggests that The Black List promotes diversity by instructing readers to rate screenplays based purely on quality. Setting aside the diversity of the readers themselves, Leonard suggests that readers responding to their own tastes will identify the "best" material. However, script readers are of course bringing their cultural assumptions to bear on their reading experiences, not least of which is their required experience as professional script readers.

Typically freelance workers with aspirations to work in other areas of the film industry, script readers in Hollywood skew young and privileged. They are often those with enough industry connections to secure such work and those who can afford to work for low pay without the clear promise of steadier careers. The question is not whether readers working for The Black List are honest but whether industrial standards of quality for screenwriting are biased in favor of those with the same cultural experiences as the privileged few who define them. Underlying The Black List's standards of merit is the belief that what determines worth is talent and taste—talent on the part of aspirants and taste on the part of readers. In its efforts to open up screenwriting to any and all participants, The Black List is not resisting media power so much as it is formalizing the standards and means by which aspirants can test their worthiness for professionalization.

Boundary Work Among Black List Users

One reason to question the narrative that aspiring screenwriters are broadly gullible or desperate is that many express deep-rooted skepticism about professionalization services—skepticism cultivated not by industry professionals but by aspirants on forums like Reddit. As murky as screenwriting professionalization services seem (and often are), their consumers are often the first to expose shady business practices. At the same time, aspiring screenwriters police one another about how professionalization services should be used, often under the guise of protecting consumers. Such boundary work is also a means for emerging screenwriters to reproduce distinctions between themselves and lesser amateurs. In the process, vocal Black List users often insist that only "emerging screenwriters" should be using the site at all.

In defense of such distinctions, aspirants are perfectly willing to criticize professionalization services when they threaten users' sense of semi-professional status. Consider the brief, disastrous partnership between The Black List and ScriptBook, a service that sells algorithmic analysis of unproduced film projects. On April 18, 2017, only a year after ScriptBook launched, The Black List announced that it was partnering with the startup: for $100, screenwriter

users could now have their screenplays evaluated by ScriptBook's algorithm, which would provide customers with a series of numerical scores in categories like character "likeability," target audience by age and gender, and estimated box office. "By analyzing thousands of produced film scripts, movies and associated data," The Black List claimed in a blog post, "their algorithm can analyze a film script based simply on its words."[29] In some ways, the ScriptBook service was an extension of the work The Black List was already doing to predict how the film industry would assess unproduced screenplays. If reader scores indicate how the film industry would likely rate a screenplay, ScriptBook reports would tell Black List users how the film industry would categorize it and perceive its financial value.

Screenwriters interpreted the service differently. The same afternoon that the ScriptBook partnership was announced and launched, a member of the r/screenwriting community on Reddit created a thread to discuss it.[30] Later that day, Leonard created a second Reddit thread to discuss the service. On both threads, the response to ScriptBook was overwhelmingly negative. Of the 14 comments that responded directly to the first thread (resulting in dozens of sub-comments), 11 criticized or questioned service. Of the 19 comments that responded directly to Leonard's second thread (resulting in more than a hundred sub-comments), 13 were openly critical of the partnership, while another 5 were neither supportive nor critical but simply raised questions. Several commenters were quick to suggest that the ScriptBook service was a swindle. One commenter called the ScriptBook service "insulting and quite honestly a scam,"[31] while another took aim at Leonard: "STOP SCAMMING WRITERS FRANKLIN LEONARD."[32] In our interview, Leonard characterized the negative response to the ScriptBook partnership as among the most difficult moments in the company's history.

Leonard: What we heard from customers was not that there were not people that wanted it, because there *were* people that wanted it. In fact, there were people who had opted in to get it. What we heard from an overwhelming percentage of our customers was not only that they didn't want it, but that they didn't want other people to have access to it. Which is a weird thing. A very weird thing.

As Leonard's comments indicate, critics weren't simply disinterested in the ScriptBook service. Many insisted that The Black List remove the ScriptBook service from the website. The most common criticism questioned the cost of the service. A few suggested that the service would make sense if it were cheaper, but many took the $100 price point as a sign that The Black List was trying to profit from "desperate" writers. Others argued that the ScriptBook service destabilized the otherwise defensible reputation of The Black List as a transcendent service in the how-to screenwriting industry. As one commenter wrote, "I wouldn't expect The Black List to offer something that seems so fundamentally useless."[33] Another wrote, "this 'service' feels like a scam and is a promotional offer I'd expect from FINAL DRAFT at best."[34] Along the same lines, a third commenter suggested the ScriptBook "hurts the BL brand in my opinion, they should take it down immediately."[35] For these critics, the ScriptBook service on The Black List threatened to turn the website into yet another service for ordinary amateur screenwriters.

Professional screenwriters reacting to the ScriptBook service similarly distinguish between their distaste for ScriptBook and their respect for The Black List as an industry tool. Established screenwriters Brian Koppelman and Craig Mazin offered some of the most widely

distributed critiques of the service. Koppelman tweeted, "I am a fan of @theblcklst and Franklin is a friend. But I hate everything about this scriptbook idea. In every way. It's offensive and gross."[36] Mazin, a prominent screenwriter and co-host of the podcast Script-Notes, joined a Reddit thread discussing the partnership, where he defended Black List as "a good service to up-and-comers" and Leonard as "a good guy" but criticized the partnership: "I haaaaaaate this Scriptbooks crap. I hate it. I have told Franklin I hate it."[37] Emphasizing their respect for Leonard, Koppelman and Mazin described the ScriptBook partnership as a misstep without going into much detail about the nature of their objections. However, Leonard claimed in our interview that the screenwriters he spoke to objected to the technology behind the service.

Leonard: I think that screenwriters have a rational fear and discomfort with any algorithmic approach to evaluating material.

A concern for the effect that algorithmic script coverage might have on the film industry certainly makes sense for established screenwriters like Koppelman and Mazin. Beneath many consumer complaints about ScriptBook, however, was a concern for those aspiring professional screenwriters who would not be wise enough to avoid the "scam" and who would fork over their hard-earned money unaware that they were being duped. "Bottom line," one commenter wrote, "This is an easy way for you to make more money at the expense of desperate writers looking for every possible way to break into the industry. All you need to do is license some software, put up a blog post on your site and wait for unsuspecting writer's [*sic*] to give you their money."[38] Another wrote, "This may sound elitist, but if a person can't even figure out what genre their script is, they aren't very likely to have a career in this industry."[39] A third suggested that "No one here is interested. But you knew this already. Your target market are the truly naive and desperate writers, desperate enough to plunk down $100 for useless information that won't help them write better or sell a script. Shameful."[40] Each criticized the service on behalf of those amateurs who they claimed should not be using The Black List in the first place.

Consistently, Leonard responded to critics by pointing out that users who did not feel the service was worthwhile could simply not use it. But Leonard was missing the point that his critics were making, a fact that he recognized at the time: "I'm confused by the conclusion that offering one product that you don't believe has value invalidates the value offered by everything else we do."[41] However, ScriptBook did, in the eyes of those who condemned it, invalidate the legitimacy of The Black List. The point was not, as Leonard insisted, that people could simply not use the service but that the existence of the service betrayed the site's mandate as a service for "emerging screenwriters"—self-proclaimed producers who were not yet professional but who already believed they understood how their screenplays would be categorized, budgeted, and marketed. What emerges in these threads is an effort to distinguish between those "desperate," "unsuspecting" amateurs who would purchase ScriptBook reports and users who were professionalized enough to not need the service in the first place.

The day after it had launched the ScriptBook partnership, The Black List deleted the blog post announcing the service, promised to refund users who had purchased the service, and permanently removed the service from the website. Although Leonard insisted in a blog

post that he still felt the service had value, he explained in our interview that, in light of the overwhelming objections of the website's users, he "didn't see enough of an upside to keeping it on the website that it made sense to fight it." Emerging and professional screenwriters collectivized during these twenty-four hours to reshape The Black List against the wishes of its creators. Neither gullible nor desperate, these screenwriters asserted that The Black List's workers had misunderstood the role of their own website in the film industry and in the broader culture of screenwriting. As visible as this incident was, less visible negotiations of screenwriting culture are unfolding every day among aspiring professionals and the services they use.

The boundary work Black List users performed during the ScriptBook partnership was not isolated to those twenty-four hours. In the first three months of 2021, for example, r/screenwriting participants referenced The Black List in 87 distinct threads. Thirteen were created to discuss feedback the original poster received on The Black List. In the ensuing threads, r/screenwriting participants routinely advise would-be Black List users that the site is not meant for amateurs trying to get feedback on their scripts. Rather, they claimed, The Black List should be used to get industry exposure once a script has already been carefully revised. "I would strongly recommend against using the blacklist for coverage," one user advised readers: "That's really not its purpose"[42] "Don't use it for coverage," another user admonished in a separate thread: "Use it to get industry eyes on a really strong script."[43] According to yet another user, The Black List "exists so that seasoned semi-pros on the cusp of breaking in can get noticed."[44] Throughout, these commenters insisted that The Black List is "not a place for general feedback/criticism"[45] but rather a space where emerging screenwriters demonstrate their skills to industry professionals.

The boundary work in these threads may not be reflective of the Black List userbase as a whole, but vocal users in these communities have demonstrated their commitment to protecting their status as "seasoned semi-pros on the cusp of breaking in." Beneath the suggestion that how-to media industries are simply scams and that consumers who use them are broadly "desperate" is an implicit understanding that aspirants are outsiders battering the gates of industry and that how-to media industries are profiteering gatekeepers. However, many aspiring professional media workers do not perceive themselves to be outsiders, and The Black List actively campaigns to position itself as a more central space in the broader development industry. Through their shared investment in The Black List, the platform's workers and users collaboratively construct the gates that define screenwriting work for many aspirants.

Conclusion

The Black List requires aspirants to perform speculative labor in the hope that it will lead to paid work. While this fact has encouraged some critics to characterize The Black List as a "scam," the platform's efforts to profit from spec work mirrors industry practices for professional screenwriters, who are increasingly working under shorter- and shorter-term contracts without much credit, bargaining power, or assurance of future work.[46] Across media

industries, media workers are facing increasing demands to perform spec work to secure their careers.[47] For the many aspirants without personal connections to the film industry or financial safety nets to fall back on, services like The Black List provide a genuinely accessible means to pursue a screenwriting career. The financial costs, questionable legitimacy, and long odds associated with these services are minimal compared to the costs of packing up, moving to Los Angeles, and trying to get a foot in the door without substantial help from someone on the inside.

In this regard, The Black List and services like it deserve critical attention as pre-industry spaces that aspiring professionals use to pursue media careers. As this article has tried to demonstrate, taking The Black List and its users seriously as participants in the film industry doesn't require also endorsing its ambitions wholesale. In its efforts to formalize hiring practices for aspiring screenwriters and centralize script development on a global scale, The Black List does not disrupt but rather reproduces media power. In turn, The Black List privileges users who have professional experience and connections, who can afford to use the website over long periods of time, and who can comfortably submit their media production to the ever-shifting taste cultures of the film industry at its most profitable centers. Less "desperate" than committed to meritocracy, these emerging screenwriters resist affordances and competing modes of usage that threaten to make The Black List a space for a broader range of participants.

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[1] Stephen Galloway (July 31, 2018), "Why Are So Many Wannabe Screenwriters Getting Scammed?" *The Hollywood Reporter*. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/why-are-wannabe-screenwriters-getting-scammed-1130919

[2] John T. Caldwell (2013), "Para-Industry: Researching Hollywood's Blackwaters." *Cinema Journal*, 52(3), 164.

[3] See, e.g., John August (October 25, 2012), "Scriptnotes, Ep 60: The Black List, and a stack of scenes–Transcript." https://johnaugust.com/2012/scriptnotes-ep-60-the-black-list-and-a-stack-of-scenes-transcript; Beejoli Shah (November 5, 2013). *Are All Screenplay Services Bullshit? The Black List Might Not Be*, Gawker. http://defamer.gawker.com/are-all-screenplay-services-bullshit-the-black-list-mi-1458939273; and Galloway, "Why Are So Many Wannabe Screenwriters Getting Scammed?"

[4] My analysis of online discussions about The Black List among users examines conversations in the r/screenwriting community on the forum site Reddit, in large part because Leonard has been an active member on the site since 2013. Specifically, my

analysis focuses on two popular 2017 threads created in reaction to The Black List–ScriptBook partnership and on the range of threads that referenced The Black List in the first three months of 2021, when the research for this article was conducted; eighty-seven Reddit threads referenced The Black List in this period, resulting in hundreds of comments.

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