

RTS Thames Valley

Chairman's Centre Report 2020/21

Like all Centres, and the Society at large, this past year has been quite extraordinary with both disappointments and new opportunities becoming apparent as the full impact of COVID-19 hit us. Before lockdown, however, we were able to have some physical meetings. In January 21st Century Film, Adrian Bull and John Mahtani, co-founders of Cinelab London, suggested that the demand for higher-quality content has led to a resurgence in film, exceeding the current demands for dynamic range and resolution, while delivering a unique film aesthetic. Members also had the opportunity to visit the Cinelab film processing and scanning facilities.

In early March Getting Started in TV Tech Roles, led by Professor Lyndsay Duthie, and with an audience of over 100 students at the University of the Arts, was an opportunity for students to hear from a panel of younger TV professionals and pick up some helpful and relevant advice on the various ways in which panel members had entered the industry. Since that event, however, members have greatly missed the opportunity to meet together and look forward to doing so again in 2021. The new digital landscape has been beneficial not only in attracting new audiences but also giving access to top speakers who would have been difficult to attract to a regional weeknight meeting. Thames Valley Centre has a unique heritage in that it is located there because this was the traditional heart of the media technology industry. This is why the Centre has always had a focus on creative technology and a mission to promote a conversation between the creative and technology communities. In recent years with the convergence of technology and the move to IP this is no longer quite so significant although there remain big players in the area such as Grass Valley, NEP and of course Virgin have now located to Reading. Continued expansion at Pinewood as well as a number of universities in the area also provide new opportunities.

When lockdown kicked in, the opportunity to move into the virtual world was taken up with alacrity when in April we had News in the New Norm via Zoom and YouTube. The BBC's Morwen Williams and Robin Pembroke outlined the way in which BBC News had responded to the challenges of reporting on a major story in highly constrained circumstances. It was enlightening to see the way in which all parts of the BBC had come together to provide innovative solutions, not least the use of smart phones. This led to many wanting to know more of how to use their smart phones for journalism and so due to popular demand we put on Get Your Mojo Working in April. This was a masterly exposition by the BBC Academy's Marc Settle who packed into one hour a wealth of advice, both creative and technical, on how to best tell a story on a smart phone whether Android or Apple.



In June, The Future of the TV Audience chaired by Lyndsay Duthie brought together a panel of TV executives from light entertainment to sport as well as the analysts point of view from Honey Lancaster-James. This inciteful session discussed the challenges brought about by the absence of studio audience and stadium crowds and how production teams had sought to mitigate this by measures such as virtual audiences or enhanced sound. The panel concluded, however, that the lack of audience/crowd had been a major challenge and they couldn't wait for them to return as this is a major component both in the TV studio and the sports stadium.

With the cancellation of NAB and IBC, the Future of Trade Shows looked at what the future might look like from the point of view both of exhibitor and attendee. Chaired by Penny Westlake of Interra Systems, the consensus was that trade shows were an excellent networking opportunity, but there were various opinions on their future relevance, even allowing for the easing of Covid-19 restrictions. Broadcast-specific hardware is diminishing in importance and software can often be demonstrated in better ways. The panel concluded that trade shows have long provided a critical service for vendors and broadcasters, but change was now inevitable. The need for social interaction and networking, however, would be key to their future.



In September it was time for our annual Colloquium which is normally a physical conference but this year was held virtually on consecutive evenings. eSports for Broadcasters, hosted by Anna Lockwood of Telstra explored this rapidly emerging sector which in 2019 reached over 400 million viewers worldwide. Kicked off by the charismatic Steven “Claw” Jality from ESL Gaming the sessions covered the growth of competitive multiplayer video gaming and the innovative technology and work flows that underpin this fast growing sector for both on-line and broadcast platforms.

In November Tim Marshall chaired In conversation with Jeff Foulser – one of the UK’s foremost TV sport executives with a long and distinguished track record in UK and international television production. He’s built Sunset+Vine into one of the most creative and successful independent sports production companies in the world. Having started as a tea boy at LWT in the 1970’s today he is the primary production partner for BT Sport delivering Premier League, Europa League and Scottish football plus Premiership and European rugby. The audience heard how along the way Jeff has been key in the development of technology such as Hawkeye and other innovations to bring added information and value to the TV sports audience. Overshadowing everything, of course, was the profound impact that COVID-19 had had on the industry and the way in which the challenges have been met, not least with the accelerated growth towards remote production.

In Celebration of Subtitling. With 40 years having passed since the UK’s first flagship programme was broadcast with subtitles, Stephen Stewart took us on a journey into the past, through the present and into the future of this essential service. A broad ranging panel considered the social benefits of subtitling, the challenges and the evolving technology that was continually increasing the opportunities for subtitle users. The panel consisted of Nigel Meggitt from the BBC, Dawn Jones a blogger and subtitle user, Hewson Maxwell from Red Bee Media and Dom Bourne of Take 1

2020 rounded off with Carols from Kings going behind the scenes of this iconic and historic TV outside broadcast with TV Director Ian Russell, Lighting Director Bernie Davis and Head of OB Operations Peter Taylor who were in conversation with Tim Marshall. In 1954 Christmas Carols from Kings was televised on Christmas Day as part of a live exchange of programmes with other countries leading to the formation of Eurovision making the event a milestone in broadcasting history. In 1963

annual TV broadcasts of the service commenced on BBC TV, becoming a firm favourite in the Christmas schedules. Today's technology has fundamentally changed the opportunities to cover this event and with the additional complications of COVID-19 added, the session led to a fascinating insight into how the production team were still able to get a quality production to the screen.

2021 started with As Time Goes By which addressed a key issue now being faced by the broadcast industry. This session explored what we need to learn in order to adapt and change to implement the new ST2110 standards, specifically with respect to time harmonisation. Throughout the story of television, effective time synchronisation has been a critical success factor and now it's just as important as we move to a fully IP enabled environment. Bruce Devlin of SMPTE led the discussion with Richard Hoptroft, founder of Hoptroft Ltd and Gerard Phillips of Arista Networks.

In February, Will the News Ever be the Same Again, built on the earlier session News in the New Norm. Disruptive technology has further challenged the very fabric of the traditional news organisation with new producers emerging from left field. This raises further questions about which media outlet you can trust? Former RTE journalist Glen Mulcahy and former BBC News Editor Guy Pelham explored this story of disruptive innovation, often driven by constantly changing and emerging technologies. This change is substantially challenging the business models of the traditional news media industry and creating new opportunities for emerging players who are creating an alternative which is counterculture to the traditional broadcasters.

In the course of the past year Tony Orme has stepped down as Chair to focus on his PhD. The Centre has very much appreciated all the work that he has put in to developing the Centre to where it is today. Tony is a leading authority on media technology and while we will sorely miss his leadership in the Chair, we are delighted that he remains on the Committee where his knowledge and experience is invaluable.

Tim Marshall OBE
Chair
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