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Popular careers as seen on screen.

Rita Marcella

Over many years in academia I have pondered how and why particular careers seem overwhelmingly attractive to young people, in particular of course university applicants, while others seem to languish and require constant efforts on the part of well-meaning practitioners to “sell” their appeal.

And of course we are in this region very familiar with the periodic drive to encourage young people to consider a career in the oil and gas industry.

But equally government has invested over many decades now in initiatives to grow numbers of qualified applicants coming through the secondary school system into the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and to increase the diversity of those who do enter these subjects.

And yet there remains a stubborn resistance on the part of the market. A market that seems often to ignore factors such as the likelihood of a high starting salary.

In 2015 Which University produced a top ten of careers with high starting salaries as:

1. Dentistry: £30,408
2. Chemical, process and energy engineering: £29,275
3. Medicine: £28,525
4. Marine technology: £27,742
5. Operational research (maths): £26,099
6. Mechanical engineering: £25,604
7. Economics: £24,927
8. Aerospace engineer: £24,884
9. Veterinary medicine and dentistry: £24,547
10. Statistics: £24,446

But does this mirror the top ten most popular subjects of study in university? They are certainly present but typically business, creative arts, social studies and law tend to appear in the top subjects in terms of applicant demand.

So what influences student selection of subjects? There are a host of hypothesised influencers from parental encouragement, through peer pressure, to gender, school guidance and even genetic make-up.

However one of the influencers that has a major impact on all kinds of consumer behaviour is that of media representation: yet has been little considered in the context of influencing professional career and industry aspirations and it is one that might fruitfully be pursued further – for we are all very much influenced often in subtle and complex ways by what we read, hear, see and watch and those messages that engage with us in an emotional way.

And it is the case that careers and professions fare very differently in terms of media representations. During a recent conversation about the cyclical issues of recruitment of the brightest and best into the oil and gas industry, I had recalled an early attempt at

a TV drama series based around the world of North Sea oil and gas exploration and this seemed to be something that had largely sunk without trace.

A little digging uncovered some very superficial references to this series and some of our readers might remember it better than I. It was called Oil Strike North, featured some well known actors, had high production values and some of it was filmed in my home town – Peterhead – which is probably why I remember it so vividly.

But it clearly did not achieve an audience and was cancelled after one series in 1975.

A similar fate befell Roughnecks a 1990s TV drama which lasted for two series and focused on the offshore working life and onshore personal lives of a group of characters dramatising the challenges of the onshore/offshore divide. And a very recent effort, of which I had not even heard, called Blood and Oil, starring Don Johnson, featured characters seeking to exploit the oil boom in North Dakota but equally failed to find an audience and was cancelled after the first ten episodes.

Of course the exception to this rule is Dallas, but that was scarcely an attempt to show the industry in any realistic way with the oil business serving largely as a metaphor for mega wealth and power. But certainly Oil Strike North and Roughnecks did try to portray the industry in a way which showed both its pioneering, exploratory nature alongside the challenges of such a life.

It is amazingly easy to contrast this relative dearth of artistic conceptions of the oil and gas industry with a multitude of others.

By a long stretch the most popular sectors to be covered must be medicine and criminal detection, largely because of the ease of inclusion of human life stories in extremes with far too many examples to mention.

Apparently glamorous careers well represented in drama would include PR, marketing (Mad Men for example), fashion (Ugly Betty), journalism and media, entertainment and so on. Equally appealing but not by anyone's standards glamorous, have been popular and long running dramas centering around the working lives of the fire service, veterinarians, politicians and teachers.

However, one of the most illuminating comparisons I found with the oil and gas industry was that of dramatic media portrayal of lawyers.

In contrast with the two British examples I could find of oil and gas dramas, I found 39 examples of series portraying lawyers or solicitors in Britain alone.

Some of these were quite brilliant pieces of work – for example Sir John Mortimer's Rumpole of the Bailey is a great and lasting contribution to literature.

Others benefitted from the capacity to detail individual vignettes of classic stories of people in crisis much like the ever present medical drama and indeed the phenomenon of the lawyer investigating cases is a standard literary trope, as in Perry Mason for example or Kavanagh QC.

More interestingly though for the present discussion, there have been highly successful TV series which have focused on the lives and challenges of lawyers, such as This Life, which centered on the early careers of six trainee solicitors in a highly

compelling and sophisticated way, bringing to life both the highs and lows of the profession. Other popular and compelling portrayals include Ally McBeal.

Now while I would not argue that positive media representation is by any means the most significant influencer of career choice, it is it seems to me an area that would repay further consideration by those intent on bringing about attitudinal change in the market.

I clearly remember, for example, the highly positive impact that the immensely popular *Silent Witness* had on the attractiveness of forensic science as a subject of university study, when it first appeared in 1996. And I would call for more variety and imagination amongst those writing and commissioning work about the possibilities of exploring differing forms of human endeavour.

Society needs certain functions to be fulfilled: those functions may not always hold a simple and popular appeal but they may be stable and well remunerated and each industry and profession needs to be conscious of the impact such media representations (or indeed absence of media representations) might be having on their future membership.

Ironically, my own early career centered around a profession that has been manifestly celebrated by novelists and dramatists – perhaps because so many writers have either relied on or even been members of the profession – and that is the profession of librarianship.

Librarians feature very heavily in literature, as unlikely heroes and unsung heroes and even as postmodern heroes – but they appear very generally in a good light and much more than their numbers in society actually warrant.

It is no bad thing. Everyone has a mental image of a librarian good or bad.

Equally, my subsequent career as an academic flows through almost every type of creative representation, even immortalised in *Cluedo*. Academia would in itself merit a whole dedicated column in its depiction in literature, alongside perhaps journalism – one for the future perhaps.