

At the World Conference of Screenwriters in Warsaw, the Writers' Guild of Great Britain presented its Free is NOT an Option campaign. Judging by the impassioned response, dramatic increases in the work a writer is expected to do for free is happening everywhere. Writers' guilds from as far afield as New Zealand, Sweden, Italy, South Africa and Canada responded enthusiastically to the idea of a campaign against free work. Clearly the line beyond which it is unfair and exploitative to expect the writer to continue to work for free is being crossed all over the globe with increasing frequency. Writers everywhere are working more and more for less and less. If we want sustainable film and television industries this has to stop. Free is NOT an Option – anywhere.

The lack of cultural diversity amongst our commissioned writers and on our screens is a concern in many countries. But the elephant in the room is never addressed. If so much of a writer's work has to be done for free, the only people who can afford to enter the business, or remain in it, are those with an unlimited overdraft facility from the bank of mum and dad. And those people, certainly in the UK, are statistically, overwhelmingly likely to be white and middle class. Do we want to go back to a time when the only voices we hear, the only stories that get told, are those of the independently wealthy?

There was universal consensus amongst those at the conference that if indies don't budget for development, it's not because they can't afford it. It's because they can get away with it. And because we let them.

It was felt that all writers' guilds needed to educate their members and writers who aren't members that devaluing our own work will hurt us, individually and collectively. Several guilds agreed to cooperate in the development of guidelines on 'how to say no', with WGGB taking the lead.

We should also lose no opportunity to educate those within our industry and the wider public about what is involved in the writing process – that saying "just give us a page of A4" doesn't make the task of reducing the mind-boggling complexity of an entire series to a few paragraphs as easy as typing out 500 words.

On this and so many other issues, the conference was in agreement that organisation is crucial. We must get as many, if not all of our writers into our unions. If we stand together, within our guilds and national industries and in cooperation with our sister unions across the world, we have more leverage than we think. Without our content, without the stories we write, indies and broadcasters the world over have nothing. And they know it.

Bill Armstrong